

A Time and Tide Bell for Mablethorpe

Background and History, by sculptor, Marcus Vergette

I first became interested in bells at the end of the Foot and Mouth epidemic in my Parish in 2001, when the movement restrictions were lifted and we could leave our farms for the first time in six months. My neighbour, the captain of the tower, went up to the church and rang the church bells all day. I hadn't noticed that this sound had been missing all that time. I was drawn up the hill to the church where he showed me the bells in the bell tower. I was amazed to discover these enormous bronze sculptures secreted away in my small rural parish.

I was asked by, and made with, the residents of my village, Highampton, a commemoration of the hardship endured by the people in the parish, and the terrible slaughter of the animals during the Foot and Mouth epidemic. We made what is thought to be the first public access bell in the UK. In order to create a democratic bell that could be rung by anyone, there were many legal and social obstacles that were successfully overcome. The bell now celebrates the communities' survival and strength, and is rung by many people, for their own reasons.

This bell was cast at Whitechapel Bell Foundry, where bells have been cast in essentially the same way on the same site for 600 years. While I was watching the tuning process of this bell the seed was sown for this present work. I used new computer modelling techniques for understanding wave-form and vibration in materials to invent a new bell form with new notes and harmonies within the bell. In exploring a new bell sound I explore a shape, and in a shape a sound.

The new bell and choice of installation sites draw a different map of our island. Each site brings something particular and unique to the whole group. Bells tell stories of the past very easily, but it is not the intention of this project to only mark and connect historic events, but also to look forward. Narrow horizons and short time frames are always misleading and make it difficult to understand the dramatic changes we have seen over the last few years and whether they will lead to chaos or a better future. These bells are designed to work for a long time. For me the character of each site, both in the people and their stories and the movement of the water, are directly related to, and are results of, the shape of the land. Although we are shaped by our land, we also shape it.

The first bell installation was Appledore, in North Devon, on the Taw and Torridge estuary. Appledore has some of the world's highest tides; this ancient shipbuilding port has connections to the west, through export of domestic ceramic wares to the West Indies during the slave trade, and to the east with ball clays which are still regularly being shipped through the Baltic to Russia. The estuary is surrounded by fertile green fields with hedges and livestock. Each day up to 9 metres of water flood into and out of the estuary. This rhythm is echoed by the dairy cows in the fields as they are milked twice daily. The bell sounds when the water is over the sand bar at the mouth of the estuary and the cargo ships and fishing boats may leave or enter the estuary.

The next site was Great Bernera in the Outer Hebrides. The island largely consists of Lewisian gneiss, it is some of the oldest rock/land on earth, which has been resisting the ravages of the sea for approximately 3000 million years, before the fossil record. There is no sand on the beach, only crushed sea shells. There is barely a tree now left on the island. Even without knowing the age of the rock you feel the primitive power of this landscape. This seems reflected somehow in the people on the island; place that has a long complex history of courage and independence in the face of hardship and resource depletion. Where the Bell is on Bosta Beach has been the point of arrival and departure for many different groups and cultures from the Vikings to the Clearances. Paradoxically, islands seem to be made larger by the sea that surrounds them. The element that might reduce them, which might be thought to besiege them, has the opposite effect. The sea elevates a few acres into something they would never be if hidden in the mass of the mainland. They become gardens in the world of water.

One possible function of this Bell is as a time-piece or time-marker, both in the way the Bell is rung daily by the movement of the sea at high tide, and as a long time marker of sea levels and present shoreline. The Bell at Trinity Buoy Wharf, London, was installed on the embankment wall of the Thames, 28 seconds east of the prime meridian. Trinity Buoy Wharf now is an interesting development in urban planning, combining living accommodation, arts and creative industries, and business. Historically, at this wharf Michael Faraday built a lighthouse to conduct experiments with electric lights for lighthouses, lighthouse keepers were trained, and navigation buoys were made. Here is the junction of the Lea and the Thames, both of which twist and turn through grassy banks and fields, between walls and embankments, through factories and houses, as they wind their way to the sea from the central heart of England through the capital, out past the further control of the Thames Barrier.

Aberdyfi, Wales, where the fourth Bell was installed, contrasts with the constantly reshaped and controlled landscape of the Thames. Here is one of the oldest legends of bells under the sea. Aberdyfi is referred to in ancient Gaelic legend and song about the kingdom of Cantre'r Gwaelod, a kingdom now submerged beneath Cardigan Bay. The origins of the legend are lost in the mists of time, but perhaps the ancient Gaelic legend refers to ice melt at the end of the last ice age, the inundation of the land, and the formation of the Bay. It is said that its bells can be heard ringing beneath the water. At low tide sometimes the tree stumps of ancient forests are revealed, radio-carbon dating suggests that these trees died around 3500 BC. On one side of the estuary are dunes, on the other, Snowdonia. The historic river Dovey, carves down Aran Mawddwy and flows into Cardigan Bay. Locals call The Dovey the dividing line between north and south Wales, but it also connects them.

The fifth Bell in Cemaes Bay, is on the north coast of Anglesey. This is an area of outstanding natural beauty, and some of the most geologically complex shoreline in Britain, whose significance has recently been recognized internationally by Unesco as a Geopark. Here in Cemaes Bay there is a long history and varied history of land use evident, with signs of farming, industry, and mining and, more recently, wind farms and a nuclear power station visible. Standing beside the Bell one can see and consider our relationship to our environment and also the connections across the water; Dublin is closer than Cardiff, and local legend insists that St Patrick was shipwrecked on Ynys Badrig, where he founded a church in 440 AD.

Anderby Beach, Lincolnshire, is critical in the constellation of the Bells, and brings something unique and particular to the whole project. Most of the west coast of Britain is unchanging stone cliffs and estuaries, whereas this stretch of Eastern coastline is some of the fastest changing coastline in Britain. Here people have been dealing with changes in sea level for hundreds, even thousands of years, and have much to offer as the rest of us begin to confront these problems. Now in some places near Anderby the land behind the sea defences is 4 m below sea level at high tide, and in others the sea defences have already been allowed to be breached and the sea reclaimed some of the land. Also with the tide peaking at different places at different times of day, means that when the other Bells are silent the one at Anderby will be ringing.

In the places where the Time and Tide Bell has been installed it has become a way for residents and visitors to connect with their own history and environment, as an instrument of measurement, as a musical instrument, as a sculpture. It has also become a focus for music, events, exchanges, etc., both locally and between the different Bell sites. Every Bell has its own inscription on the wave catcher, written by the community around the Bell; in this way the Bell says what those who experience it regularly want it to say. Bells speak in celebration and in loss; they are a mouth piece for our culture. I would like to thank all those people in the communities where the Time and Tide Bell has been, or is going to be installed. Without their support, vision, and enthusiasm no Time and Tide Bells would have been installed.

Marcus Vergette July 12, 2014