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bel·fry  (běl frē)

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n. pl. bel·fries

1. A bell tower, especially one attached to a building.
2. The part of a tower or steeple in which bells are hung.

[Middle English *belfrei*, from Old North French *belfroi*, alteration of Old French *berfrei*, *berfro*; see **bhergh-**² [in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#).]

bel *fried* *adj.*

Word History: The words *bell* and *belfry* seem obviously related, but in fact the *bel-* portion of *belfry* had nothing to do with bells until comparatively recently. *Belfry* goes back to a compound formed in the prehistoric common ancestor of the Germanic languages. It is generally agreed that the second part of this compound is the element **frij-*, meaning "peace, safety." The first element is either **bergan*, "to protect," which would yield a compound meaning "a defensive place of shelter," or **berg-*, "a high place," which would yield a compound meaning "a high place of safety, tower." Whatever the meaning of the original Germanic source, its Old French descendant *berfrei*, which first meant "siege tower," came to mean "watchtower." Presumably because bells were used in these towers, the word was applied to bell towers as well. The Old North French alteration *belfroi*, which must have reminded Middle English speakers of their native word *belle* (our *bell*), entered Middle English with the sense "bell tower."

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Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

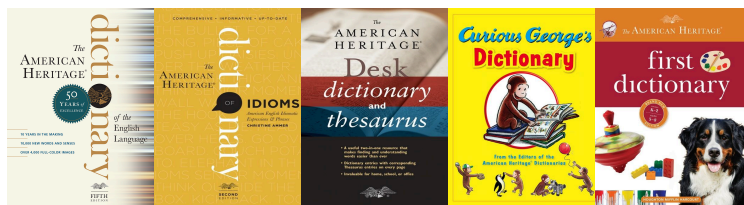
Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

[Indo-European Roots](#)

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The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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