INSCRIPTIONS UPON MEDIEVAL BELLS.

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This paper has to do with inscriptions found upon bells, which were made in England in the medieval period to be hung and used in church-towers. Its purpose, among much which might be said, is confined to two objects— one, to point out how any inscription is useful in helping us to decide the *date* of the bell on which it occurs ; the other to enunciate some principles for criticising, elucidating, and (where necessary) emending inscriptions.

In the case of bells, I take the medieval period to end with the Reformation, or, practically, with the beginning of the sixteenth century. And I venture to make the word ' inscription ' include everything—words or marks—impressed upon bells when they were cast—everything which bears any message or meaning or can give us any information about them.

(1) For the purpose of learning the *date* of a bell, obviously the first and simplest and clearest help is when the bell bears its own date stamped upon it. Unfortunately, in early days, the inscription of a date was very rare in *English* bells. It was common—almost usual—in foreign bells ; but amongst the English bells which we possess and know, only about a score or so earlier than the year 1500 bear actual dates. Fortunately, on the other hand, one or two very early bells are dated, and these are of great use in guiding us to the chronology of others. The earliest certain date which we have is 1296. I am venturing to disregard a statement in Mr. Tyack's *Book about Bells*. He speaks[1] of the discovery (in 1897) in a pond in Suffolk of ' a bell bearing the date 1133.' I cannot obtain any confirmation of this statement, and in the absence of it I think there must be some mistake about the alleged date. Omitting this, we have a bell at Claughton in Lancashire with the

[1] p. 125.

inscription ' Anno d(omi)ni m° cc° nonog° ʌi,'— 1296. The next dated bell is at Cold Ashby, Northants.—1317. We have to go more than eighty years before we find, still existing, another dated English bell.

(2) The second form of inscription which helps to an approximate date is that which mentions a living person— either the *donor*, or the *founder*, of the bell. I will mention just one early example of each : (*a*) Mr. Cocks, in his fine book on *Church Bells in Bucks*, gives us an inscription on a bell at Caversfield :—

HUG(O) GARGAT SIBILLAQ(UE) U(X)OR EI(US) H(AEC)
TI(M)PPANA FECERUNT ECPONI.

Hugh Gargate was lord of the manor at the beginning of the thirteenth century. In a document of (or about) the year 1219 we have mention of his widow, ' Ego Sybilla de Kaversfield quondam uxor Hugonis Gargat in pura viduitate.' The bell is therefore earlier than 1219.

(3) As an example of an early bell-founder, we may take (from Mr. Cocks's book) a bell inscribed

MICHAEL DE WYMBIS ME FECIT :

Michael Wymbish is mentioned in a deed of 1297 as ' Michael the potter,' and in one of 1310 as ' Michael de Wymbish, late potter ' : so the bell must be earlier than 1310.

[The name of this family reminds me of the *language* employed in England in medieval bell-inscriptions. It was almost always Latin ; but occasionally we find *Norman French*, as

RICARD DE WYMBIS ME FIST,

on a bell about 1290. Occasionally also *English*, as

JOH ME YEYT,

—pretty certainly John Godynge of Lynn, mentioned 1299. Examples of other English inscriptions are :—

HELP MARI QUOD ROGER OF KIRKEBY (probably about 1400):

IN GOD IS AL QUOD GABRIEL :

I KATERY(N)E GODDES DERLYNG

TO THE MARI SHAL I SY(N)GE.]

(3) Next to the *names* of founders, as a clue to the date of bells inscribed with them, come the *marks* (crosses, stops, etc.) used by particular founders and foundries. These are of great assistance, and are very plentiful. Almost every medieval bell-inscription began with a cross, and marks are freely interposed between the words, sometimes even between syllables of a word. They can generally be identified, and connected with certain or approximate dates.

(4) A small but interesting class of marks is connected with royal arms, royal heads, and coins of the realm. Strictly speaking, these only indicate *negatively* a date before which the bell could *not* have been founded : but a coin inserted in the bell-mould would probably be that of the current reign. The royal heads found are—possibly those of Edward I and Queen Eleanor : certainly those of Edward III and Queen Philippa, and of Henry VI, Queen Margaret, and Prince Edward.

In 1367 John Rufford was appointed by patent royal bell-founder to Edward III, and so justly put the king's (and queen's) head on his bells. Henry VI's head is connected by Mr. Walters with a foundry at Worcester about 1480. But that was after the king's deposition and death : it seems clear that the first use of the mark must have been earlier. In a drawing which remains of the old bells (unhappily destroyed in the eighteenth century) of King's College, Cambridge, we see a king's head upon one. What slight notice has been taken of this assumes that it is the head of Edward III (which was certainly used long after his reign). But the following facts point in a different direction : (1) King Edward's head always has a beard, and this (if correctly drawn) had none ; (2) the bell was cast in Henry VI 's reign (about 1460) ; (3) it was cast for the royal foundation of Henry VI ; (4) it—and its fellow bells—were probably ordered, as a gift to his new college, by Henry VI himself : (5) on some of them is the shield of the royal arms, now for the first time appearing on any bells, and the arms are those of Henry VI (with 'France modern '), not those of Edward III (with " France ancient '). On these grounds I venture to think that the use of Henry VI's head on bells began, not at Worcester about 1480, but with John Danyell in London when he received an order for bells from the king about 1460 or a little earlier.

(5) We pass on to another important evidence for date, the *style* and *shape* of the *letters* in bell-inscriptions.

The lettering on bells in medieval times may be divided into three great types : (i) Roman, (ii) Gothic, (iii) Black letter.

(i) The earliest bell-inscriptions which we possess are in Roman letters of the style sometimes called Anglo-Saxon. The Gargat bell letters (earlier than 1219) are purely Roman ; and so I believe are those on a bell (undated but very early) at Marton in Yorkshire. When we come to Chaldon and Claughton bells (in the latter half of the thirteenth century) we already find slight traces of Gothic influence.

(ii) From the beginning of the fourteenth century till about the end of the first quarter of the fifteenth century the type of letters used is regularly that known as Gothic or Lombardic. In this, as in the Roman type, only capital letters were employed. They are of great beauty, and some of them are highly ornamented, as may be seen on a bell (dated 1423) at South Somercotes in Lincolnshire.

(iii) From about 1400 begins the use of what is known as 'Black letter,' and for some time it ran concurrently with Gothic. Very often in inscriptions each word began with a Lombardic *capital*, and went on with black-letter minuscules. The black-letter type continued until and after the end of the medieval period.

Let us now turn to the *legends* of the inscriptions and their subject matter.

The earliest legends on bells are usually very short, and record either

(1) The dedication of the bell, or

(2) its date, or,

(3) its founder's name.

(2) and (3) are comparatively rare. In speaking about the language, I have given examples of early founders' names ; and the Claughton bell is a unique instance of a date and *nothing more*. (1) is the commonest form of early inscription, as at Chaldon :

CAMPANA BEATI PAULI ;

at Marton :

CAMPANA SANCTI JOHANNIS EWANGELISTE ;

at Cold Ashby :

MARIA VOCOR ;

at Caversfield :

IN HONORE DEI ET SANTI LAURENCII ;

sometimes simply IESUS.

Gradually inscriptions tended to lengthen, and to crystallise into set forms, of which from the middle of the fourteenth century *two* are predominant : (*a*) the ' Ora pro nobis,' and (*b*) the Leonine hexameter. Both of these can be traced back earlier.

(*a*) The earliest invocation of a saint which I am able to give is

SANCTE PETRE ORA PRO PETRO EXONIENSI EPISCOPO.

The bishop (Peter Quivil) died in 1291. For the next half-century I can offer no instance.

(*b*) Rhyming Latin verse was much beloved of medieval Christian poets. We are familiar with it in early hymns. Towards the middle of the twelfth century men began to write long poems in hexameters, in each of which the middle of the third foot rhymed with the end. To these hexameters the name of ' Leonine ' was given, for what reason is uncertain. It seems to have been derived either from one of the popes called Leo, or from Leonius, an ecclesiastic of Paris, who about the time of the first Crusade wrote a poetical history of the world.[1] The earliest Leonine verses on bells that I can find recorded are two lines on a bell made for Anselm, abbot of Bury St. Edmunds, before 1149 :

MARTIRIS EDMUNDI IUSSUM DECUS HIC ITA FUNDI
ANSELMI DONIS DONUM MANUS APTAT HUGONIS.

Very few, however, occur before 1350. Occasionally the rhyming verses are pentameters, as

VOX AUGUSTINI SONET IN AURE DEI ;

or even iambics, as

GAUDE MICHAEL INCLITE
PARADISI PREPOSITE

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[1] Raven, *The Bells of England*, p. 103.

But any verse except the hexameter is rare.   After the middle of the fourteenth century the rhyming hexameters are extremely common.

I propose now to say a little about the structure and elucidation of these Leonine inscriptions.   To any one accustomed to classical poetry they seem at first detestable. Dr. Raven declares : ' Bad grammar, false quantities, and impossibilities in scansion abound, to say nothing of '[1]— other things.   Judging by a classical standard, that is quite true.   But what I want to point out is that the composers of these verses were not merely ignorant or careless.   They deliberately dropped the classical rules ; but they replaced them by rules of their own, to which they *strictly* adhered. Their principles were mainly two—one regarding scansion, the other regarding rhyme ; and as I have never seen these principles presented in any publication, I venture to formu- late them now :—

(i)   *Any syllable* anywhere may be either long or short as required.

(ii)   The *rhyme* must always be *perfect* to the *eye*.

Remembering these principles, and adding a third, the use and influence of abbreviations, we shall, I think, be able to steer a right course through even the most tortuous verses.

(i) The first rule looks like a disregard of all rules, a mere hap-hazard, ' go-as-you-please ' license.   I do not think it was quite that ; it may have been due to some cause, like accent or intonation, now unknown.   But I am not going to defend the rule : only to point out that it existed and was acted upon.   Its effect was, that a vowel might be long or short indifferently : it might even be left unelided before another vowel ; and a syllable might be reckoned short, though shut in by many consonants.   See now how we are going to scan some verses given up as hopeless :

Intonat de celis vox campanā Michaelis ;

that gives very little trouble, but another with the same ending is a shock, whether we put the dactyl in the first or the second foot :

Fidelis me[n]suris nŏmĕn campanā Michaelis.

[1] p. 103.

'Iesus' reduced to two short syllables startles us in

    Est mihi collatum Jĕsŭs istud nomen amatum.

Strange to us are the names Barbarā, Lucia, invoked thus :

    O virgo Bărbārā, pro nobis Deŭm ĕxora :

    Tutrix esto pia mi se[m]per virgo Lŭcīa.

(ii) The second rule—that the rhyme must be perfect to the *eye*, i.e. that the rhyming words must finish with exactly the same letters (regardless again of quantities)—is often ignored by modern writers, but I believe there is *no exception* to it in the Leonine verses. One caution must be borne in mind : the rhymes may be of one syllable or of two syllables—the latter for choice, but *so far as they go* they must have identically the same letters. 'Thomas' has only one syllable rhyming in the verse

    Has tu campanas fecisti Pottere Thomas :

but an extremely ingenious scribe achieved the dissyllabic rhyme in

    Dicor ego Thomas laus est Xpi sonus o mas.

'Beata' at the end rhymes with only one syllable in this :

    Trinitate sacra fiat haec campana beata ;

but with two syllables in this address to the Virgin :

    Virgo coronata duc nos ad regna beata.

The dissyllabic rhymes were very much preferred, but monosyllabic were allowed.

Now for the practical application of this rule about rhyme. It helps us in three ways :

    (*a*) it confirms some readings which have been dis-
        puted ;

    (*b*) it enables us to correct some errors ;

    (*c*) it guides us to the solution of some difficulties.

A good instance of the first and third of these points is afforded by a well-known inscription :

    Dulcis sisto melis campana vocor Mich[ael]is.

Dr. Raven was much troubled by this verse, and suggested that it should run :

    Dulcis *c*ist*a* me*ll*is, etc.

The suggestion is directly counter to the rule of rhymes *exact to the eye*. 'Michaelis' can have only one 'l' therefore 'melis' must have only one 'l'. That, to my

mind, settles the reading, and leads us to the right transla-
tion. 'Melis' is the regular ablative plural of 'melos.'
In English : 'I am sweet with melodies, I am called
Michael's bell.'

To take a few cases where the rule, combined with the
marked preference for two-syllable over one-syllable rhymes,
leads us to correct some Leonine verses.

> Tu Petre pulsatus perversos mitiga fluctus.

The last word, I think, should be 'flatus.'

> Caterina pia protegas nos a nece dura.

'Pura,' not pia —as the second word—gives a much better
line from the Leonine point of view.

> Hic est Martinus quem salvet trinus et unus,

I have a shrewd suspicion was originally written

> . . . unus et trinus,

and was altered, either accidentally, or deliberately by some
one who preferred classical prosody to rhyme.

Lastly let me touch on abbreviations. They are to be
found on bells from the earliest inscriptions—as we saw on
the Caversfield and Claughton bells. As in medieval
writing generally, the commonest letters to be omitted are
M, and N, and R preceded by a vowel (—AR, ER, etc.)
Thus 'ois' stands for 'omnis,' 'Katina' for 'Katerina,'
and many more. Certain names, like Jesus, Christus, are
regularly abbreviated. Sometimes an inscription seems to
have used an abbreviated form as if it were a complete one,
thus[1] :

> O sidus celi fac Barbara crimina deli.
> (O star of heaven, Barbara, cause our sins to be blotted
> out.)

'Deli' is really 'deleri' with the 'er' left out. But in
order to preserve the scansion and the rhyme we must
keep 'deli' as the full form.

Perhaps a similar misuse of abbreviation accounts for
the name of St. John in the following[2] :

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[1] Walters, *Church Bells of England*,   [2] Walters, p. 274.
p. 269.

Sunt mihi spes hi tres Xpe Maria Johes

(though *possibly* this should read as a hexameter,

Sunt mihi spes hi tres Xpus Maria Johannes).

But a monosyllable is clearly required at the beginning of the line[1]

Joh ego cum fiam cruce custos laudo Mariam.
(As long as I exist, I, John, watcher at the cross, praise Mary.)

In connexion with the abbreviations, I have two venture-some suggestions to make.

On a bell at Scarcliffe in Derbyshire is the verse

Hic venio retro cum silis noie Petro.

The general sense seems plain. The bell called 'Peter' had been recast, and brought back to the tower. But what is 'silis'? There is no such word known. Evidently it is either a mistake or an abbreviation, or both. Mr. Walters[2] suggests it 'may be a misreading for SCTIS = sanctis, sc. the saints to whom the other bells were dedicated.' But this gives a meaning unsatisfactory in itself and difficult to get out of the Latin. Further, the abbreviation for 'sanctus' was so common and well-known that it is hard to see why I L was substituted for C T. The only word with L in it which could with any possibility be contracted to SILIS is 'similis'; that, however, gives neither sense nor construction. But if we take SILIS and alter the *one* letter L to O we get a word—SIOIS—which *looks* indeed strange, or impossible, and so puzzled the bell-founder, but which is a perfectly regular abbreviation for SIMONIS, and we get the simple meaning :

' Here I come back with Simon's name, Peter.'

The scanning is of course allowed by the first principle which I laid down : and two things tend to confirm me in my conjecture : (1) the omission of M and N occurs in the very next word NOIE ; (2) Simon is mentioned in conjunction with Peter on a bell in Sussex, also apparently recast :

Hoc mihi iam retro nomen de Simone Petro.
(Back again, I have this name from Simon Peter).

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[1] Raven, p. 123.   [2] p. 277.

The other suggestion of abbreviation, with which I will close, has to do with the invocation inscribed on the treble of a charming untouched medieval ring of four bells (date about 1460) in St. Botolph's Church, Cambridge :

Sancte Apoline ora pro nobis.

No saint 'Apolinus' is known.   Dr. Raven[1] has suggested 'Apollonia' but she is feminine.   Mr. Walters[2] hesitates between Apollonia and an 'imaginary St. Apoline.'   Can it possibly be a case of abbreviation—that AR (as frequently) is left out, and that the saint is the well-known Apolinaris ? I hope that members of the Institute who are learned in medieval saints will consider that point and give their views upon it.

[1] p. 126.   [2] pp. 271, 332.