It is a rare thing, these days, to witness a groundbreaking for a new house of worship. Rarer still is the chance to see the birth of a new tower for change ringing.

So it was with some excitement that on 14th September I attended a groundbreaking service for the new chapel at Virginia Theological Seminary (“VTS”). And happily I can now confirm that VTS is indeed building a tower for change ringing.

VTS is in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from Washington. Founded in 1823, VTS today is the Episcopal Church’s largest seminary. Since 2007, VTS has been led by an Englishman, Dean Ian Markham.

For most of its history, VTS worshipped in an 1881 Gothic Revival chapel. The old chapel had a rather Arts-and-Crafts exterior, and a low tower that apparently held chimes. That former tower was a missed opportunity, from the ringing perspective.

In 2010, however, the old chapel burned. A fire began in the sacristy. The chapel’s wooden roof quickly went up in flames. What remained was a burned-out brick shell, with most of the stained glass gone.

Evidently the people of VTS loved their old chapel. For they decided to preserve its remnants as a memorial garden.
They also determined to build a new chapel. And in true American fashion, they supplemented the insurance money by embarking on a capital campaign, which raised a further $14.3 million.

As architects for the new chapel, VTS chose a New York–based firm, Robert A.M. Stern Architects (“RAMSA”).

RAMSA’s founding partner, Robert A. M. Stern – the dean of the Yale University School of Architecture – is a leading exponent of traditional architecture. And RAMSA designed a new chapel in a restrained Georgian idiom, which will blend well with older VTS buildings.

Working with RAMSA, the Seminary also decided to build its new chapel next to its Welcome Center, to form a new “worship and welcome quadrangle.” And on the side of the chapel facing the welcome center – almost as the hinge on which worship and welcome will swing – there will be a tower.

How this tower became a change-ringing tower, in the Seminary’s mind, is a bit unclear. It might have had something to do with the fact that, being English, Dean Markham must be familiar with change ringing. It might also have had something to do with the fact that RAMSA is also familiar with change ringing. Before the VTS project came in, RAMSA had been designing new residential colleges for Yale University – a complex that Yale says will include a 12-bell tower.

Regardless, what is clear at the Seminary is that, as part of the capital campaign, VTS offered its donors a $250,000 “opportunity” – yes, that’s how we put it over here – to fund “changing bells.” And by January 2013, someone had taken this opportunity, because at around that time, the VTS website showed the bells as “reserved.”

So from the ringing point of view, on September 14 there was much to celebrate.

But of course it was not only from a ringing point of view that the occasion was joyous. It was wonderful to see the Seminary community join together to consecrate their new chapel’s beginning.

Present were sacristans, students, faculty members, alumni, staff, and neighbors. Also present were five bishops – James J. Shand, Bishop of Easton and Chair of the VTS Board; Frank T. Griswold, former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church; Carolyn Tanner Irish, former bishop of Utah and a co-chair, along with Bishop Griswold, of the capital campaign; and the current and former Bishops of Virginia, Shannon Johnston and Peter Lee.

This episcopal pomp was balanced by the fact that the service was outside, and involved shifting some dirt! Fortunately the weather
Then came some concluding prayers: the collect for Holy Cross Day, which it was; the Seminary’s own prayer for itself; and a collect for the building of a chapel. The closing hymn was Isaac Watts’s “We’re marching to Zion” – to “the beautiful city of God.” And then came the dismissal – and the “thanks be to God” that to me signals the start of post-service ringing. Like Pavlov’s dog, I looked around for a rope to pull.

Of course, as yet, there were no ropes. So I wandered off instead to the equivalent of the pub – a lovely lunch in the VTS refectory. There I spoke briefly with the architects. I nattered with Alan Hughes of Whitechapel, and with Dan Beaman, a ringer from Charleston and an architect too. And then I took the train home to New York.

But back in Virginia, construction of the chapel is moving forward swiftly. In the few weeks since the groundbreaking, a VTS webcam shows the foundation being dug. And VTS has since confirmed that the tower will hold eight bells, cast by Whitechapel.

So our friends in the Washington Ringing Society have a new challenge: a third tower in the area, in addition to the rings of ten at the Cathedral and the Old Post Office. And most importantly, the Episcopal Church’s largest seminary will soon – by 2015 – have bells hung for change ringing. This prospect bodes well for the future of change ringing in the United States. It was spectacular. It was a beautiful early-fall day: bright, clear, and cool.

The service started under a white tent on the Seminary’s broad front lawn. For a prelude, a brass octet played Handel and Gabrieli. There was a quick clerical procession up the tent’s 30-yard center aisle. The liturgy began with a sung litany of prayers for the Church.

The Hebrew Bible lesson, Genesis 28:10-17, was read by the architect, Dean Stern. This lesson describes Jacob’s dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder that rose to heaven. (Scripture does not tell us what method the angels were using.)

The second reading was I Corinthians 3:10-17, which speaks of the people of God as a temple built on Christ. The congregation then echoed this theme by singing Westminster Abbey, also known as “Christ is made the sure foundation.” This hymn weaves in a vision of a “dedicated city … in exultant jubilation pouring perpetual melody.” Ringers can relate! A choir sang two anthems – Ain’t-a that good news, in the William Dawson arrangement; and the Ralph Vaughan Williams setting of O how amiable, which asks God to “prosper Thou our handiwork.”

Dean Markham gave pithy remarks. He pointed out that Christians believe that God is everywhere, yet “we are just not that good at remembering who we are.” So “we need the architectural shape and form that invites us into the holy.” Dean Markham did not mention bells, but he did say that “we need the tower.”

Shortly after these encouraging words, Bishop Shand humorously invited the 400-person congregation to move, “in some sort of procession,” about 75 yards to the south, to stand on the site of the new chapel. (Your correspondent stood where the bell tower will be.)

Bishop Shand took a shovel, invoked the Trinity, and ceremonially broke the ground. The shovel was then passed to several bishops, to Deans Markham and Stern, and to key staff and volunteers, who likewise each dug in.

Left to right: The Revd J. Barney Hawkins IV (co-chair for the Chapel for the Ages Campaign and vice president for Institutional Advancement), Robert A. M. Stern (partner, Robert A. M. Stern Architects), The Very Revd Ian S. Markham (co-chair for the Chapel for the Ages Campaign and dean and president) and Grant Marani (partner, Robert A. M. Stern Architects) standing by the wall of the former chapel, now a memorial garden. (Photo by Curtis Prather, VTS Communications dept)

When did you last do it?

A series of short articles from the Central Council Towers and Belfries Committee

9. Check your clappers

Clappers should have very little sideways movement when held against the bell – up to about 10mm is acceptable. If excessive movement is detected check that the whole clapper assembly is not turning in the bell and tighten the crown staple nut if necessary. If the clapper is tight in the bell then it is probably time to consider re-bushing the clapper pivot. On the modern ‘independent’ style of clapper the pivot should be greased occasionally unless fitted with a ‘Teflon’ or ‘nylon’ bush. Older type clappers with the baldrick style of fitting will probably have more sideways movement but even these can be improved by fitting new leathers and replacing any hardwood fittings.

If you have any doubts seek guidance from your Local Guild/Association Officers in the first instance.

Editorial

The scheme, now well underway, to install a ring of Whitechapel bells at the Virginia Theological Seminary is an exciting development in the United States and bodes well for the future of change ringing in America, since many Episcopal clergy are trained there. We are reminded that it is almost exactly 50 years since the bells at Washington National Cathedral were installed in 1963. Will Williams tells us “They were first rung on 19th and 20th October, when six boys and Russell Young came from Groton School, joined by Warren Sturgis (ex-Groton) from New York, and Philip M. J. Gray, from Bristol, who happened to be in US on business.” No doubt this event will be suitably commemorated.

We include this week (overleaf) the first in a new series of articles about the work of The Ringing Foundation and the Association of Ringing Teachers. The Ringing World will also commence publishing regular monthly lists of candidates who have passed the various stages in ART’s Learning the Ropes training programme.

The new Ringing World Diaries for 2014 are now available from the RW Shop. You may order online at www.ringingworld.co.uk/purchase or by mail using the insert published last week in Issue 5345. We are grateful in particular to Chris Mew for putting it together and would also like to thank all the many contributors who helped to supply or update the indispensable information contained therein.

Our congratulations to the St James’ Guild band that achieved (subject to ratification) the longest peal yet to have been rung in the City of London at St James, Garlickhythe on Saturday, 5th October: 18432 Superlative Surprise Major in 10 hours, 17 minutes. By all accounts the ringing was exceptionally fine (see snippet on p. 1032). It is currently our ‘featured performance’ on BellBoard and we hope to have a full report shortly.

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