



The Bells of St. Marks

One of Ontario's 48 sets of bells lives right here in Niagara-on-the-Lake

Tim Taylor
The Lake Report

It was the middle of the 1820s. The War of 1812 still cast a long shadow. Niagara townsfolk craved a steeple bell to announce important community happenings and sound the alarm in times of calamity.

Ninety residents answered the subscription call for the town's first bell. By 1828, the single bell was mounted in the belfry of St. Mark's Anglican Church, swing-mounted and rung by a stout cord, dropped three floors into the church entryway below.

Current St. Mark's Rector, William Roberts reflects on the value of that 200-year-old investment in the town: "Imagine how vital our bells have been over the decades. When they ring, we know instantly how to respond. A perfect communication tool.

"The sound of the chimes is almost other-worldly —

even calming amidst all the noise pollution in our world these days."

The Bells of St. Mark's have grown in number and stature to become one of the three largest chimes in Ontario. And certainly, the largest in any small parish church.

In the world of chiming, there are generally two major categories of bell sets based on the number of bells.

Sounds simple. If your set is less than 23 bells, it is a chime. Twenty-three or more bells (two octaves), it is a carillon.

The St. Mark's bells are a little more complicated. They are a hybrid of the two types. It is a large chime — 19 bells — with the tuning and console of a larger carillon. It can play, with some adjustments, almost any music on its one and a half octaves.

The St. Mark's chime "is more sophisticated than a straight chime," says Dr. Andrea McCrady, the

dominion carillonneur in Ottawa.

McCrady visited Niagara-on-the-Lake this spring and played a brief after-service chime recital at St. Mark's. She performs over 200 recitals a year on the 53-bell carillon at the Peace Tower in Ottawa.

"St. Mark's started out as a chime," she recalls. "But became a hybrid, when a small carillon keyboard was installed at the same time as the chime was being doubled in size."

"They are a lovely set of bells. They really are. They are very well-tuned. You can have confidence in their music."

She adds that the St. Mark's bell tower has a fine sturdy sound box. "And there's also great value in having a very fine church-yard to wander and listen to the chimes."

McCrady was enamored with the chimes from an early age, starting on piano when she was six. She retained an interest in chiming through medical school, even travelling on a special scholarship to Europe, to explore some of the finest carillons in the world.

After retiring from a 30-year career as a family doctor, she returned to the bells in earnest, achieving the coveted dominion carillonneur position 10 years ago. She has played over 200 carillons around North America.

For many who aspire to the play the bells, McCrady is a chiming and carillon hero.

Through master classes and teaching, she has inspired hundreds to take up the bells.

So it was that Bernadette Secco, a Niagara Falls resident and a longtime St. Mark's chimer, attended a McCrady masterclass in Ottawa. She returned to inspire the next generation of St. Mark's chimers.

"I've been practising the



The bells at St. Mark's Church. SUPPLIED



Dr. Andrea McCrady, Canada's dominion carillonneur, performs over 200 recitals each year, on the 53-bell Peace Tower Carillon in Ottawa. She recently visited Niagara-on-the-Lake and played the bells of St. Mark's.

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piano for over 50 years," says Secco. "When we were kids, my grandparents would walk us along the Niagara River on Sundays, dressed in our frilly dresses. I could hear the 55-bell carillon at the Rainbow Bridge. I was just fascinated by it."

Secco speaks with passion about the bells: "There is something very primal in all of us. For me, it's the bells. I vibrate with them. It's like the best massage I ever had."

Her favourite time for chiming is after the last service on Christmas Eve at St. Mark's.

"As people are leaving, I scurry up (into the tower)

and play Silent Night," she says, her eyes sparkling as she speaks. "It's a quiet, simple version because the sound of the bells crackles through the cold air. It's what Christmas is all about."

Secco has passed this passion on to the two chimers who share the St. Mark's bell tower for special events.

Christine Bishop, a music teacher from Bournemouth, England, came to Canada and Niagara-on-the-Lake, with her husband, six years ago.

They Googled "nice places to live in Ontario" and NOTL was top of the list.

When Secco called for new chimers in the St.

Mark's Sunday bulletin, Bishop leapt at the chance to take lessons from such an accomplished musician. That was four years ago.

Now, in addition to her part-time chiming at St. Mark's, Bishop volunteers as a music teacher at Royal Oak School and has a gaggle of 20 local piano students.

"I really love chiming the bells," she says. "It is a real joy. Every time I chime, I think of all the people that can hear the music. But I also think of all the chimers that have played these bells before over the last two cen-

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Left: The current chimers of St. Mark's, Christine Bishop and Paul Wiebe, squeeze into the tiny keyboard room, two floors above ground and one floor below the belfry. Right: Bernadette Secco observes the St. Mark's bells as they automatically chime the quarter hour. Secco is credited with reviving interest in the bells by encouraging new players. TIM TAYLOR

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turies. It's a privilege."

Bishop shares the largely wedding and funeral chiming duties with Paul Wiebe, a chimer for 10 years at St. Mark's and church organist in St. Catharines.

Once again, it was Secco who sparked Wiebe's interest in the bells. At the time, Wiebe was part of the St. Mark's choir and read

Secco's overture to would-be chimers in the Sunday bulletin.

"I love St. Mark's," he says. "I love Niagara-on-the-Lake. And I love the bells."

Wiebe also loves to play music that is joyful and moving all the time. He chuckles: "I'm laughing because at one wedding I played the old popular classic, Penny Lane. I got com-

plaints because the bride wasn't named Penny!"

It's clear the people who really know the Bells of St. Mark's want more people to know them. They believe the bells are greatly under-valued.

Donald Combe, a long-time St. Mark's parishioner and member of the church's venerable Archive Committee, is one of those believers. He wants his church

and the town to take more notice of the Bells of St. Mark's.

"They are an incredible resource that is not used nearly enough," he contends.

Rector Roberts agrees: "Imagine having a regular chime concert on balmy summer evenings. Picnics and lawn chairs and music that carries you back to a bygone era."

The climb

A casual exploration of St. Mark's Anglican Church will offer few clues as to how to find the chime keyboard, let alone, the actual bells in the belfry.

I needed a guide for both of my recent climbs: Sidle along a very narrow passage (less than a foot wide) behind the organ pipes, without touching anything, stepping over large and small conduits.

Then up a makeshift ladder, reminiscent of a nautical gangway.

Not there yet.

From this small, enclosed space, up another long ladder, through a small opening in the ceiling, into another smaller room. It is windowless and contains an awkward-looking contraption that looks like a marriage between a small organ and a weaving loom, with 20 stainless steel wires threading their way from the top of the keyboard mounting, through the ceiling above, to their connected bells.

Each wire is attached through the console to a lever that looks a bit like a small wheelbarrow handle, stuck into the instrument, ready for the chimer to push down and activate a bell for each handle.

All the bells are on the next level up, partially protected from the elements. But not too protected — you want to hear the bells...

Further into history

The Bells of St. Mark's have a long and colourful history, part of a centuries-long international tradition.

It wasn't until 1877 that the original, 1828 bell was replaced by six new bells, financed by two local widowers, in memory of their wives. The 1828 bell was given to St. Saviour's church in Queenston.

In 1917, the St. Mark's Ladies Guild added three more bells as a memorial to parish sons killed in action in France. The Bells of St. Mark's then provided a full octave range of nine bells.

In 2006, all nine bells were removed for tuning and reconditioning to carillon standards. At the same time, the aging belfry was repaired, reinforced and readied for the return of the original nine bells and nine more, bringing the total to 18.

At the same time, the instrument was equipped with an electronic-pneumatic system allowing music to be programmed and the Westminster Quarters played.

In 2012, a single bell was added: The Brock, so named to commemorate the War of 1812 hero and the bicentennial celebrations.

Bell chimes and carillons are also measured by their weight. The total weight of all 19 St. Mark's bells is 5,852 pounds — almost three tons. The largest of the St. Mark's bells is 1,240 pounds; the smallest is 92 pounds.

Bells, unlike other instruments, do not go out of tune. They are cast of an alloy of roughly three parts copper to one-part tin. They are cast slightly larger than their final form to allow for a lathe-like shaving of the inside to more precisely tune the sound of each bell.

There are some 2,600 sets of tower bells in the world, including 48 in Ontario. The largest Canadian carillon is at the Rainbow Bridge (55 bells and 43 tons) in Niagara Falls. Fully refurbished in the 1990s, this carillon has not been played since the tragedy of 9/11. It is still considered a security risk.



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