

Feature

Restoring the past,

Bells in an historic Baptist building are once again ringing out a message of hope, writes **Mark Woods**

THE GREAT War was a social and psychic shock to the British people whose effects have arguably not died away even with the passing of the last of its combatants. It's left its legacy in stone all over the country, on shockingly long lists of names on village greens and country churches, and in more far-reaching ways: the liberation of women, social mobility, international institutions, and the industrialisation of warfare.

In Plaistow, East London, the war had come very close to the West Ham Central Mission founded by Robert and Hettie Rowntree Clifford. Its ministry was among the East End's poorest, and at one point it provided shelter for those rendered homeless by a huge explosion at a munitions factory.

After the War a massive fundraising effort led to the building of the Memorial Baptist Church in 1922 – now, after its union with nearby St Andrew's, Memorial

Community Church – at a cost of £60,000. Designed by William Hayne in the Byzantine style, the congregation at the time envisaged 'a great cathedral church towering above the mean streets of West Ham, witnessing to the love of God and welcoming, as to a house of beauty and peace, burdened and weary hearts'. (It survived the Second World War because German bombers relied on its twin domes as navigational aids.)

It was named in memory of the fallen from the congregation and the local community, but its purpose was the same: to bring comfort and the love of God into the lives of those who'd known little of either. For its time, it was very advanced – it even had a projector room so that films could be shown.

And it had one feature that was unique: a chime of 10 massive bells. Made by Croydon firm Gillett and Johnston in 1925, they were inscribed with the names of 169 local men who died serving in the War. They also have the name of the only member of the royal family

to be killed, Prince Maurice of Battenberg.

Baptist churches throughout the UK and overseas were asked to help build the church, and their names are carved on stones around the building. However, all the money for the bells was raised locally by people giving 'not less than one shilling'.

Ninety years later, the building was showing its age – and so were the bells. The West Tower was dangerous, and had to be restored two years ago: and last week saw the completion of work to repair the East Tower – carried out by PAYE Stonework – and refurbish and re-hang the bells. Amazingly, the bells were refurbished by Gillett and Johnston, which made them all those years ago. The clavier used to play them – hand levers instead of ropes – has been restored too, so they'll once again be ringing out over the streets of Plaistow.

The project generated a lot of local interest, from the Royal British Legion, local historical societies and Kaizen Primary School, which



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Plaque in memory of those who died serving in the First World War



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9A Twin Bridges Business Park
232 Selsdon Road
South Croydon
CR2 6PL

Tel: 020 8686 2694

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web site: www.gillettjohnston.co.uk
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Bells after restoration

building the future



Bells prior to restoration



sent its school reporters to see the restoration. The bells will be dedicated in a special service in November.

The building is remarkable - it's 2*-listed, so the work had to be done - but for minister Mark Janes, it's what goes on inside it that counts. 'The church building is a great thing from a historical and architectural point of view,' he says. 'But the original vision of the church, that was at the heart of the West Ham Central Mission, was to share the gospel in very practical ways that addressed the needs of people who were very poor. The church continues to work with people who are vulnerable and socially excluded.'

There are plenty of those in the neighbourhood. Newham is the youngest and most ethnically diverse borough in the country, with the highest birthrate. Not long ago the church realised that around a third of its number (around 120 on a typical Sunday morning) were under 18. A relatively high proportion of the residents have mental health issues

and learning or other disabilities. Needs are complex. The church does what it can.

Bridges, for instance, is a homeless charity co-ordinated by church member Lesley Wildman; it started with a Christmas meal, and 'we just went on from there', she says.

'We offer breakfast every Saturday, where we have comfortable chairs and a TV, and we try to give people a sense of worth,' she told the Newham Magazine. 'Our clients say: "Bridges is like a cafe, but when you go into a cafe people look down at you. When you come here, you're accepted."

As well as friendship, Bridges offers practical support. 'We are the step up the ladder for our clients. We go to appointments with them, help them fill in forms, make sure they know what's going on. People running services often say, 'if they want housing, they'll attend the appointment', but it's not so easy if you're, for example, an alcoholic sleeping on a bench and you wake up to someone offering you a drink.



But with a bit of extra support, people can help themselves.'

Thursday afternoons are for the Welcome Centre, where anyone can come and chat and make new friends, while the Plus Centre is open on Saturday evenings. It offers free computer use and friendly help with learning new IT skills, and volunteers are on hand to help.

There's also the church's Swift Centre, which hosts everything from the FROG youth group for years 7-9 to dog training classes -

it sees more than a hundred young people every week, offering them new opportunities and raising their horizons. And, Mark says, 'We have a quiet but constant stream of people confessing faith and seeking baptism who we seek to mentor and disciple.' Because, of course, it's a church, not just a social outreach, and the life of the church goes on - a family left for Nepal on Saturday to work with the United Mission to Nepal via BMS, and some young people from the youth club set off last week to cycle

2012 miles across Europe.

The restoration of the bells and tower is a step along the way in the church's redevelopment - and an important one. Funding's come from various sources, including English Heritage through the Heritage Lottery Fund, the War Memorials Trust and the Western Front Association - and the very generous giving of time and money by the congregation. They've taken part in sponsored swims, bike rides, sleepovers, and brought their £1 a week to church to get their 'bell card' stamped; made cards and cakes, or just given.

But Memorial Community Church is a vast old building, and will need a lot more spending on it yet. 'We hope one day to restore the original grand entrance to the church and there are exciting plans, but we take one step at a time,' says Mark.

Most importantly, 'The church as a family of people wants to be at the part of our local community, offering people the opportunity to discover who Jesus Christ is and the transforming power of his love.'

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