

Appeal for the Tower of St Leonard's, Streatham

Bell ringing has been suspended temporarily at the ancient parish church of St Leonard, Streatham, in order to safeguard ringers from injury by falling masonry.



St Leonard's tower is by far the oldest structure in Streatham, dating from about 1350 AD when Sir John Ward, a friend of the Black Prince, built a new church for the village. The tower walls were constructed, as was common at the time, from Surrey flint interspersed with blocks of softer limestone and are about two feet thick. Over the centuries the tower has survived numerous alterations to the rest of the church, including complete rebuilding and enlargement in 1830-31. The brick spire was added in 1841, replacing an earlier one which had been struck by lightning.

The most recent redevelopment followed the fire which devastated the church in May 1975. Raging flames, fanned by a strong east wind, swept through the nave and up the tower, which acted like a chimney. At the height of the blaze, the old bells were shattered in pieces by a combination of intense heat and cold water from the firemen's hoses. Subsequently the church was restored, the gloomy Victorian interior giving way to the

light, open worship space which we enjoy today, the tower was strengthened and a brand new ring of bells installed in 1981.

However, over the past 20 years or so it has become apparent that the mediaeval walls had suffered more from the fire than was originally thought. On the inside the softer stone has developed a tendency to crack and flake away. We are assured this is not a serious structural problem, owing to the thickness of the walls, but it does pose a significant health and safety risk.

When the bells are rung, the tower rocks – only by a few millimetres but enough to feel. This movement is quite normal when church bells are rung “full circle” and would be no cause for concern but, when the inner surface of the walls is unstable, the result is all too predictable. Only a few weeks ago a visiting ringer was hit by a small piece of stone.

Given the distinct possibility that a larger chunk falling on someone's head could





cause serious injury, the Rector and Churchwardens, who bear ultimate responsibility for the church building, have reluctantly decided to close the tower until remedial work can be carried out.

The church architect had already proposed a solution which involves covering the walls of the ringing chamber with “Rendalath”, a reinforced render carrier system which can be plastered over, thus preserving the integrity of the ancient walls while creating a safer and brighter environment for the bell ringers. The scheme, which has been approved by the Diocese, includes the provision of more suitable lighting and the reinstatement of a window between the ringing chamber and the narthex which was bricked up after the fire. The cost is estimated at £20,000 to 25,000.

Unfortunately there is no money available to allow work to commence immediately. A major overhaul of the church heating system costing £40,000 has used up most of the parish’s reserves. We are therefore seeking external funding in the form of grants, loans or donations to restore an important part of the church’s – and Streatham’s – heritage to full working order.

In the meantime the bells will remain silent * on Sunday mornings.

* Apart from one bell which can be tolled from downstairs.