

**Request to Include the Bells in the  
Statement of Significance for St.  
James Old Cathedral**



# The problem

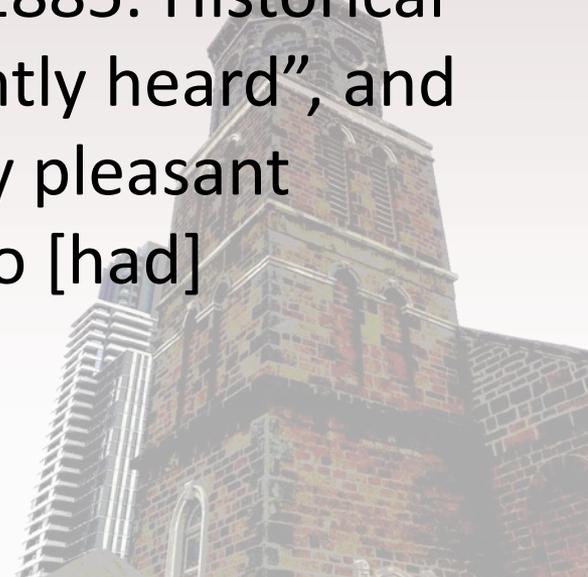
- The Statement of Significance for St. James Old Cathedral mentions many of the structure's components and furnishings, including the doorways, pews, baptismal font, pulpits, honour board, and windows.
- Incredibly, however, *it makes no mention whatsoever of the tower bells.*
- This is a problem because the bells have immense cultural and historical significance for the City of Melbourne and the State of Victoria.



# Evidence for historical significance

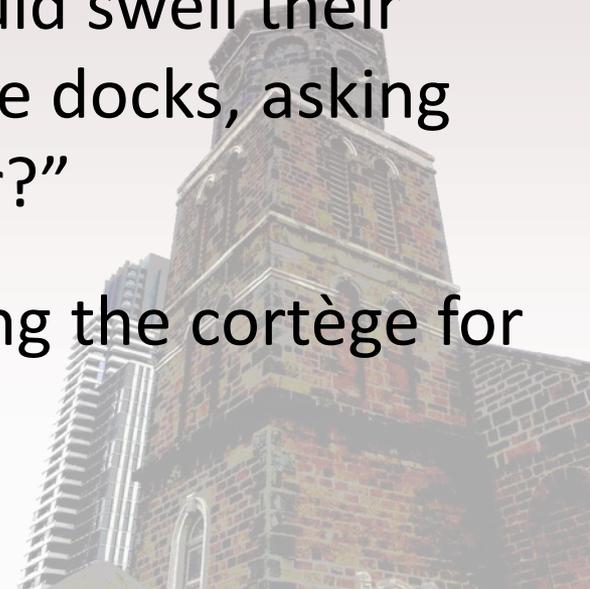
The bells have been a prominent part of public life in Melbourne for over 160 years.

- The six original bells, cast in England, were brought to Melbourne to replace the old ship's bell that was attached to the cathedral. They were first rung in 1853; two more bells were brought over in 1885. Historical sources note that peals were “frequently heard”, and that they would “call to memory many pleasant associations in the minds of those who [had] emigrated from the old world”.



# Evidence for historical significance

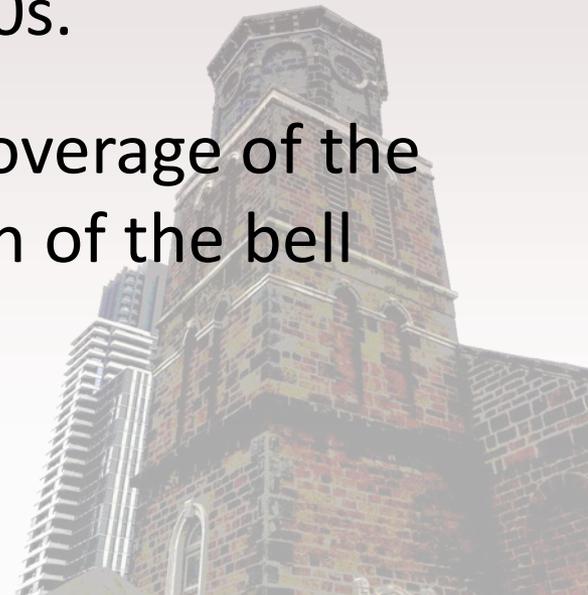
- The first six bellringers were “diggers” who had returned to Melbourne to bank the proceeds of their prospecting; after watching the installation of the bells, they decided to remain in Melbourne to ring them.
- Melbourne bellringers have passed down the story that the first St. James bellringers would swell their ranks by meeting incoming ships at the docks, asking each new arrival, “Are you a bellringer?”
- The bells were rung half-muffled during the cortège for Burke and Wills in 1861.



# Evidence for historical significance

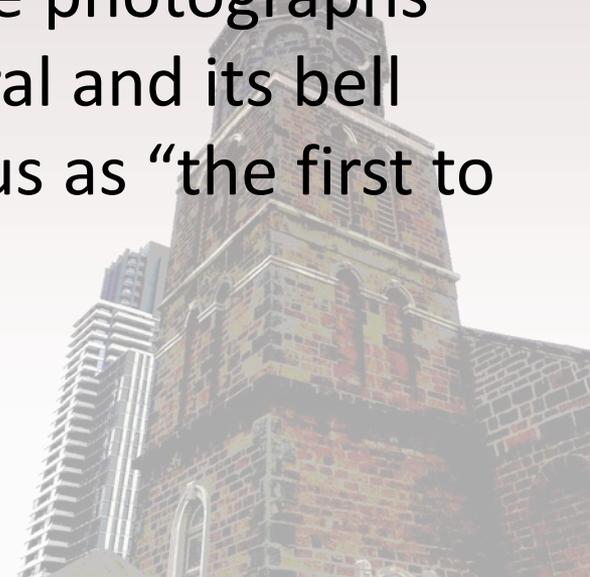
Numerous documents over the past 160 years have mentioned the bells. For example:

- Victorian engineer John Bunckle wrote a lengthy reminiscence (originally published in the *North Melbourne Advertiser* in 1888) of his experience hanging the St. James bells in the 1850s.
- The *Argus* of 29 April 1914 provides coverage of the cathedral's relocation and the redesign of the bell tower.



# Evidence for historical significance

- The *Argus* of 10 November 1922 summarises the history of the Cathedral, noting that at the time it was built, its actual cost was £10,415, “including £400 for six bells”.
- The 1930 and 1931 volumes of the *Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects* include photographs and technical drawings of the Cathedral and its bell tower, and affirm the Cathedral’s status as “the first to hold a peal [ring] of bells in Victoria”.



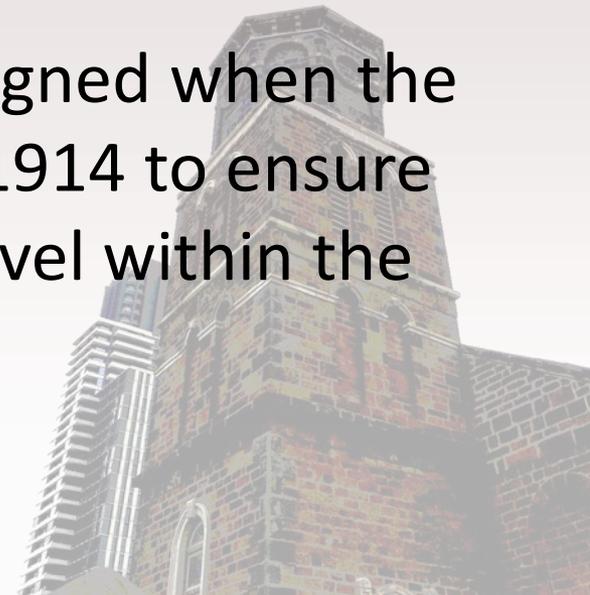
Early depiction of the Cathedral and its bell tower (original in the LaTrobe Library)



# Evidence for historical significance

St. James Old Cathedral has consistently shown a determined commitment to keeping the bells in place and ringing:

- The original six bells and the two added later were all procured from England at considerable expense.
- The bell tower was significantly redesigned when the building was moved to King Street in 1914 to ensure that the bells could be hung on one level within the structure.

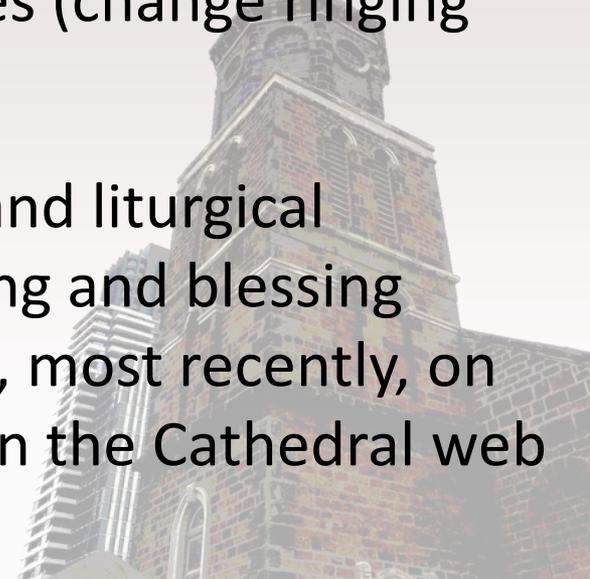


Bells lying on the old site of St James Cathedral, William Street, circa 1914  
(Royal Historical Society of Victoria)



# Evidence for historical significance

- While the bells were not hung safely for full-circle change ringing after restoration, the Cathedral ensured that the bells could continue to sound by means of a chiming mechanism that moved only the clappers.
- The Cathedral fundraised with an appeal through the National Trust for the bells to be rehung for full-circle change ringing in 1977-8; they have been rung in both modes (change ringing and chiming) ever since.
- The Cathedral asserts the bells' historical and liturgical importance through services of thanksgiving and blessing (including on their restoration in 1978 and, most recently, on July 22 this year), as well as through text on the Cathedral web site and in each weekly bulletin.



# Evidence for cultural significance

- A strong and active team of volunteers preserves the centuries-old craft of bellringing.
- The bells provide an important link between the parish and the community.
- The bells offer the potential for ongoing artistic innovation and collaboration as site-specific public art.



# Evidence for cultural significance

- The bell tower maintains links with other towers across Melbourne and Victoria and interstate.
- The bells are visited – and rung – several times each year by elite teams of bellringers from the UK and the US who visit for the sole purpose of ringing the local bells. These include the Royal Society of Cumberland Youths, responsible for the ringing at St Martin-in-the-Fields, and the Ancient Society of College Youths, responsible for the ringing at both St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. The St James Old Cathedral tower is always on their itinerary.



**Despite this abundant evidence for the bells' ongoing historical and cultural importance, *they are not mentioned at all* in the St. James Old Cathedral Statement of Significance.**



# What we're asking

That both the C258 and Heritage Council Victoria Statements of Significance be amended to recognise the bells' heritage, artistic, and cultural importance by including a specific description of the bells and bell tower and a brief summary of their history, in the same way that the statements list the structure's other components and furnishings.



# Why we're asking

- An amended listing will help researchers seeking to discover and understand Melbourne's rich and complex past.
- It will validate and support the efforts of the Cathedral's bellringers to preserve the craft of bellringing.
- It will help safeguard the bells and bell tower by affirming their importance.



# Why we're asking

The Melbourne City Council recommended that we approach the Planning Panel with our request. While we have since been informed that this is not necessarily the most suitable body to which to address this request, and are already in contact with Heritage Victoria, we have elected to make our case regardless.

We consider that this is a unique opportunity – and perhaps the only such opportunity for many years to come – to secure recognition for the bells in the form of an explicit mention in Amendment C258, and we hope that, based on what we have presented, you will be able to suggest the most appropriate next steps for us.

We are eager to answer any questions you might have.



# Sources

Bagot, H (1978a). "The Bells of St. James". *Melbourne Times*, November 1, p. 7.

Bagot, H (1978b). "The Bells Will Ring". *See*, November, p. 14.

Bleby, E (1989). *We Sing in a Strange Land*. Australian and New Zealand Association of Bellringers, South Australia.

Buncle, J (1888). "Experiences of a Victorian Manufacturer", *North Melbourne Advertiser*, January 28, p. 3 (a much-expanded, but undated, reprint is available in the North Melbourne Public Library).

Burridge, SH (1958, 1966, 1975). "A Brief History of St. James' Old Cathedral". Melbourne.

Goldsmith, JS (1935). *A Great Adventure*. The Ringing World, Woking. Viewed at <https://www.whittingsociety.org.uk/old-ringing-books/goldsmith-great-adventure.html>.

*Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects*, vol. 28 (1930), p. 57.

*Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects*, vol. 29 (1931), p. 3.

Lewis, H (1982). *A History of St James Old Cathedral*, Melbourne. Acorn Press, Canberra.

Pettet, H & Doggett, A (2001). *The Bells Are Ringing!* Authors, Melbourne.

"St. James's Cathedral – Old and New" (1914). *Argus*, April 29, p. 13.

"St. James Old Cathedral – 83rd Anniversary" (1922). *Argus*, November 10, p. 9.

