

History of handbells

Bells have been in existence for thousands of years, but handbells developed in England in the 17th century.

The first bells in England were huge and found in church towers. They were used for change ringing, the art of changing the order in which the bells ring. Eventually, English towns began practicing change ringing with small, wooden handbells so they wouldn't disturb neighbors and to avoid the uncomfortable environment in the bell tower.

It was in 1660 that William and Robert Cor cast the first tuned bronze handbell in the Wiltshire Foundry in England. Small handbell sets were made to correspond to the bells in a specific tower.

Cast of bronze, handbells have a fixed, directional clapper. The three physical characteristics of a handbell are its English tuning, fixed clapper and restraining spring.

As bell ringers began to realize the musical potential of handbells, semitones were added to form full chromatic sets, enabling performers to play familiar melodies. By the middle of the 18th century, group "tune ringing" was a favorite diversion in England, and soon nearly every village had its band of bell ringers.

English handbells became a permanent part of the American scene in the early 1900s through Boston's Margaret Shurcliff. She brought from England eight Whitechapel handbells, a set which she continued to expand. Soon she was introducing to Boston her Beacon Hill Ringers, who became well-known for their annual Christmas caroling on Beacon Hill.

Until 1955, the vast majority of handbells was produced in England by the Whitechapel Bell Foundry. That year, Petit & Fritsen, Dutch bellfounders since 1660, began manufacturing handbells. Schulmerich Carillons began

mass producing handbells in the United States in 1963. Jacob Malta opened his own handbell business, Malmark, in 1974.

English handbells spread throughout this country first through family ownership and then into churches. Also, handbells made their appearance in schools in the last half of this century.

Numerous techniques have been incorporated into the art of handbell ringing. A variety of sounds besides the straight ring exist today, including the martellato, pluck, thumb-damp and "wow" effects.

In addition, many ringers have become adept at changing dynamics. Many English bell teams ring off the table, meaning the bells are rung up from a table. This means the clappers strike the backside of the bell. Most other countries favor ringing in hand, which means the bells are rung starting from the shoulder and the clapper strikes the front side of the bell.

_ Source: American Guild of English Handbell Ringers