

THE WHITECHAPEL GUILD:

Ringling through the Decades at NCS

BY QUILLA ROTH '66
WHITECHAPEL GUILD COORDINATOR

If you routinely passed through one of the Cathedral's locked gates, climbed stone stairs to a high-ceiling gallery which houses a dusty *manquette* of the Cathedral, a plaster figure of Christ, and a suit of armor, then took two elevators or open metal spiral staircases to reach a dramatic sky-high view of Washington, DC, you must have been in Whitechapel Guild.

Since 1964, members of this NCS institution have been ascending to the ringing chamber of the Cathedral's central tower to practice the 400-year-old art of change ringing, an activity like no other at NCS and one that almost no other high school in America can offer.

Change ringing is a form of bell ringing in which a set of bells (generally 6-12) sounds in changing rhythmic sequences (called "methods") rather than in tunes. Change ringing originated in England in the 17th century and today is primarily practiced in the United Kingdom and former British colonies. The bells are rung by a group of trained ringers, each of whom rings one bell by pulling on a rope that swings the bell in a 360 degree arc from mouth-upward position to mouth-upward position each time it sounds.

Whitechapel Guild is named after the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London that cast the National Cathedral's 10 change-ringing bells. The Guild was founded after the Cathedral's central tower and its bells' were dedicated in a day-long festive celebration on Ascension Day, 1964. Because there were almost no change ringers in the United States at that time, the Cathedral brought a band of 10 expert ringers over from England to ring for the dedication. Some of those ringers gave an enthusiastically received presentation about change ringing at NCS morning chapel. They followed this with an introductory lesson in change ringing for interested girls that afternoon (albeit only on handbells), and the Guild was born.

That fall, Fred Price, a retired Englishman and an experienced ringer, came to stay for several months in order to teach both students and adults to ring. Because the then-Head of NCS Katherine Lee was a strong supporter of ringing, members of Whitechapel Guild were able to spend free periods (even skipping gym!) in the tower learning to ring.

Not surprisingly, NCS students were good at this new activity, and they've been doing it ever since, ringing for the December service of Lessons and Carols, graduation in June, and when schedules permit, for Friday Cathedral services. In addition, several of the original members of the Guild were invited to join the newly-formed band of Cathedral ringers that performed for Sunday services and special Cathedral occasions.



The biggest bell is called the "tenor," and weighs 3588 lbs!

Quilla Roth '66, who started with the original Whitechapel Guild in 1964, knew very soon that ringing would be a lifelong passion, but never thought she'd be teaching change ringing at NCS 46 years later! Quilla graduated from Vassar College with a B.A. in math; after a year of studying history in graduate school, she decided to work in the then still-new IT field, ultimately becoming a federal government employee. A DC resident, Quilla continued as a member of the adult ringers at the National Cathedral. She assisted Rick Dirksen with Whitechapel Guild for several years and became Guild coordinator when he moved away from DC this year. Another experienced ringer, Alexander Taft, joined NCS as webmaster in July and is helping with the Whitechapel Guild as well. So even if it takes two people to replace Rick Dirksen, the Guild is still going strong after nearly 50 years!

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PHOTOS BY JENNIFER CLEARY





Alumnae fondly remember the Guild's trips. (left) The 1977 trip (with Rick Dirksen in plaid) to England during the Queen's Jubilee; the girls rang at St. Clement Danes Church in London. Right: near Bath, England in 1997.

As **Ann Gardner Martin '66** remembers, the Whitechapel Guild thus early on became the backbone of Cathedral ringing, and members used to laugh at the notation at the end of the Cathedral service bulletins that the bells were “rung by the men and boys of Washington Cathedral.” Whitechapel students and alumnae continue to be core members of the Cathedral band today.

Since the Guild started, scores of girls have learned this physical activity that combines music and rhythm, logic, team-

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Alex Taft (far left) and Quilla Roth (second from right) instruct students in the art of ringing. (Inset boxes, l-r): Quilla with Annie Spaller '15 and Tessa Lightfoot '15; Karen Lee '13; and Claire Voon '11.

work, leadership, and learned skill and finesse. As **Elizabeth “Beth” Sinclair '81** comments, all Whitechapel members have “done EXACTLY the same thing—technique, rounds, call changes, plain hunt, etc.,” forming a different connection than that formed in other team activities. Some of this continuity is in the nature of ringing, and some of it came from Rick Dirksen, who led the Guild for 45 years and established it as an activity that builds confidence, enables long-term friendships, and gives girls skills and an interest they can enjoy all their lives. As **Abby Trooboff Goldman '96**, said, “Mr. Dirksen made us feel competent and able and strong—all very good things for adolescent girls!”

Ringing is something that has always been the “challenging and exhilarating” experience that **Sarah Myers Lewis '81** found it. After all, the first thing you learn is how to make a *large* bell swing almost full circle from a mouth upward position by pulling firmly, but gently, on a rope that extends from your hands, through a small hole in the ceiling, to a room 23 feet above, where the rope is tied to a large wheel connected to the bell. The bell rings once per pull and full-circle swing. Then you have to do it again, and again, pulling roughly every two sec-

onds, and doing it safely, keeping your feet on the ground and the rope falling and rising rhythmically in a straight, vertical line.

This learning to “handle” the bell takes several weeks of one-on-one instruction. Then you get to try ringing with other girls. At which point, you learn that ringing several bells accurately in rhythm, one bell (rung by one girl) sounding after the other, is hard. Yes, you can make the bell swing full-circle, but can you stop it at will and hold this hundreds of pounds of bell metal immobile and balanced precisely enough that you can then again make it swing (and sound) with just a slight pull on the rope? And do this repeatedly? This requires finesse, not brawn, and is what allows you to ring rhythmically and accurately. Next you start learning “methods” (the “change” part of change ringing), how to change the order in which the bells sound in predefined patterns. This adds mental challenge to the physical challenge, and opens the door to a world of specialized learning and enjoyment.

But in addition to being a challenge, ringing is full of fun and friendship, both within Whitechapel Guild and beyond. **Haley Barnett '97** remembers the year she studied in London, ringing at a tower where she met a London-resident Whitechapel



The Guild's First Days: A Reminiscence

by Ann Gardner Martin '66

THE BELLS WERE ACTUALLY PUT IN while I was living in Germany, where my father had been stationed, but they were not dedicated until I returned in 10th grade. I was immediately intrigued by the notion of change-ringing. I remember that Mr. (Wayne) Dirksen, who prepared us to sing the hymns for Friday chapel, introduced it to us and I wrote my first Plain Hunt on the back of a set of yellow bus tickets.

We used to go up in groups of four to be taught by Mr. Fred Price of Bourne-mouth, who had something like 80 pupils. He would serve us tea. I remember some of the advice we received: "Don't grip the sally as if it were a serpent," and "Don't look up, there's no help for you there." There was great camaraderie among us and great nervousness as the date approached when our second teacher, Mr. (Rick) Dirksen, had to select a certain number of us, because he couldn't teach us all; for some reason, we ended up with 19. Once the selection was made, I recall making a list of members on a sheet of paper soaked in tea to look ancient. I also had a little notebook in which I listed all the quotations in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* which were about bells. We were presented with a set of handbells at the very beginning by the ringers who rang the first peal, a select band of Englishmen. Those handbells (after various epic struggles between the Music Department and the Whitechapel Guild as to whose bells they were) are still in regular use.

In those early years the Whitechapel Guild was the backbone of Cathedral ringing. We were quick learners and there were lots of us. We used to laugh at

the notation at the end of the service bulletin, "bells rung by the men and boys of Washington Cathedral." There were St. Alban's boys at the beginning, but they were not encouraged as we were and they tended to drop out. At that time everyone at NCS could contribute to their team's total points by doing "curric," or an extracurricular physical activity, and it was decreed that ringing satisfied this requirement.

Because of the nature of the Exercise, as change ringing is called, one often bumps into old Whitechapel girls in ringing chambers all over the world, and I am still a close friend of many of those girls who learned to ring back at the very beginning. It is exciting that members of those early bands are now teaching a new generation of Whitechapel ringers.

I met my husband as a result of Whitechapel membership. For our first assignment in senior year, our English teacher Miss Hicks asked us to write about anything that interested us, so of course I wrote about ringing. She liked the essay and showed it to Dean Sayre. Eventually some of it was read out at graduation and it was also published in *The Ringing World*, the official journal of change ringers. (Their publication criteria were not too rigorous!) I received a bunch of letters after its publication, one from my future husband, a ringer in Leicestershire. You can never be too careful about your English assignments.

Read more reminiscences by Whitechapel Guild members on the Alumnae page of the NCS website: www.ncs.cathedral.org

It requires training and skill to ring the massive bells of the Washington National Cathedral, which weigh from 608 to 3588 lbs. Left: the bells in motion above the ringing chamber.

☆ WHITECHAPEL GUILD ☆

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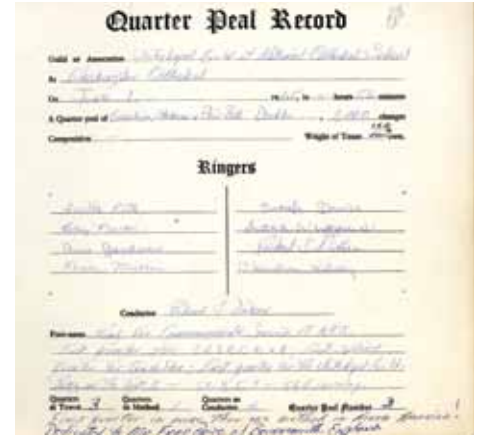
alumna who stayed in touch and welcomed her to family events over the year, something especially nice for someone away from her own family. **Susan Cummings '83** says that ringing, which she took up again in London 19 years after Whitechapel Guild/NCS, introduced her to a great group of people and “...is just a lot of fun.” Many Whitechapel Guild alumnae also remember fondly the occasional trips that Rick Dirksen led to other towers in the US as well as some to England. **Caroline Bartman '07** recalls visiting so many English churches that when everyone tried to go to sleep each night, they'd still hear the bells ringing.

A variety of things made Whitechapel Guild special and even keep some of us ringing long after graduation from NCS. For some, it was the chance to do something unique and different. For others, it was being part of a select group that regularly saw hidden parts of the Cathedral. As **Beth Sinclair '81** said, “...we had the keys to the castle and got to go up there all the time.” For **Anne Matthews '77**, it was partially the connection with the Cathedral's adult ringers and the resulting “chance to get to know people of all ages and to experience the joys of dedication to a common pursuit where everyone's contribution [regardless of age] is equally vital to the result.” **Sarah Irwin '67** learned a kind of discipline from ringing that she had failed at before, but that she needed in order to ring well and thus enjoy ringing.

For many who went on one of Rick Dirksen's trips to England, a highlight of Whitechapel Guild was the bonding that occurred on the trip while getting to ring bells (often very different from the Cathedral's) in an amazing variety of English towers and to spend time with English ringers.

For those who continued ringing after NCS (or returned to it later), Whitechapel opened a world of continuing worldwide and life-long friendships. **Anne Samuel '94** found that “learning how to ring tower bells gave me an instant and ongoing international family. When I studied abroad, I rang with a group in Cardiff, Wales and still have friends from that time.” **Vanessa Countryman '96** had a similar experience when in graduate school at Oxford. **Kathleen Barker '09** likes “having something specific to come back to on the Close...Whitechapel Guild definitely strengthened my relationship to the Cathedral (as well as to NCS) which now being away from DC is important to me.” Like other Whitechapel alumnae, **Elizabeth “Liz” Banks '05** still loves ringing before the service of Lessons and Carols, when alumnae come back and ring with current Whitechapel Guild members.

Like the Cathedral, NCS has many traditions. Thanks to the Whitechapel Guild, making the unique, joyous, and loud Cathedral music that is change ringing is a long-standing and still active tradition and one that I hope will continue to be there for girls for many years to come.



At NCS' 1965 Commencement, taking part in the first “quarter peal” performed by the Whitechapel Guild were: **Quilla Roth '66**, **Betsy Proctor Jennings '67**, **Anne Gardner Martin '66**, **Rhoda Micocci '66**, **Sarah Irwin '67**, **Diana Wriggins Cundy '67**, **Richard S. Dirksen**, and **Christine Kelsey Andrae '67**. Note says, “First quarter in more than one method in North America! Dedicated to Mr. Fred Price of Bournemouth, England.”

WHITECHAPEL GUILD MEMBERS

2010–2011

- Luise Dziobek-Garrett '11
- Sarah Norvell '11
- Claire Voon '11
- Arlana Agiliga '12
- Camilla Folger '12
- Cassandra Moshfegh '12
- Kira Reinke '12
- Karen Lee '13
- Abigail Bartram '15
- Maya Bhalla-Ladd '15
- Tessa Lightfoot '15
- Lesley Mould '15
- Isabelle Shafran '15
- Annie Spaller '15

In addition to the set of 10 change ringing bells, the Cathedral tower holds a 53-bell carillon, a set of stationary bells whose clappers are connected to a keyboard at which one person plays conventional, melodic music on the bells.