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Bell gong without a trace

Agile thief goes to great heights for the treasure

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It has hung in the belfry for 90 years, but when the bell at St Andrew's Church in Inglewood vanished it took more than a month for anyone to notice.

The bell is thought to have been stolen about six weeks ago but it was reported missing only last week.

Inglewood police have now recovered the clapper and are midway through an inquiry to track down the cast-metal casing.

A younger member of the parish was cleaning the church on June 18 when he noticed the bell's absence, but did not mention it to anyone because he assumed the church committee must have removed it.

Last week, church committee member Colin Hale was clearing leaves in the churchyard when he came across a piece of concrete in the garden that had been knocked off the side of the church.

He also noticed a circular gouge on the concrete path consistent with the indent of a heavy cast-metal object.

He glanced upward to see a gap of sky where the church bell should have been.

The thief or thieves had probably used a stepladder to get onto the guttering then climbed the steep roof, holding on to the parapet, he said.

"It's a terrible job to access it. They were very agile people."

He said it was a shame the thief was not using his athleticism for a good cause.

"If he put his talents to some use he could be some use to society."

Church committee treasurer Kevin Rowan said the theft of the bell was a disappointment to the church community.

"We just can't understand why someone would do it."



Empty belfry: The bell at St Andrew's Church in Inglewood was stolen and it went unnoticed for more than a month. Colin Hale reported it missing last week.

Photo: ROBERT CHARLES/FAIRFAX NZ

He said scrap-metal dealers these days tended to not accept items when they did not know of their origin.

The bell has not tolled for about three years because of concerns ringing it might weaken a crack in the church wall.

The church had previously been subject to vandalism, including smashed windows and the odd bit of graffiti, Mr Hale said.

Senior Constable Alistair Balsom said police did have a suspect. "We're following strong leads and working with a certain indi-

vidual to try and recover the bell," Mr Balsom.

The historic nature of the bell meant they wanted to get it back

first and worry about laying charges later. The church is about 90 years old but the bell itself is more than a century old.