

THE TOWN BELL TOWER

Introduction

The bell tower has been a major feature of the townscape for centuries. When the construction of the church ended in 1437, the Town Council proposed the construction of a bell tower, but there is no documentary evidence until 1459, when building work being done by the master builder Çaera was stopped. Construction recommenced in 1591, and after selecting the designs of the master builder Damián Méndez, Pere Joan Romà and Joan Fraix were contracted to continue with the work, although one year later the project had to be put out to tender once again. In May 1593, work once again continued, this time under the management of Francesc Galiana de la Lancha and Guillem del Rey, until the official date of completion in 1604, although the finishing touches to the rotunda were not completed until the following year.

The bell tower is 54 metres high, has an octagonal floor plan and is divided into five sections: the first two are solid; there are three rooms between the third and fourth, the clock room, the prison and the bell ringer's house; while the last section is the chamber where the bells are located, and on the rooftop there is a rotunda with three columns covered with tiles that protects the clock bell and two bells that toll the quarter hours.

The project was a municipal venture from the outset and was designed to be separate from the church, from which comes its name, *fadrí* (in English, *bachelor*), given to it by the local poet Bernat Artola.

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The door and the spiral staircase

The door was sculpted in 1604 by the mason Joan Ganaut, one of the French masters who made the eight gargoyles that crown the cornice. That same year, mosén Baltasar Brunell wrote the text in Latin that can be seen above the door, celebrating the completion of the works:

The works pending since before living memory, according to the agreement of the Council, recommenced in the year of Our Lord 1591 and were finally completed in 1604, in the reign of Philip III, being Jeroni Miquel the advisor of the gentlemen, by the citizens Narcís Feliu, Gaspar Brunell, Francesc Navarro, the procurator of public funds Miquel Jaume Serra, and the prefects of the works, Jeroni Jover, Doctor in Law, and Miquel Giner.

The first section of the stairway, designed by the master builders Fraix and Romà, was not to the Council's taste and the contract drawn up for the master builder Galiana stated that it had to be built once again with *“strong blue stone and the spiral stairs must be of that blue stone and made in one piece”*. Each step was smoothed down at the quarry and was cut on site to fit it in. As the walls were built, one step was placed on top of another in the central circular axis, while the broadest face was embedded into the body of the stairway, while at each turn an embrasure in the wall was opened to allow light to enter the stairway, which has a medallion on the ceiling with the date of completion of the works.

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The clock room

In 1596, the Council approved the division of the two central sections to make three rooms. The first was designed to contain the machinery for the mechanical clock, which is why the orders included the construction of a chimney that would reach the rooftop to hold the ropes and counterweights that activate the hammer that strikes the clock bell.

The first clock was made by Alexis Sanç between 1605 and 1609 and the sphere looked out over L'Herba Square, where the Town Palace and one of the church doors were, and where the Lotja was being built at that time. In 1853, the clockmaker Pere Besses was commissioned to install a Swiss clock. What is now currently visible inside a wood and glass box is the machinery of a French-made mechanical clock, installed by Manufacturas Blasco in 1940, although it is not operating and the current clock is connected to a computer.

The restoration work in 2001-2002 found part of a charcoal drawing done in the second half of the 17th century. The drawing appears to depict a duel, with a soldier with moustache and long hair brandishing a rapier with looped hilt, dressed in a doublet, shirt with cuffs and a wide-brimmed hat. To the right there is a miniature drawn in pencil that is a sketch of another figure painted above the swordsman.

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The prison

The second room was designed as a prison, and in 1596 an order was placed to manufacture bars for the window, along with a thick door with a lock and a hatch protected with an iron bar. Here plans were made to build a latrine with a stone pipe that connected to the exterior and another pipe with buckets that went up to the upper floors, where urinals were to be put in place. In the latrine cesspit large quantities of fragments of pottery were found, as well as parts of keys and a plaster plaque with an image of the Virgin Mary of Cueva Santa.

The room is known as the ecclesiastical, the priests 'or the clerics' prison, although there is no documentary evidence to confirm that anyone was ever imprisoned there. The idea may come from an inscription painted with red letters on a dark blue background that said:

EGO AUTE(M) INNOCENCIA MEA
INGRESSUS SUM: REDIME ME
ET MISERERE MEI
En 27 de Diciembre de 1817
UN AÑO
MEMENTO MEI.

We do not know who painted it, although the first part is a liturgical psalm from the Book of Psalms of David. Only a few letters remain from this inscription, which we know of thanks to a number of chroniclers, and it was finally removed because it covered a tempera painting of Mary's Holy Family which represents the virgin as a child, standing before Saints Anne and Joachim, restored in 2020.

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The prison: pottery finds

The latrine cesspit was emptied during the restoration of 2001-2002 and large quantities of pottery and other objects were found there, some of which were selected for display in the prison and the bell ringer's home. You can see the remains of plates, glasses, bowls and pots from the 17th to the 19th centuries made by different pottery workshops:

Lusterware. Made at the workshops of Paterna and Manises, it was the favourite of the new bourgeoisie of the early 17th century. There are bowls and plates of the 17th and early 18th century with a copper lustre and decoration such as a bird with outstretched wings (*pardalot*), bunches of grapes, carnations, spirals, ovals and spots.

Blue pottery. Also made in Paterna and Manises, the pottery, originally decorated in cobalt blue, changed to a more violet colour and from the 18th century onwards it was influenced by the series of L'Alcora; the plates, serving dishes and bowls were decorated with bunches of carnations, poppies, peonies and tulips, along with other designs that appeared in the early 19th century.

Pottery in green, manganese and blue. These fragments of plates probably come from workshops in Teruel and Muel; they are decorated with thick green lines that alternate with fine lines in manganese, while blue is reserved for the fillets that border the edges of the plates. This type of decoration is typical of the early 18th century.

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The prison: pottery finds

Pottery of L'Alcora and other workshops. You can see two cups of a creamy white colour (called *terra de pipa*) with marks on the base; as of 1784, the letter A identified the pieces of the Royal Factory of L'Alcora, and from 1788 onwards workshops imitating this type of earthenware were obliged to have their own brand. The most copied pieces were those of the *ramet* series, characterised by the presence of a daisy with blue petals and a yellow circle that surrounds an orange-ochre spot. This pottery was very popular between 1775 and 1800. You can see it in the vase of L'Alcora, which was copied by private workshops in L'Alcora, Ribesalbes, Onda and Manises, as you can see in the plate and in the two cups.

Other pottery. The cooking pottery found includes the remains of saucepans that, like the earthenware oil lamp, may have been produced locally in the 19th century. It is curious to see the little glass with honey coloured glaze, a production with Italian influence produced in L'Alcora, and also copied in Eslida, Betxí and Manises.

Other objects. An outstanding find was a plaster plaque of the Virgin Mary of Cueva Santa of Altura, with two figures on either side and a monk at the base, possibly Friar Bonifaci Ferrer.

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The bell ringer's home

This is the last area to have an octagonal form like the previous ones, with a corridor on one side, where there is a window. Originally designed as the home of the bell ringer and his family, over time it was adapted and a work bench was installed on the wall with the clock chimney, along with a wall closet and a pair of red painted dressers for ceramics on two of the walls. The room was whitewashed, with the exception of the skirting board, which was coloured orange, and a border frieze that combined geometrical shapes and plants in red and blue.

The ceiling here is also domed and made of stone with mortared joints, but unlike the other rooms, there is a piece of wood where the key would be with six holes to pass the ropes and ring the bells from the room itself, enabling the bell ringer to ring the bells there and not have to go up to the bell room.

The windowsill still has a sundial that indicates the twelve hourly intervals (in solar time) and which was used as a reference point to adjust the mechanical clock's time.

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The bell room

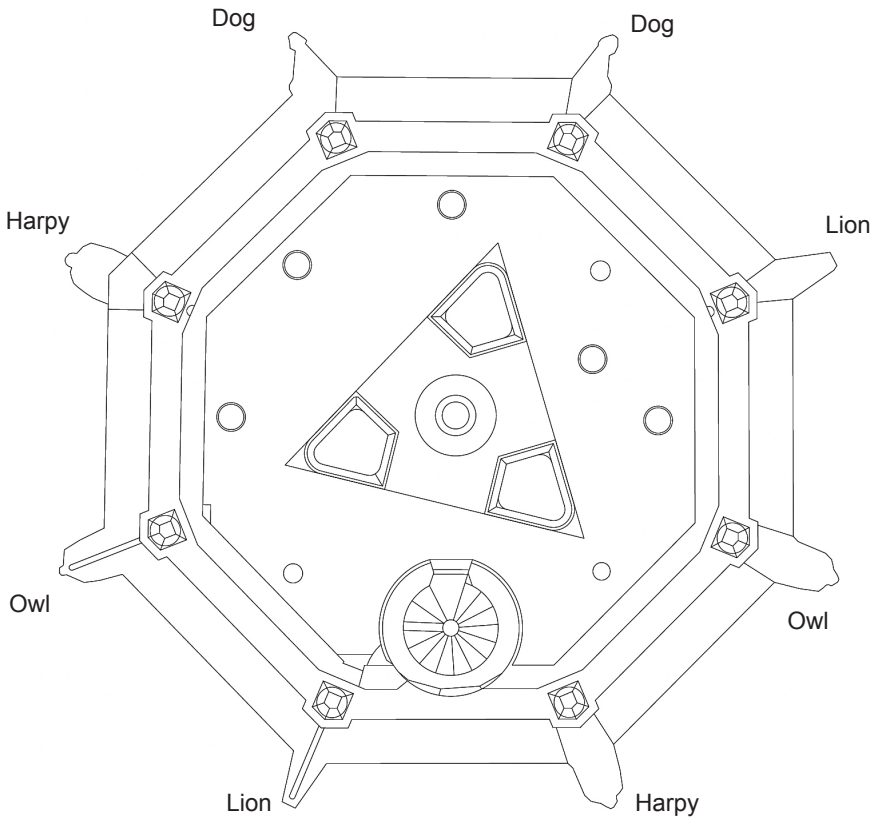
Built with stone slabs, it has seven windows with semi-circular arches and contains the bells, with the exception of the side where the stairway is, where there are three embrasures. The dome is octagonal, also of carved stone, and the key has been carved with the town crest, as a symbol recording the fact that the tower was owned by municipality. The floor is octagonal and is made of cooked clay bricks placed on edge and radiating outwards from the centre, with the wooden key where the bell ringer's ropes passed through from the floor below. There is a rattle on one wall that was used in Holy Week, as the bells could not toll during the days of the Passion.

The bells are musical percussion instruments that are made to ring with an inner clapper or exterior hammer. They are made of bronze, and constant use and other episodes caused so much damage that they had to be re-forged. The clock bell (in the rooftop) was made in 1604 along with another five whose names are unknown. This bell is only remaining one, while the others were re-forged or replaced by new ones. From the door, looking left to right, you can see the following bells, with the years of manufacture or re-forging and their weight: Jaume (1740/1773/1825/1939, 1,302 kg); Àngel (1759/1790-1791/1796/1939, 1,915 kg); Vicent (1740/1789/1939, 579 kg); Dolorettes (1824, 53 kg); Victòria (1966, 356 kg); Cristina (1626/1673/1676/1759/1962, 244 kg); Joaquina (1700/1788/1939, 166 kg), and Maria (1758/1789, 881 kg).

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The rooftop and the rotunda

In the exterior of the rooftop we have the last cornice, with a gargoyle at each of the eight corners, made in 1601 by the French stonemasons Jaques de la Carrera and Joan Ganaut, who carved heads of owls, harpies, dogs and lions.



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The rooftop and the rotunda

The rooftop is protected by a sill with a pedestal on each corner holding a ball, with a stone frame or continuous bench. You can see stone caps in the floor through which pass the bell ropes when they have to be unhooked or put in place.

In the centre there is a three-column rotunda built between 1604 and 1605, where the clock bell and two of the quarter hour bells hang, covered by a roof of blue and white tiles, a ball and a weathervane. It was struck by lightning in 1656 and a new ball had to be put in place and the roof repaired. In 1735, the flooring of the bell room and the rooftop was rebuilt, and the weathervane, ball and roofing were removed to enable the tiles to be securely fixed, and the ball was changed once again in 1784, while the weathervane you can see now was made by Simó Aznar in 1860.

The rotunda protects the clock bell and the two quarter hour bells, which are as follows: Tàfol, the clock or the hour bell (1604, 2,156 kg); Lledó, the little quarter hour bell (1939, 68 kg), and Anna, the large quarter hour bell (1679/1862/1892/1921, 254 kg).