

Fairbridge 'Big Bell' Story



When you first glance up at the Fairbridge bell on its high stand at the museum, it is intriguing. It draws you closer to investigate its size and details, with its chips and bruises from nearly 200 years of age. It's not a huge bell, 550mm in height (3ft 6in), but it's large enough to hold a presence and it shows it's age with a greenish bronze patina.

Local history of the bell is that it was at Fairbridge Farm School, Molong, from 1952 till the school closed in 1973. Fairbridge catered for child migrants from Great Britain, homing and schooling them in farm practices. Fairbridge Farm School opened in November 1938 and the bell was an important part of routine and structure at the school. However, as

you will read, the 'big bell' wasn't the chief bell at the school. Most often than not, the 'big bell' is not recounted in Fairbridge history. The bell the former students remember is the piece of railway iron that was strung up on a wooden framework near the kitchen. It was 'rung' with a steel bar and you wonder how many children damaged their hearing when ringing it. The damage to the railway iron if something that only constant use and hard hitting could accomplish! No doubt many a frustration was taken out on that piece of railway iron.



Working backwards – 2020 to 1952

We will start at the end with the history we do know. The bell arrived at Molong Historical Society in 1982, being obtained from St Barnabas Church, Orange. The bell having been donated to the church on the closure of Fairbridge Farm School in 1973. However, the bell was never used so made its way back to Molong to be included as part of the permanent Fairbridge Collection at the museum. It was erected under its cover and stands on the grounds at the back of the museum.



The bell arrived at Fairbridge Farm School in 1952 after being discovered in the old Woolloomooloo Fish Market building, then owned by Sungavure Ltd, during alterations¹. Fairbridge Farm School was chosen from a number of institutions that applied to an ad in The Sun newspaper in

1951 due to its "ties between the Old Country and NSW"². Prior to the bronze bell arriving at the school



¹ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article176526406>

² <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article229730426>

the previous bell had been the piece of railway iron hung on the wooden framework. Photos in the Fairbridge Collection at the Molong Historical Museum show the single railway iron bell and then both the railway iron and the bronze bell side by side on wooden framework. It is reported in the Fairbridge history that the bronze bell was used until a crack formed and the railway iron was once again used. However, given the damage on the railway iron then maybe this was just used as a way of preserving the old bell until it was removed to the chapel?

In 1961 an old army hut, from Dubbo, was purchased and erected in the Fairbridge Farm School village and converted into a Chapel. A special beam being installed to take the weight of the bell. Here the bell potentially called the children and staff to church each Sunday until it was donated after the school closure in 1973. However further research & oral histories need to be collected.

Woolloomooloo Fish Markets – 1951 to 1880's



The bells history at Woolloomooloo Fish market is not entirely clear. Reference to plans for the building in the newspaper in 1871 say "In the upper turret-room it is proposed to hang a fire-alarm bell, provided the house holders in the district will subscribe to defray the expense of one. The bell might be so arranged that the rope could be conducted either to the office or the bedroom of the market clerk. There is at present no public alarm-bell eastward of Pitt-street; and, as Woolloomooloo has now become thickly populated,

and contains some very large business establishments, it is very desirable that an alarm-bell should be provided for use in cases of fire. In the tower there is also to be a recess left for a clock."³ So maybe the bell was to be used as a fire bell or it could have been used to strike the hour in conjunction with the clock? At

this point in the research, 2020, we don't know but we are assuming it was used with the clock.



The Woolloomooloo Fish market was opened in 1871 however in an early photograph there was no clock⁴. A newspaper article in March, 1885⁵, makes mention of the clock so it is assumed the bell is also there at this time. A later photo of the building shows the clock at the front of the building.



After major extensions and alterations the clock (and possibly the bell?) was relocated to a clock tower in 1893⁶. "Large brick building built on two levels, with administrative offices fronting Forbes St and a lower building surrounding an inner courtyard. Large central tower has a multi-faced clock at the top and an ornate curved copper hood."⁷ However if the bell was not used in conjunction with the clock then it may have been during this time the bell was put into storage until it was found after the sale of the building and discovered by Sungavure Ltd.

³ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article164373577>

⁴ <http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110041394>

⁵ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article111179139>

⁶ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article235956495>

⁷ <http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110103094>

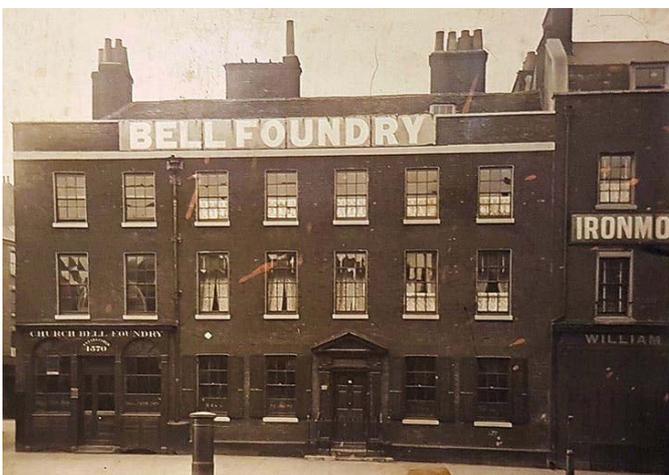
Photos of the building prior to demolition in 1961 show the clock tower already removed.⁸ But we do know, according to the papers (and associated photo), that the bell was uncovered in 1951 and transferred the following year to Fairbridge Farm School.

Where now?

Going back even further into the bells history in the period from its manufacture, in 1837, till the fish markets, in about 1872, is still more murky. The 1951 newspaper clipping states the bell hung over council buildings in George St., near old Belmore markets⁹. This is where some confusion sets in as there were several markets and many names for them all; Sydney markets, cattle markets, hay & corn markets, Haymarket, Belmore, central, old belmore, new belmore etc etc. To compound the confusion most were located on or near George street! However, digging again on the online papers leads us to a couple of leads that the Woolloomooloo bell was firstly destined for use in Town Hall¹⁰ in 1875. Records from City of Sydney archives¹¹ and further newspaper articles¹² and recollection¹³ state this was true and the clock and bell coming from the Haymarket Stores. The clock was used initially at Town Hall but it was not the case for our bell, it being replaced by a new one, originally, from PN Russell.

With the lead to the Haymarket and also the fitting of the dates of construction of Woolloomooloo Fish Markets (1871), and no clock originally being in the building till around 1880, brings us to the bells beginning. There could be some debate that the clock (and bell) could have come from the Central markets on the old police building but this was not demolished until 1892.

In the beginnings - 1837



Jumping right back now and starting with the bells manufacture. The bell was cast in 1837, at Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London, by the well-known bell maker, Thomas Mears. The bell left the factory along with another 150-200 bells that year when the factory was in mass production of bells across the world. The foundry was notable for being the original manufacturer of the Liberty Bell, a famous symbol of American independence, and for re-casting Big Ben¹⁴. In Australia the Whitechapel

⁸ <https://cosaprod.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/685231>

⁹ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article229730426>

¹⁰ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article14827002>

¹¹ <https://archives.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/nodes/view/960991>

¹² <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article136862138>

¹³ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article166787994>

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whitechapel_Bell_Foundry

foundry have made many bells including, in the same year, for Sydney Hyde Park Barracks, Adelaide Holy Trinity Church and New Norfolk Island Willow Court Asylum. Locally bells from Whitechapel foundry can be found in Orange Holy Trinity Church & Bathurst, St. Michael & St. John Cathedral¹⁵.

The following description and history has been provided by archivist and bell historian, Chris Pickford, of Kinver, UK.

Description: Bell (cast in bell metal, approximately 78% copper and 22% tin) made at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London by Thomas Mears II in 1837. The bell has its six canons and argent (suspension loops) complete and intact. The moulding wires are of standard configuration, i.e. 2:2-2:3:2 (i.e. from crown to lip). In the mulley groove or inscription band between the 2-2 mouldings the bell has a cast inscription in mixed-size capitals recording the maker's name, i.e.



THOMAS MEARS OF LONDON FOUNDER 1837.



A tonal analysis from a recording show that the perceptible note of the bell (i.e. the Nominal) is F sharp and that the internal harmonics are typical of the founder and period. In simple terms, it might be said that the bell is “not too well in tune with itself”. The bell is nevertheless of fair tone and - from the recording - does not sound as though it is cracked (as has been previously stated).

The bell retains its cast-in crown staple (of iron) inside the head of the bell. This was for the suspension of an internal clapper but the lack of internal indentations suggests that the bell may have never been swung or rung in this way. There is clear evidence of external clock hammer indentation on one side in line with the single canons (i.e. consistent with one of the likely hanging alignments for the bell). This shows that the bell was used as a clock bell at some stage in its history.

Historical context (bellfounding): The Whitechapel Bell Foundry, which closed in 2017, was one of the oldest manufacturing businesses in the UK. The foundry had been operating on the same site since 1738 and the origins of the company can be traced with reasonable certainty back to 1570 and quite possibly back to earlier bellfounders operating in the area from the C14th.

The Mears family became associated with the foundry in the 1760s and ran the business from 1782 to 1865. The family retained ownership of the premises into the third quarter of the C20. The firm traded as Mears & Stainbank until the name was officially changed to the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in 1968

Thomas Mears II (c.1778-d.1851) had sole control of the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London from 1810 when he succeeded his father until 1844 when he retired leaving the business in the hands of his sons Charles and George. During that period he bought up a number of provincial foundries - including those at Gloucester, Hertford, Aldbourne and Downham Market - to give Whitechapel a near monopoly in the field. This was at a time when many established firms were going out of business and the only other growing concern was that of W. & J. Taylor of Oxford which was to become a leading manufacturer of bells after moving to Loughborough in 1839.

¹⁵ https://anzab.org.au/info/AustralianClocksAndBellsSummary_2019March.pdf



The clock is mentioned in advertising “opposite the cattle market clock”, recollections, irregular timekeeping and even a poem. The tender for the clock removal from the Haymarket occurred in 1875¹⁸. This then links into the references of it being potentially used for Town Hall before going to Woolloomooloo, sometimes around the 1880’s.

The forgotten bell of Fairbridge

So while the ‘big bell’ of Fairbridge is often discounted and not included in the written and oral histories of Fairbridge it is an early pioneering artifact of colonial Australia, with a rich and interesting history of its own. It has quiet possibly tolled out the hour for near on a century across Haymarket and Woolloomooloo and then sat quietly in retirement for another 50 years in Molong. I hope with this researched history, and any future research, that it continues to be appreciated by all that enquire.

Hayley Lavers for Molong and District Historical Society, 2020

¹⁸ <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article13363732>