

THE CHURCH BELLS OF LINCOLNSHIRE.

By THOMAS NORTH, F.S.A.

It was in the month of August, 1845, that the Rev. J. T. Fowler, F.S.A., Vice Principal of Bishop Hatfield's Hall, Durham, then a lad, took rubbings of the inscriptions on the church bells of Whetton in this county.

That was the commencement of a collection which Mr. Fowler subsequently determined to make, with the intention of providing material for an account of the Church Bells of Lincolnshire, illustrated by drawings of founders' marks and mediæval letters, from casts taken for that purpose. The collection was increased as time went on, until very many of the belfries of the numerous churches in North Lincolnshire were visited.

In the intervals between the excursions which Mr. Fowler was able to make, he made notes from the rubbings which he had recently taken. That was a fortunate circumstance; for travelling with his collection, the bag which contained the rubbings was stolen, and has never been recovered.

Two persons, doubtless, felt extreme annoyance on that occasion—the thief, whose chagrin and disappointment must have been great as he conned over his (to him) useless, mysterious and unintelligible haul; and Mr. Fowler, whose enthusiasm in bell hunting was, not unnaturally, so effectually damped by his loss that the further prosecution of the work lay for several years in abeyance.

At length, in 1878, Mr. Fowler, in a very obliging manner, offered to place his collection of notes and casts in my hands if I would attempt to complete the work on the plan of my volumes on the Church Bells of the three counties comprised in the diocese of Peterborough. Having been promised help from Mr. Jerram, and from several friends in the county, and in dependence upon the courtesy of the clergy generally (which has not failed me), I have been, since that time, as hard at work as enfeebled health will allow upon the very pleasant task, the interest of which has so grown with its progress that one almost regrets to see its completion so near. Whilst almost every bell in the county has now been examined and measured, parochial and public records have been searched for information, and careful notes made of local traditions, customs and uses.

It was doubtless the knowledge of these facts which induced Canon Venables to propose to me a few weeks ago that I should contribute a Paper to this Meeting on the Church Bells of Lincolnshire, which he was good enough to say would be an attractive subject.

My knowledge of the help which he himself is always ready to give to

¹ Read in the Section of Antiquities at the Lincoln Meeting, July 31st, 1880.

archæologists was an incentive to me not to refuse the carrying out of his suggestion, though I felt the difficulty of dealing with so large a subject in the necessarily narrow compass of a short Paper.

What I can give will be little more than a collection of bare facts relating to a subject which, when more fully treated, cannot fail to be full of interest, not only to the ecclesiologist, but to the student of past English manners and customs.

We know by a "Certificate of Plate, Jewels, Bells, &c. in Lincolnshire,"¹ dated the 10th of April, 1549, that there were then in the churches and chapels of the county, exclusive of the Wapentake of Kirton-in-Holland, 1753 great bells and 475 Sanctus bells; if we add to those the moderate number of forty-seven of the former and ten of the latter for that of Wapentake, we find in the churches and chapels of Lincolnshire, at the time of the Reformation, 1800 great bells and 485 Sanctus bells.

Notwithstanding the increase made since in many rings for the purpose of change ringing, there are now only about 100 more large bells than there were 330 years ago, and, as might be expected, the Priests' bells, which are the present successors of the Sanctus bells, have very much decreased in number, there being now about sixty-five only, instead of 485 at the date to which we have referred.

A reference to the existing Inventories of Church Goods in Lincolnshire in the time of Edward VI. shews that no church, however small, had then less than two "great bells," whereas there are now nearly 200 old parish churches in the county with only one bell, and that, in many cases, a miserable "ting-tang." At what time, and for what purpose, these ancient bells were sacrificed is a question which naturally suggests itself.

By the Indented Inventories of the seventh year of Edward VI. the church bells therein named were given into the charge of the parsons and churchwardens for use in the churches respectively named. We must, therefore, look to those church officers, and to the action of the parishioners generally, for a solution of our question.

Doubtless during the changes and uncertainties in church teaching and ritual in the reigns of Edward VI. and Queen Mary some church bells were sacrificed by foolish people like the parishioners of Skidbrooke-cum-Saltfleet-haven in this county, who being, as they confessed, "moved by universal talk, and by persons openly preaching against bells and other laudable ceremonies of the church, affirming the use of them to be superstitious and abominable," sold two of their bells for £20, which sum they expended upon repairing the church and scouring out their haven, then choked up with sand²; and possibly a few were seized by private persons and sold for their own benefit. But it was, I think, the parsimony or poverty of churchmen in after years—in the seventeenth, eighteenth and even in the present century—that induced the sale of so many bells principally from the smaller village churches.

Many examples might be quoted. It will suffice to say that Beelsby, where was a fine ring of bells early in the century, has now only one, and that a small one; two bells at Cadney were sold in the last century to

¹ *Exch. Q. R.* 75. P. R. Off.

² *Land Revenue Records*, Bundle 1392, File 81. P. R. Off.

pay for repairs at the church; the same thing happened at Fosdyke, where one bell now represents an older ring of five; Fulletby, Howell, South Reston, Skegness, Strubby, Sturton Magna, Low Toynton, and other churches, all lost bells under similar circumstances. Thimbleby lost a ring of six bells to pay for exchanging an ancient Gothic church for a so-called "classic" and unsightly structure. Conisholme, Fulstow, Lusby, and possibly other parishes, lost their rings of bells by the falling of the church towers; and lastly we must mention the sad and needless sacrifice of the ring of the six Lady-bells formerly in the grand central tower of the cathedral church of this city.

At a moderate computation a number of bells approaching 400 (irrespective of the sanctus or priests' bell) must have been lost to the Lincolnshire churches since the death of Edward VI.

There is now a brighter page to this history in noticing the successful attempts made in many parishes to remedy the loss just indicated. The single bell at Aisthorpe has been succeeded by a ring of five; Broughton and Carlton Magna now have five bells each in place of two; S. Peter at Gowts, Lincoln, has substituted a tuneful ring of six in the place of only three; Brigg recently welcomed a ring of eight with procession, prayer and praise, as a substitute for the single small bell which previously hung in its steeple; and at Spalding Miss Charinton has crowned her munificent gifts to the church in that town by giving eight bells to S. Paul's, adorned by dedicatory and commemorative inscriptions and devices appropriate in character, and in artistic treatment, to the House of God in which they are placed.

But it is to the bells of Lincolnshire as they at present exist, and to the more ancient of them especially, that we must now refer. Notwithstanding the heavy losses sustained in the ways just indicated, the great sacrifice of old and heavy bells (in the large towns specially) upon the introduction of change-ringing in the seventeenth century, and the gradual, but certain, loss occurring almost yearly by neglect and accidents of various kinds—for church bells are easily cracked and so spoiled—there is a fair percentage of ancient ones still remaining in the county.

For instance, there are complete rings of three pre-Reformation bells at Barnetby-le-Wold, Boothby Graffoe, Bratoft, South Elkington, Holton-le-Clay, Horkstow, Immingham, Manby, Sowerby, South Somercotes, Tallington, Theddlethorpe S. Helen, and Waith.

Pairs of such bells hung by themselves at Barholm, Canwick, Dunsby, Harpswell, Saltfleetby S. Peter, Somersby, and Toynton S. Peter; and, in company with other and later bells, at Saltfleetby S. Clement, Scampton, Alkborough, Althorpe, Edlington, Friesthorpe, Grainsthorpe, Alvingham, Bitchfield, Grayingham, Brattleby, and many other places; whilst single ones are still at (amongst other places) Burton-by-Lincoln, Carlby, South Carlton, Doddington Dry, Enderby Bag, Goulceby, Hackthorne, Hatcliffe, Keddington, Lincoln S. Mary Magdalene, Manton and Swaby.

Now whilst all these bells are of interest to the student, furnishing, as they do, to guide him in their classification, about 180 founders' initial crosses and stamps, many of them not hitherto found elsewhere, we must not to-day do more than call attention to a few as representatives of the remainder.

First, for beauty of execution, and as being early dated bells, must be mentioned the two at South Somercotes, which are allowed to be the

handsomest ancient bells in the kingdom. The second of the two (the third of the ring) is inscribed :—

+ DVLCIS CITO MELIS CAMPANA VOCOR GABRIELIS A° D'O M° CCCC XX III,
each letter of the inscription being a work of art most beautifully executed ; one has S. George and the Dragon, another a mitred head, a third natural representations of leaves, and so on.

The same letters appear upon bells in a sadly neglected condition at Somerby near to Brigg, given by Thomas Cumberworth in 1431, and some of the same fine letters are used as capitals with smaller letters on other bells in the county.

Then we have a goodly cluster of bells all bearing the same founder's stamps, with the letter S, probably for *Sanctus*, repeated at intervals round the bell.

There are many dedicated to, or bearing inscriptions referring to, the Blessed Virgin Mary in various forms, as (to quote one or two, without mentioning the very usual one of the Angelic Salutation) the second at Norton Disney :—

∩ MARIA VIRGO ASSVMPTA EST IN CELVM.

The first and second at Saltfleetby S. Peter :—

+ IN AMORE SCA MARIA

□ PURA PUDICA PIA MISERIS MISERERE MARIA.

And the third at Theddlethorpe S. Helen :—

+ VIRGO CORONATA DVC NOS AD REGNA BEATA.

Two are interesting as bearing inscriptions in English. The second bell at Alkborough has :—

+ IESV : FOR : YI : MODIR : SAKE :

SAVE : AL : YE : SAVLS : THAT : ME : GART : MAKE : AMEN.

And the first at Lacey :—

+ MARY : OF HAWARDBY : OF VS : HAVE : MERCY :

Probably referring to an image of the Blessed Virgin, of the existence and reputation of which we are now alike ignorant.

Then we have, as is usual in other counties, a goodly number of bells dedicated to the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, many of the latter being most probably used in pre-Reformation times for the *Angelus*.

In addition to the bells at Somerby there is a bell at Saltfleetby S. Clement which bears the name of the donor in this manner :—

+ DOMINVS IOHANNES DE HORSYGTON ME FECIT FIERI.

I shall be glad to know who he was, and his connection with the parish ?

There is another cluster of bells all from the same foundry, bearing the same stamps slightly altered in some instances, and with inscriptions similar in form, of which the single bell at Burton-by-Lincoln inscribed :

∩ IN NOIE JHS MARIA

and the second at Burwell inscribed :—

IN THE NAYME OF JHV SPED ME,

may be taken as samples. Another bell of that class (the third at Wellingore) has a stamp of the Virgin and Child.

There are very many other inscriptions on bells dedicated in the Holy Name of Jesus, and in those of Saints and Martyrs, all worthy of note, but I must be content with mentioning the third at Fordingham :—

ET NOMEN DICTI GERO SCI BNDICTI,

and the third at Hainton :—

NOMEN SANCTORUM GERIT HEC CAMPANA PUERORUM.

There is, by the way, a curious variation of this inscription at Maltby-le-Marsh, where the second bell has :—

NOMEN SANCTORUM GERIT HEC CAMPANA PULLORUM.

Puerorum, the word used on other bells dedicated to the Holy Innocents, not suiting the verse, the versifier hit upon the happy thought of *pullorum*, so we have "The Holy Chicks."

Some of these ancient bells have no inscriptions, but instead thereof a series of Tudor badges ; others have letters of the alphabet.

Of the many bells of rather more recent date well worthy of notice, the fine one, dated 1585, formerly hanging at S. Benedict's, now at S. Mark's, in this city, may be mentioned as a good specimen. It is a local favourite, and is known by the common people as "Old Kate." The fifth bell at Burgh, given by William Paulin in 1589, is also richly ornamented.

Respecting the founders of these ancient bells we know a little, but much has yet to be learned. Johannes de Stafford, whose name I found on a bell in Leicester (and who was, most probably, the same man as the Mayor of Leicester of that name in 1366) was the founder of the third bell at Scawby. Robert de Merston was the founder of bells hanging at North Cockerington, Skendleby, and other places. Simon de Hazfelde, whose name I found in Northants, cast and placed his name on a Sanctus bell still remaining at Sutterton ; whilst at Bicker is a curious little Sanctus bell, inscribed :—

IOH : ME YEYT,

or, John cast me, sufficiently ancient to give the name of a founder who had not assumed a surname. We find also the stamp of W^m ffounder and others, to which can be assigned a *locale* and an approximate date, but at present no first owner with certainty. Very many of the ancient bells, as we can judge from their stamps and their lettering, undoubtedly came from the early Nottingham foundries. Mr. Phillimore is at work upon the bells of that county, and will, I hope, be able to prove, what I am convinced is the fact, that Nottingham was a great centre of the bellfounder's art for the Midland district and for Lincolnshire in mediæval times.

Some few of the ancient Lincolnshire bells, like many of the modern ones, came, no doubt, out of Yorkshire, but the great majority of them come from Nottingham, where the Mellors, Quernby with the Oldfields (founders of the Lady bells of Lincoln, and of the present tenor of the cathedral ring), and the Hedderlys plied their craft in later times. Although there were small foundries in this county from 1192 (*circa*)—the time when Fergus the brazier of Boston gave two small bells to Croyland Abbey—to the present century, when the foundries at Barrow and at Barton were energetically worked by the Harrisons, there is

nothing to shew that in mediæval times there was any foundry in the county equal, or approaching in reputation, to the very extensively patronised one at Nottingham.

The step from the bells to their uses is a short one, which will, I hope, always be taken by bell students. The additional interest is so great, and the trouble involved so little, that such an opportunity of recording old local customs and survivals should not be lost. Many of those, having no utilitarian value, are gradually, but surely, departing. It may seem strange that the course of politics should have anything to do with old bell customs in obscure Lincolnshire villages, but it is quite true that since Reform and the abolition of Church Rates have become established facts, the ancient *Angelus*, the more ancient Curfew, and the Shrive or Pancake-bell, have ceased to be rung in many places—no funds being now available for the payment of the sexton or clerk for his trouble.

Still, however, the Curfew is heard in about a score of parishes; the Pancake-bell rings in upwards of seventy parishes, and is remembered as being rung in about as many more; the morning bell, successor of the *Angelus*, still rings in many places, the mid-day bell in a few. Bells ring in many churches at the publication of banns, the “spurrings,” as the process is locally called, on the day of the wedding, and occasionally on the morning after the wedding to awake the bride and bridegroom. Bell ringing is not uncommon on certain evenings in the week in winter to guide people home from the markets, reminding us of the days of open heaths and fens. We are enjoined on one bell to remember the 5th of November; on another we are as earnestly requested to do nothing of the kind. Notwithstanding this conflict of advice, the “shooting of old Guy,” as the clashing of the bells is called, is not yet quite neglected. Chiming or ringing at funerals lingers, with many a touching tale of the love of the aged of a past generation for that ancient custom.

At S. Mary's, Stamford, hangs the Common bell of the Corporation; at Sleaford the Butter-bell, reminding one of the days when forestalling was a punishable offence; there, too, hangs the Fire-bell; over the Guildhall in this city is the ancient mote-bell, inscribed:—

CVM QVIS CAMPANAM RESERET SÆCCVM BONVS AVDIT
ET CVRIAM PLANAM FORE CVM SCITOTE REPLAVDIT
TEMPORE VVILII BEELE MAIORIS
LINCOLNIE CIVITATIS U

Which has been freely translated:—

When first a good man hears the bell
Let him his bag with speed untie;
When next it rings, he'll know full well
The hall is cleared, and homeward hie.

The remembrance of many curious customs is kept alive by the ringing, in various ways, of the bells in different parishes, but I must not lengthen my remarks beyond saying how grateful I shall be to receive from any of the clergy or laymen of the county notes on any special ringing of the bells now or in any past times, and of any traditions connected with them. What may be learned in that way from a search in the parish chest is well illustrated by a manuscript copy of the Duties and Fees of the Parish Clerk of Barrow-on-Humber in the year 1713, preserved among the church papers there.

In this single document we have notices of several customs now obsolete: the ringing of a bell twice daily during Lent at nine and four,—the accustomed hours of matins and evensong,—on such days as prayers were not said in the church, meaning, I suppose, the Litany and holy-days when the service was later—at ten or eleven a.m.; the ringing of the Harvest-bell at break of day to call the reapers to their work, and again at sunset; the ringing of the real Passing-bell according to ancient practice, and the ringing of the Soul-bell, which in this case was, I suppose, the peal after death in obedience to the canon. Apart from the bells we learn as to the old custom of placing hay in the seats to keep the feet of the worshippers warm, and from another document we learn that the sexton received 4s. 4d. annually from the churchwardens for dog-whipping.

The bells of the cathedral church of this city require a separate Paper for their elucidation. The bells of St. Hugh's tower, "Great Tom," that Stentor, as Fuller calls him, of all the bells in the country, and the beautiful ring of Lady bells, formerly hanging in the central tower, all have their history.

Although a second ring of bells was by no means an uncommon thing in our large cathedral and monastic churches in pre-Reformation times, Lincoln was in 1834—the year in which the Lady bells were removed—unique in that respect in England, its cathedral being the only one in which the second ring had escaped destruction. Whilst every one must now regret the loss then effected, it should be remembered that the bells were at that time much out of order, St. Hugh's had not been rung for forty years, and the state of public opinion on such matters being very different from that of to-day, the two rings were possibly looked upon rather as a nuisance causing needless expense, than as rich ornaments adding to the dignity of the church, and so as a source of proper pride, and as worthy of the greatest care. We may safely say that were the Dean and Chapter of that day now sitting in chapter, a proposal to remove the Lady bells would hardly find a mover, certainly not a seconder.

By the liberality of a lady and gentleman, to whom the cathedral must be endeared by many associations, an addition is just made to the Quarter bells. It will not, I hope, be deemed impertinent for a comparative stranger to ask whether it would not be possible to remove "Great Tom" from the central tower, which was not built for so heavy a weight, where he cannot be rung, and dare not even be chimed, to his original position in the north-west tower?

If that were done, are we too sanguine in thinking that some wealthy citizen or citizens of Lincoln would give a new ring of bells for the central tower, and so restore its music to a magnificent structure, which is not unjustly pronounced to be not only the highest, but the finest, central tower in England?