Neutral Citation Number [2026] ECC Yor 1

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT OF THE DIOCESE OF YORK

IN THE MATTER OF: St John the Baptist, Stamford Bridge

JUDGMENT

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1. St John the Baptist, Stamford Bridge is a Victorian (1868) unlisted church in the Stamford Bridge Conservation Area. Having regard to Pevsner's guide, its significance lies chiefly in its architectural character:

> *St John Baptist. 1868 by G. Fowler Jones. Yellow sandstone with limestone dressings. Chancel and nave with bellcote at east end of the nave. E.E. style with lancets.*

2. The bellcote is mentioned in Pevsner, but the petitioners describe the two 1867 Taylor chiming bells as being of no special historic importance. The Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) Bells Adviser concludes they were cast either whilst the church was in the planning stage and installed in 1867, or they were stock bells. He acknowledges that they are not listed by the Church Buildings Council (CBC) as "worthy of preservation." Nevertheless, I note the CBC Code for the Conservation and Repair of Bells and Bellframes 2007 (the CBC Code) itself indicates this does not imply that such bells are not worthy of preservation.

3. Ringing has local value rather than heritage significance: the bells have long been chimed mechanically via wires and cranks, a rare and now deteriorated arrangement. The PCC emphasises the community importance of maintaining manual chiming, noting that fundraising was expressly tied to preserving that function. While the bells are not historically significant, their role in village identity and worship gives them local communal significance, justifying careful reinstatement.

4. The bells and fittings are now unsafe and heavily weathered. The DAC Bells Adviser notes deteriorated wooden headstocks, worn wheels, ferrous gudgeon plates damaging the stonework, and an ageing wire-and-crank chiming system that is difficult and unsafe to maintain. Together, these factors demonstrate a clear need for removal, refurbishment and rehanging with reliable fittings.

5. The petitioners seek a faculty for the following works:

> *To remove the bells and headstocks from the bell turret, remove the cannons [sic], fit two new galvanised headstocks, a galvanised lever, wall mounted bearing brackets, clapper assemblies, galvanised sally guide wire and bronze pulleys and new bell chiming ropes, and reinstall the bells with new fittings as per the Proposal from Pembletons Bellhangers and Engineers dated 30th April 2026.*

6. The DAC advised that no consultation with the CBC, Historic England or any other body was required. It raised no objection to the court granting a faculty and indicated that the proposals would not affect the character of the church as a building of special architectural or historic interest. No objection was raised by anyone else. However, the DAC did not formally recommend the proposals because of concerns expressed by its own expert, the DAC Bells Adviser, to which I will shortly turn.

7. Given that the petitioners had been afforded a full opportunity to explain and justify the proposals, it was not necessary or appropriate to accept their invitation, via the Registrar, to talk directly to the bell engineers or require further clarification. However, primarily to judge visual impacts, I visited the site unaccompanied on 15 September 2026 and viewed the bellcote from all sides from within the churchyard and from the adjacent road.

8. Before I outline the DAC Bells Adviser's concerns, I need to address another matter. I understand one of the petitioners expressed concern regarding a possible conflict of interest. They alleged that the DAC Bells Adviser had worked for many years for one of the contractors who had quoted for, but not been awarded, this contract. I am assured that this belief is mistaken and in fact the Adviser had never worked for the firm in question. I accept that assurance and I am satisfied there was no conflict of interest. Nevertheless, because of the allegation, the Adviser left the DAC meeting during the discussion of this petition.

9. There are 3 areas of disagreement between the petitioners and the DAC Bells Adviser, the first two being the most significant:

    (a) **Removal of the canons**. The Adviser recommends retaining them, relying on the CBC Code's presumption against removal except for bells of no historic significance *and* hung for full-circle ringing. As these bells are chiming only, he considers removal unjustified. Pembletons, the petitioners' chosen contractors, argue the opposite, favouring removal for stability and ease of modern hanging.
    (b) The use of **galvanised steel headstocks**. The Adviser recommends hardwood headstocks to preserve appearance and follow conservation practice, whereas Pembletons prefer galvanised steel for durability and reduced maintenance.
    (c) **Mechanical versus electromagnetic chiming**. The Adviser considers the existing wire-and-crank system unsafe and difficult to maintain. He advises that either mechanical swing-chiming or electromagnetic chiming would be acceptable. However, he expresses a preference for electromagnetic chiming because it reduces maintenance and has been successfully introduced elsewhere. Pembletons strongly favour mechanical chiming, while alternative quotes from Nicholson Engineering Ltd and Whites of Appleton propose fully electronic systems.

Removal of canons

10. Pembletons recommended that the canons should be removed to allow for a more secure and simplified modern headstock attachment, saying it is a proven technique they have successfully implemented on numerous bellcotes.

They also contended, in contrast to the DAC Bells Adviser's view set out above, that this would be consistent with the CBC Code because the canons themselves are not of specific historical interest and the bells are not intended for full-circle ringing.

11. The CBC Code states on page 11:

> *As a general principle, canons should not be removed. This general rule may be relaxed only if the bell is not identified as of historic significance, cast after 1700 and to be hung for fullcircle ringing.*

12. Although, the bells are not identified as being of historical significance, it is common ground that they are not hung for "fullcircle" ringing and the DAC Bells Adviser's interpretation appears to be correct. As the CBC Code itself states, it is an "advisory document, not a piece of legislation", but I nevertheless give it due weight and need adequate reasons to depart from it. Furthermore, as stated in *In the matter of St John the Evangelist, Cononley with Bradley* [2016] ECC Lee 1, even with an unlisted church, there is "a presumption in favour of the status quo, with the burden of proof on the petitioners to satisfy the court that a faculty should issue."

13. I therefore gave the petitioners an opportunity to provide final comments on the proposal to remove the canons. Their response of 3 September 2026 did not repeat the contention that removal of the canons accords with the CBC Code and stated that Pembletons have advised they are "capable of completing the work with or without canons…". Pembletons had already indicated in its quotation of 30 April 2026 that it would be, "happy to adapt any part of this proposal to better suit specific diocesan requirements…." Nevertheless, without providing any details, the petitioners' response of 3 September 2026 asserted that, "the removal of canons would also ease costs without making a material difference to sound", and claimed that, "all the quotes suggested either removing the canons or some alteration to them."

14. One of the alternative quotes (Nicholson Engineering Ltd) indicated:

> *If stainless steel deadstocks or headstocks are to be used, it would be necessary to remove the canons from the heads of the bells. Canon removal and the casting of resin pads onto the heads of the bells would also increase contact area, reducing the risk of the fittings becoming loose.*

15. However, stainless steel headstocks are not proposed. Whilst the reference to more secure fittings is consistent with Pembleton's view, I am told that Pembletons can complete the work with the canons retained and, in his letter of 6 May 2026, the DAC Bells Adviser said:

> *Bells can and have been rehung with their canons retained and this work complied with the Code of Practice which supports retaining where possible. I see no valid reason why they should not be retained here as the bell head is not subject to the forces of a full circle rung bell which are between 2.4 x and 4.5 x the weight. In this case only the weight of the bells (also supported by a new central staple bolt) are the force exerted. If the crown of the bell is weak then a through bolt between the double canons can be used. The Code of Practice does not just refer to Listed*

bells but provides guidance on all. These canons may not be historically important but their removal alters the profile of the bell and its appearance and affects its integrity.

16. I have seen no evidence that retaining the canons would involve an insecure method and the other alternative quote (Whites of Appleton) proposed retaining the canons, albeit with hardwood headstocks. I have no reason to doubt the petitioners' indication that removal of the canons would not make a material difference to the sound, but the DAC Bells Adviser refers to the impact on appearance and integrity. Whilst, based on my site visit, the impact on the appearance of the bells from the ground would be limited, I have seen no evidence that retaining the canons would significantly increase the cost of the works.

17. In all the circumstances, having regard to the judgment in *St John the Evangelist, Cononley with Bradley* and to the CBC Code, which specifically advises against the removal of canons, as a general principle, I am not persuaded there is sufficient justification for their removal.

The headstocks

18. Pembletons and the petitioners argue that galvanised steel headstocks provide durable, low-maintenance stability, especially in an exposed bellcote. Pembletons describe steel as a "fit-and-forget" solution offering "a better long term maintenance regime," noting that modern hardwoods can shrink and require ongoing attention. The petitioners add environmental reasons: iroko and sapele are "from Nigerian rainforest sources," elm is endangered, and timber is "less environmentally sensitive." They contend that modern materials better support the Anglican Communion's "Lungs of the Earth" initiative and the parish's eco-church aims.

19. The DAC Bells Adviser objects to galvanised steel because it alters the historic appearance, is visually intrusive in an exposed bellcote, and conflicts with conservation principles favouring minimal change. He prefers hardwood headstocks as traditional, sympathetic materials that preserve the 1867 character. His report recommends "new wooden headstocks of a hardwood like iroko or sepele," noting they provide durable service when properly maintained, and says they are oily hardwoods which rarely shrink. Though he does not specifically cite the CBC Code in this respect, he regards galvanised steel as a less conservation-minded choice.

20. The CBC Code gives no specific guidance favouring timber over galvanised steel headstocks, though its conservation principles lean toward traditional materials. It states that "unnecessary replacement or alteration of historic bells and bellframes should be avoided", repairs should use "identical fittings… so that the character of the installation is not lost", and installations should be conserved "in as near their original state as possible." Timber naturally accords with these aims, though steel is not prohibited.

21. Hardwood headstocks would more closely follow a conservation-led approach. However, having regard to my site visit, the visual impact of replacing the existing weathered timber with galvanised steel would be limited, especially when compared with the more noticeable change common to all schemes: the removal of the prominent wooden wheels and their replacement with a lever. Furthermore, whilst Pembletons say the headstocks can be finished in

"high-quality" industrial paint, acknowledging the DAC Bells Adviser's comment that the "options of finish need clarity", details can be required by condition. This should further limit the visual impact and potentially address concerns from some members of the DAC about rust, in the event of damage.

22. Further, on the subject of durability, I note that Nicholsons Engineering Ltd also recommended galvanised or stainless steel and whilst the DAC Bells Adviser maintains that iroko and sapele "rarely shrink," there appears to be a genuine disagreement between experienced experts. In any event, I am persuaded that galvanised steel offers durable, low-maintenance stability in an exposed bellcote.

23. I also attach weight to the petitioners' environmental arguments and, taking all these factors together, including the absence of specific advice against galvanised steel headstocks in the CBC Code, I am persuaded that their use is justified in this case. This is notwithstanding the usual presumption in favour of the status quo, and subject to the condition to which I refer.

Mechanical versus electromagnetic chiming

24. I can deal with this aspect briefly, as there is no significant conflict. Rehanging the bells in a fixed position with electromagnetic chiming was an option in the DAC Bells Adviser's report of 27 November 2024. In his advice of 21 April 2026, he expressed a mild preference for electromagnetic chiming, when he said, "Hanging the bells with electromagnetic action will reduce future maintenance issues."

25. However, the petitioners prefer mechanical chiming because it preserves the long-standing tradition of manual ringing which the community specifically funded and expects to retain. This is an important factor, whether mechanical chiming is more or less durable than electromagnetic chiming in an exposed bellcote, and it is sufficient to justify the proposal.

Overall conclusion

26. A faculty may pass the seal for the proposed bell-work on the basis that the canons are retained. No authority is granted for their removal and the faculty is subject to the conditions set out in the Annex.

24 September 2026 **Canon John Murray**

Deputy Chancellor

ANNEX – CONDITIONS OF GRANT OF FACULTY

(1) Notwithstanding the description of the works in the petition, the works shall not commence until:

(a) a revised specification from Pembletons demonstrating how the bells are to be fitted with new galvanised headstocks and associated fittings, and reinstalled without removing the canons; and

(b) details of the type and colour of paint finish for the galvanised headstocks

have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Court, following consultation with the Diocesan Advisory Committee;

(c) the contractor has confirmed that adequate insurance has been arranged; and

(d) the Court fees have been paid.

(2) The works shall be carried out in accordance with the revised specification and details approved under condition (1)(a) and (b).

(3) Any material variation to the authorised works shall be referred back to the Court for approval.