

Brisbane church has centuries-old bell

By CLEM
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FRAMED in a peaceful setting on the steps of lovely St. Augustine's Church of England, Hamilton, is a weather-stained bell about 20 inches high.

A plate beneath the bell bears this inscription: "This Eastern church bell, rescued by the Allies in 1918 from a ruined mosque, is here restored to Christian use in memory of the heroic dead, being the gift of Captain and Mrs. W. Campbell Thomson."

The word "restored" is used because on the bell are cast figures of the Infant Christ with Mary, the Crucifixion and Christ in Glory.

The old bell — which each Sunday calls worshippers to the church set in its spacious, peaceful grounds — has in its time been through fire and disaster.

In fact, if the history claimed for it is true, it must surely rank as the world's most historically remarkable bell.

It would be the world's oldest known bell.

Its story was outlined when the church was consecrated in 1944, in a church order of service, which reprinted an article stated to have appeared in a newspaper shortly after erection of the bell (in 1926).

It was said to have been erected in a Roumanian church by the Emperor Constantine in

manian church by the Emperor Constantine in 320 A.D., and to have been lost to Christianity in 1410 when the church in which it was hung was overrun by the Turks, to be later used as a Mohammedan mosque.

But its shape alone would indicate that the bell's history does not date back to the reign of

Constantine the Great (278-337 A.D.).

Constantine, in 330 A.D., moved his capital from Rome to Byzantium (which became Constantinople) and made Christianity the State religion.

The last of the Constantines, Constantine XI Palaeologus (1448-1453) was the last ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire.

He was killed in the final charge of the victorious Turks when they overthrew Constantinople in 1453.

Nine years earlier, an allied army of Hungarians and Poles advancing to the relief of the beleaguered capital had been defeated with great carnage at Varna, on the Black Sea coast.

It was at Varna, by a curious and possibly significant coincidence of history, that the bell was unearthed by merchant

seamen in 1918 after they had seen British soldiers secreting it in the sand.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Pope Sabinianus (604 A.D.) first used church bells, but it has been claimed that they were introduced into France as early as 550 A.D.

Incidentally, the Encyclopaedia refers to "the scanty early history of bells."

It continues: "The long, narrow bell, the quadrangular and the mitre-shaped all indicate, in Europe at least, antiquity, while the

graceful, curved-inwardly-midway and full trumpet-mouthed bell indicates age not earlier than the 16th century."

St. Augustine's bell is of the latter shape.

As the science of casting came from Asia to Europe it is certainly possible that an Eastern bell of "modern" design could pre-date a similar-shaped Western bell by sufficient time to place it within the time period of the Byzantine Empire's latter days.

If so, St. Augustine's bell must have been contemporary with big political and religious changes

cal and religious changes in the countries bordering the western part of the Black Sea.

Perhaps it called to prayer Christians or Turks who were later on the scene of the world's first big bombardment—when history's first great gunner, Mohammed II., placed his cannon opposite the walls of Constantinople on April 5, 1453, and ushered in a new era in warfare.

Nothing like it had been heard before.

Mohammed's artillery, of 14 batteries, consisted of 13 huge bombards and 56 smaller cannon.

Awe-inspiring ordnance threw stone shot weighing from 1,200 lb. to 1,500 lb. and measuring 30 inches in diameter.

To handle them, Mohammed had 60 oxen, 200 men to march alongside them to keep them in position, and 200 more to level the road!

On May 30, Constantinople, and with it Eastern Christendom, passed to the Moslems.

But back to the bell. How did it come to Australia?

It was given to Captain Thomson, a keen collector, by crew members of the A.U.S.N. ship "Melara."

According to the story, they had seen the soldiers, who had brought it from a shelled mosque, burying it in the sand near Varna, presumably awaiting an opportunity to smuggle it away.



