

Antique bell tuned to chime anew

By Judith Doolin Spikes

IRVINGTON — A bell that tolled the hour in the Rivertowns for 90 years has been restored in England and will be reinstalled in Irvington Presbyterian Church's tower later this summer.

"To the best of my knowledge, the bell was last struck in the late 1950s," said the Rev. David Harkness, the minister of the church since the early '90s. An electric carillon (a set of fixed bells struck by hammers operated from a keyboard) was installed in 1959 and provided music and bell tones until it failed in the mid-1990s. Replacement parts were not available.

"It has taken the church leadership some time to reach the decision to repair and retune the existing bell and add four new [carillon] bells," Harkness explained.

The Romanesque Revival stone edifice, on the west side of Broadway, was built in 1869 to plans by James Renwick, architect of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan. The congregation was founded in 1854 in Mrs. Orton's barn on Main Street (present site of the Main Street School) and built its first church on the east side of Broadway, opposite the present building. (That structure was sold to the Immaculate Conception congregation in 1872, damaged by fire in 1970, and abandoned, then demolished in 1996.)

Jay Gould, Cyrus Field, Charles Tiffany, and George Morgan (a New York State governor and brother of J.P.) were principal contributors to the 1869 church building, which included the bell, cast in 1870 by Meneely & Kimberly in upstate Troy.

The ticklish job of removing the thousand-pound bronze bell from its narrow, seven-story bell tower was performed one miserable day in February by Seaboard Weatherproofing and Restoration of Port Chester, contractors whose expertise is in exterior restoration of historic buildings but who had never before

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removed a church bell.

Seaboard was recruited for the job by Walter Sedovic, the Irvington architect who is overseeing the work. He had worked with Seaboard on the restoration of an historic synagogue in New York City. "Sedovic needed someone who could do a job with many unknowns — and we had rigging experience," general manager Jay Fiebich explained. "The weather was cold and nasty, and what the birds had left wasn't pleasant, but we got it done."

Seaboard used a simple machine (described by Sedovic as a "block-and-tackle" and by Fiebich as a "ball-and-chain-type hoist") cranked by hand — lots of hands. "The same way it was originally installed," Sedovic said.

And it took all day.

A team of technicians from the 400-year-old Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London assisted in the delicate operation of freeing the bell from its support frame, a sort of yoke that allowed the bell to rock from side to side when tolled by a rope, Quasimodo-style, from the ground.

"It's a beautiful bell, and it's great to see it 'in person,'" Sedovic added, noting that the bell is about 4.5 feet high and 3.5 feet in diameter.

The British chaps saw the bell off by ocean steamer back to their workshop, where the Liberty Bell and Big Ben, the hour bell of the Great Clock of Westminster, had been cast. There, Sedovic said, the Irvington bell was "hand-worked to make the thickness consistent so that the



The bell on the day it was lowered from the tower.

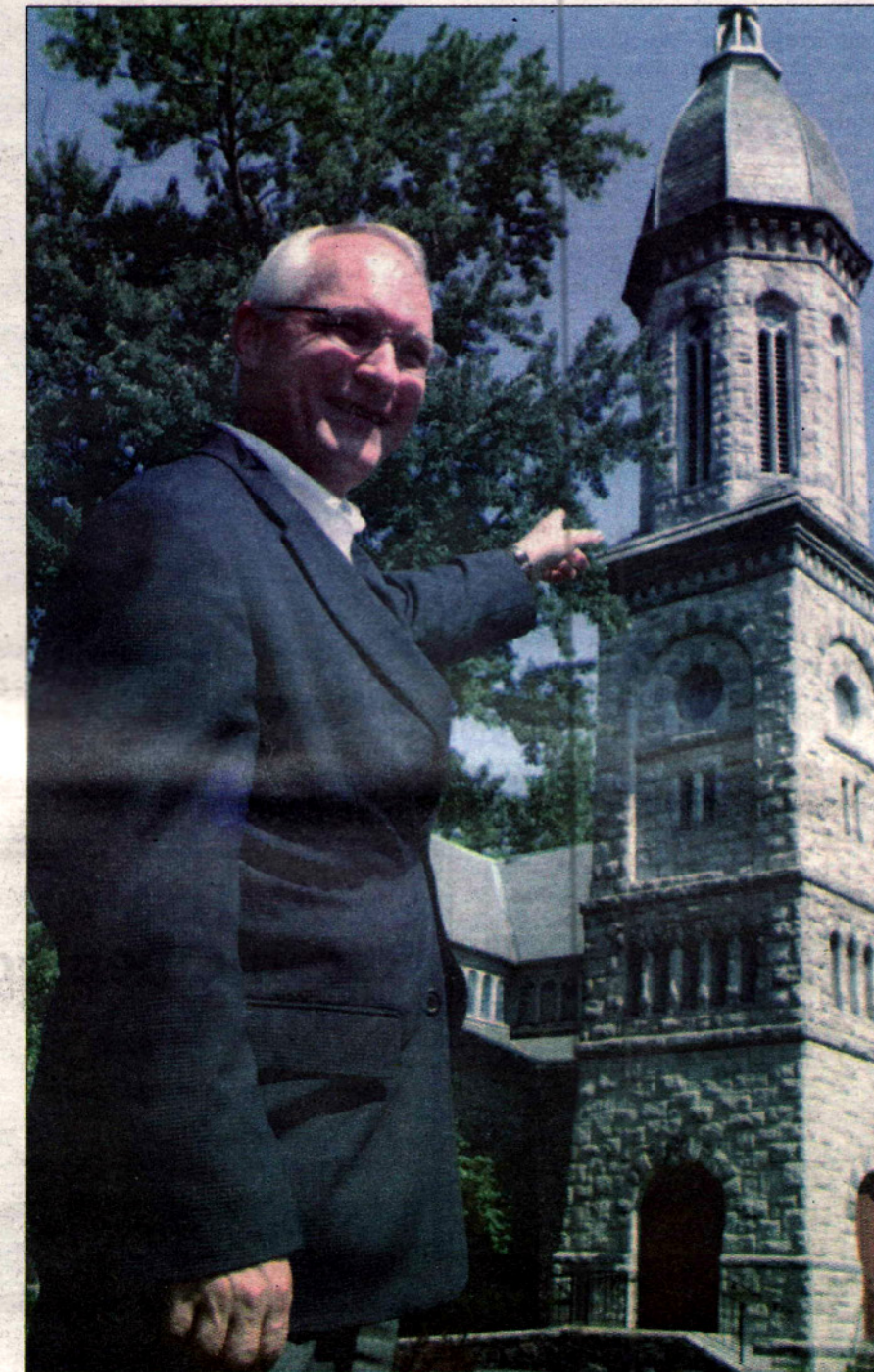
wave of sound will remain consistent." Tuning to a specific pitch, he added, will allow it to resonate better and be heard from a greater distance.

Irvington's antique bell and the new carillon bells, also cast by Whitechapel, are now back in port in New York. Installation was initially scheduled to begin July 23, but Harkness now suspects that it will not take place for at least a few weeks. "The British team will come back, and we have to coordinate that with Seaboard, myself, and the church," Sedovic said.

Fiebich isn't yet sure what method he'll use to get the antique bell back into its tower, but he expects to have more

options — probably powered by electricity — than were available for removing it. For one thing, there will be fewer unknowns on the return trip; for another, the original bell, like the carillon bells, will be re-installed in a stationary position that reduces torque on the tower.

The retuned antique bell, in conjunction with the new four-bell carillon, will "offer many choices for playing," Harkness said. "There will be a clock function to mark the hours of the day and controls that will allow us to use the bells for worship, weddings, funerals, and other events. With five bells, the options for chimes and tunes are enhanced."



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The Rev. David Harkness points to the bell tower of Irvington Presbyterian Church.