

# The Tower



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## Brief history of the tower

Until the middle of the 18th century, St Peter's had a central tower on a cruciform building. In 1756, the Ringing Chamber floor was raised and higher tower arches built. However, this work was poorly done, and by 1799 the tower had become so dangerous that most of it had to be dismantled; two years later, the floor fell in. Major work was then unavoidable, and the tower was reconstructed to a similar size to the present one, while the transepts and most of the chancel were removed at this time. During Lord Grimthorpe's renovations in 1893, it was refaced in red brick with stone dressings.

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## Ringling Chamber

Within the ringing chamber there are a large number of peal boards decorating the walls, a total of about forty. Many towers in Britain contain one or more peal boards, but very few have as many as St Peter's. Each one records a ringing performance of at least 5,000 changes, lasting a minimum of 3 hours. Most of these were rung to mark a special occasion such as the inauguration of a new vicar or a Royal Wedding or Funeral. Peal boards of particular note are:

- The oldest St Peter's peal board, just to the left of the stairs up to the clock-room and belfry, recording a peal of Grandsire Triples rung in 1767. This is notable because 18th century peal boards are quite rare.
- The peal rung for the Royal Wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip in 1947, recorded on a board to the right of the entrance door.
- The Victory Peal on August 16th 1945, which is detailed in stained glass (pictured to the right). This is most unusual as there are only a handful of towers which contain such windows, but the fact that a second panel has been added for a fiftieth anniversary peal almost certainly makes it unique.
- Two peals rung in 1993, the last one on the old bells and the first one on the new ring both recorded on a board just to the right of the entry door.
- Peal of Yorkshire Surprise Royal, to the right of the stained glass window, rung as a welcome to the most recent vicar, Anne Hollinghurst.

Images of all the peal boards can be viewed in the [Gallery](#) page. Just below and to the left of the last mentioned peal board is a shallow cupboard which has ten ropes disappearing into it. This is the Ellacombe Chiming apparatus and each of these ropes is attached to a hammer underneath one of the bells. It allows tunes to be played on the bells, although nowadays it is very seldom used. The pendulum of the church clock, which is above the ringing chamber, extends down almost to the floor of the Ringing Chamber and can be seen swinging in the cupboard opposite the entrance door. It is one of the longest pendulums in the country and is claimed to be the heaviest. Its period is 5 seconds - two-and-a-half seconds each way. The library of the Hertford County Association of Change Ringers is contained, in the main, in the two cupboards against the north and east walls.

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## Clock Room

This room contains the mechanism for the church clock and its one clock face looking south over the main shopping street. This room also helps to reduce the intensity of the sound heard by the ringers. The clock was made by John Briant of Hertford and installed in 1806. Further details of the clock along with a copy of the original bill are on display. The clock was temporarily removed during the bell restoration in 1993, and when refitted a new enclosure was built around it. The clock room is also used as a general storage area for spare parts and for copies of the ringers' journal, *The Ringing World*.

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## Belfry

The wide walkway around the bells and frame here is most unusual, as in many belfries the frame takes up all the space available. Indeed, there is often a second tier above (or in a few cases, below) the main layer. In many towers, access to the belfry requires one to climb through one of the bell 'pits' (the area in which each bell swings). The louvres have all been boarded up, except for a smaller hinged door at the top of each. These allow the volume of sound which is heard outside to be controlled, from the full intensity, for service ringing, when they are open (the boarding up of most of the area hardly diminishes this) to a much reduced level for practising. There is also a trap-door in the middle of each floor (except the roof) which provides access for the bells and frame. An electric hoist was attached to the beams just below the roof for lifting the bells and frame components. For more information about the bells and previous sets of bells, look in the [Bells](#) page.

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## **The Roof**

When open this affords splendid views of the whole of St Albans and its surroundings. The roof is the highest point in St Albans and has consequently been chosen by Radio Verulam as the site of one of its transmitters. On Ascension Day, the choir climbs up to the roof and sings early in the morning.