



A BELL FOR WYKE REGIS SCHOOL

by Douglas Evans

Wyke Regis School had a bell tower without a bell. For over two hundred years, the limestone school with a bell tower upon its slate roof had stood on the white cliffs overlooking the English Channel. Today, however, few people remember what happened to the bell.

One cloudy October morning found the students of Wyke Regis, each dressed in a blue and gray school uniform, planting daffodil bulbs in the school garden.

Faith, a girl in Class 4, stood and brushed dirt off her grey skirt. Brown patches stained her white knee socks. “Coo!” she said. “The headmaster must fancy flowers.”

“Come spring, we’ll have the loveliest school garden in England,” replied Mr. Hardy, the caretaker, who crouched nearby.

Faith looked toward the bell tower above the school. Two seagulls stood inside.

“There’s something I’ve been wondering, Mr. Hardy,” she said. “What happened to the school bell?”

The man removed his flat cap and ran a hand over his shaved head. “They buried it,” he said.

Faith made a face. “They buried the bell?”

“During the Second World War, it was,” the caretaker explained. “In the summer of 1940, the German army stood on the shores of France straight across the English Channel from here. The southern coast of Britain prepared for an invasion. If the enemy came, bells would sound the alarm--church bells, mind you. So, to avoid confusion, all the school bells were taken down.”

“And buried?” asked Faith.

“Right. So the Germans couldn't find them and use the bronze to make more weapons. I was just a wee lad then, but I remember standing in a pillbox with my mother while she watched the sky for enemy aircraft. Coils of barbed wire lined the beach down below. They even switched the street signs in the village to confuse any invader who was looking for the road to London.

“Coo!” said Faith. “So the school bell was never dug up.”

“No one paid much mind to that bell after the war,” Mr. Hardy

said. “Years passed, and once the electric buzzer was installed in the school, the bell was forgotten.”

At that moment, the buzzer sounded. A blur of blue and gray uniforms streaked toward the school.

Faith turned a full circle. “Imagine. A bell is buried somewhere around here.”

“The bell sounded lovely from the cliff tops here,” Mr. Hardy said. “I’ve never liked that buzzer.”

That winter on the southern England coast was wet and gray. The garden at Wyke Regis School turned to mud. But in early March, green sprouts appeared. By mid-April, hundreds of daffodils, their yellow blooms nodding with the sea breeze, greeted the students.

One morning after the morning buzzer, the classes filed into the school chapel for the daily assembly. They sat on the floor in straight, still rows. The room was so silent that careful listeners could hear the distant surf slapping the white cliffs.

Mr. Bayley, the headmaster, entered the chapel with a fistful of daffodils. He stood behind a podium and said, “Good morning, children.”

“Morning, sir,” they returned.

“These flowers came from the garden we planted last autumn,” said the headmaster. “For assembly today, I’ll read the poem

Daffodils by the English poet William Wordsworth.”

At the mention of the garden, Faith, who sat in the back, thought of the empty bell tower. All winter, she had wondered about the missing bell. Something she had seen that morning sparked her interest even more. From the school playground, she watched two men swish long poles back and forth across the sandy beach.

“Treasure hunters with metal detectors,” Faith told herself as the headmaster recited the poem. “They were searching for coins washed ashore from sunken ships.” She thought some more. “So why couldn’t I use a metal detector to find the buried school bell?”

After assembly, Faith sought out Mr. Hardy. She found him sweeping sand off the playground and explained her bell idea.

“If I had a system and searched the school grounds meter by meter, maybe I could find it,” she said.

The buzzer sounded above Mr. Hardy’s head, making him wince. “Tell you what,” he said. “I can get a hold of one of those metal finders. Meet me by the playground after school, and we’ll have ourselves a bell hunt.”

As soon as the buzzer sounded to end the day, Faith ran to the playground. Mr. Hardy stood there with a shovel and a metal detector, a four-foot-long device with a plate attached to one end and a plastic box at the other. On the box were dials and an LCD display.

The caretaker handed the detector to Faith. "Grip the handle on top and slowly sweep the plate along the ground," he explained. "If the display lights up and the box squeals, you've found something metal. Now look at this." He showed her a black-and-white photo. "That's Wyke Regis School in 1940, not long before the bell was removed."

"Brilliant!" said Faith. She noticed a bell the size of a soccer ball, hanging in the bell tower. The playground and parking lot were where they are today, so the bell couldn't be buried there."

"Right," said Mr. Hardy. "I'd start in the playing field."

Faith walked to the far corner of a large grassy field.

"Watch the meter, Faith," Mr. Hardy called to her. "I've got my shovel ready."

Faith switched on the metal detector. She stepped forward, swishing the pole back and forth. Almost at once, the meter lit up, and the box squealed.

"I found something!" she cried out.

Mr. Hardy ran up to her with the shovel.

"Don't get too excited, Faith," he said. "It could just be a water pipe."

The caretaker began to dig where Faith pointed. After removing three shovelfuls of dirt, he reached into the hole and pulled

out a screwdriver.

“Crikey!” he said. “I must have dropped this while fixing the lawnmower a few years back.”

Faith scowled. “But it’s not a bell,” she said.

She began again. Slowly sweeping the detector back and forth, she walked forward. At the end of the field, she turned, stepped to her left, and started back. She wouldn’t miss one spot.

“So far I found two bottle caps and a bicycle spoke,” she called to Mr. Hardy, who was washing some classroom windows.

“Good way to clean up the school yard,” he replied.

For the next hour, Faith continued to move the metal detector over the school grounds. The box squealed above a buried horseshoe, a pound coin, and a soda can. Finally, after combing the entire area, she sat on a bench by the garden. With the cliffs in back, the parking lot in front, and row houses on both sides of the school, she couldn’t widen her search.

“You had a good go at it, Faith,” Mr. Hardy called to her. “But you best be getting home now. Pick a few daffodils to cheer yourself up.”

Faith turned toward the flowers, struck with a thought. “This garden, Mr. Hardy. It wasn’t in the photo you showed me.”

“Right. During the war, this ground was dug up for a Victory

Garden,” said the caretaker. “Many schools and families in England planted vegetables, Victory Gardens, to ease the food shortage.”

Faith picked up the metal detector. “So this garden would have been...” She pushed the detector plate through the daffodil plants. The meter lit up, and the box squealed loudly. “A brilliant place to bury a bell!”

Mr. Hardy leaned on his shovel, grinning. “Crickey!” he said.

The caretaker started to dig where the detector had squealed the loudest. His shovel sank into the soft ground and lifted chunks of earth. Soon, the hole was a half-meter deep.

Faith knelt by the dirt pile. “Well, something metal is down there,” she said.

Mr. Hardy removed his cap and ran a hand over his damp head. “And it can’t be much deeper.”

At that moment, a voice thundered above Faith’s head. “Hardy! My daffodils! What on earth are you doing?” Mr. Bayley, the headmaster, stood there.

The caretaker said nothing. Instead, he plunged his shovel back into the hole. *Dink!* It struck metal.

“That’s it!” he said, sinking to his knees.

“That’s what?” asked the headmaster.

Faith peered into the hole. She saw Mr. Hardy’s hands

scooping dirt from around a bucket-shaped object.

“The bell, sir!” she yelled. “We found the school bell!”

The caretaker stood holding a bell covered with white crust.

“Coo!” said Faith.

“Jolly good,” said Mr. Bayley.

“Right,” said Mr. Hardy. “And with a bit of acid and sandblasting, I’ll have this bell shinier than a new pound coin.”

The following Friday was May 1, May Day. That morning, Mr. Hardy hung the bell, golden and gleaming, inside the bell tower. During assembly, the classes gathered on the playground. They skipped around maypoles, holding blue and yellow ribbons attached to the top.

As Faith wound her ribbon around a maypole, she looked up at the school bell. It began to sway.

Dong-dong! Dong-dong! Dong-dong!

For the first time in seventy-five years, the sound peeled from the bell tower.

“Coo!” went Faith, as the bell above Wyke Regis School continued to ring. It rang across the schoolyard, over the white cliffs and far out to sea.