

THE CHURCH BELLS OF BEDFORDSHIRE.¹

By T. NORTH, F.S.A.

Compared with the Lincolnshire churches, upon whose bells I had the honour of saying a few words before this Institute last year, the belfries of Bedfordshire are well supplied with music.

In Lincolnshire, out of 683 churches, there are no fewer than 502 with only three bells or less; the large number of 248 (or more than one-third of the whole number in that county) possessing only one; whilst in Bedfordshire, with about 130 churches—47 of which have only three bells or less—there are only about twenty (and most of those modern ones) in which only one bell is found.

When John Mair, the Scotch historian, remarking upon the vast number of bells of England, and describing the delight with which he listened, when studying at Cambridge, to their melody upon the Great Festivals, said, "Not a village of forty houses you see without five bells of the sweetest tones:" he might have been describing this county, for five is here the favourite number, there being forty-seven churches, or more than one-third of the whole, with that very pleasant number in their belfries.

Unfortunately, there are but few documents known to exist to which we can refer for information about the church bells of Bedfordshire at, or before, the Reformation.

Of the results of the Commission—so far as regards Bedfordshire—issued in the second year of Edward the Sixth, to enquire into the quantity and value of Church furniture and ornaments throughout England we know nothing, and of that "for the survey of all Colledges, ffrechapells, Chauntries, firaternyties, Brotherhoods, Guylds," &c., within the County of Bedford, we know little beyond the names of the Commissioners and the returns from two Chauntries. The Commissioners, who at that time acted for Bedfordshire, were Sir John St. John, Knight; Sir Thomas Rotherham, Knight; and William Smith, Gentleman.² Those gentleman, probably, also acted as Commissioners for Church goods.

Under the more important Commission issued in the Sixth year of Edward VI,³ to obtain the returns of Church goods, the Commissioners for Bedfordshire were William, Marquis of Northampton; John, Lord Bray, John St. John and Uryan Brereton, Knights; and Lewis Dyve

¹ Read in the Architectural Section at the Bedford Meeting, July 29, 1881.

² "Augm. Off. Chantry Certificate," No. 1, P.R. Off.

³ Printed in seventh report of the Deputy-Keeper of the Public Records, p. 307.

and Richard Snow, Esquires. Unfortunately, neither the certificate of these Commissioners, nor a complete set of the returns from the different parishes, can be found, and so the number of Church Bells in this county at that time cannot be ascertained. Judging from the existing returns from thirteen parishes then sent in, and which I have recently found in the Public Record Office, the Church Bells of Bedfordshire have suffered very little loss in numbers since that time; in the thirteen parish churches to which I refer there were in the year 1552 forty-nine large bells and five sanctus bells; in the same churches now there hang sixty large bells and two priests' bells. These existing returns are, most of them, very explicit in the description of the bells, some giving the estimated weight as at Tingrith, where there were "iij belles weynge by estymation, xxv hundred wyght;" and others, giving the exact measurement of each bell, as at Salford thus:—

"Item in ye steeple of ye said church iij belles, the great bell in Compas two yeardes and di, in deapth iij quarter and a nayle; the second in compasse ij yerdes and a quarter, in deapth iij quarter; the third in compasse ij yerdes, in deapth iij quarter save a nayle."

It must not be supposed, from this praiseworthy state of things, that the people of Bedfordshire were altogether proof against the temptations of the times. There is extant a letter, dated from Westminster, 16th May, 1556, signed by William Berners, Thomas Mildmay, and John Wyseman, and addressed to Thomas Strynger, of Meppershall, in this county, yeoman, by which he is ordered to appear in person before the writers at Westminster on the first day of Trinity Term then next, to answer concerning the detention of church goods formerly belonging to the parish church of Meppershall. There is also another letter from Thomas Hemmynge of Arlesey, touching the order so given to Stringer, in which he excuses his (Stringer's) attendance at Westminster on the plea that "my neyghbour ys an olde man and not used to jorney," and enclosing his answer "concerninge the premises," which closes with a retort upon one of his supposed accusers, John Leventhorpe the elder, gentleman, of Meppershall, and says that he must needs speak of the "ymbeaselynge" of certain goods by the said Leventhorpe which were not put in the Inventory,

"Imprimis he had a saunce belle hangynge yn the belfrey and converted the same to his owne use and never payd one peny therfore and by estymac'on to be sold iiij markes or thereabouts."

The inhabitants of Sandy, too, were at the same time called upon to account for two large bells, and made their defence in a letter addressed to the Commissioners, and which is now preserved in the Public Record Office.

In later times, too, a few parishes in Bedfordshire, as in other counties, no doubt lost their bells to save the pockets of the ratepayers: the good people of Arlesey having recently placed a new ring of six bells in their steeple it is, perhaps, hardly fair to repeat against them the old distich current in the neighbourhood:—

"Arlesey, Arlesey, naughty people,
Sold their bells to mend the steeple!"

¹ "Land Revenue Records," Bundle 1,329, File 2.

² Land Revenue Records: Church Goods 442.

Bedfordshire being a small county, not very thickly strewn with villages, does not offer a very wide or full field for the Bell-hunter. A large proportion of the bells, as in other counties, have been re-cast since the Reformation, indeed those at Houghton Conquest have been renewed twice since that time. There are, however, about 50 bells still remaining which were cast prior to the year 1600. Of these the larger proportion are dedicated to various saints—SS. Andrew, Paul, Nicholas, Katharine, Mary, Margaret, Thomas, Gabriel, &c.—and bear the usual “Ora pro nobis.” Two (Salford third, and Thurleigh fifth,) have the angelic salutation :—

AVE MARIA.

The third bell at Hawnes has the unusual inscription :—

SUM CAMPANA MARIE + MATRIS MESSIE PIE

and the fourth at Kempston says, what is intended for :—

EX ANNA NATA SALVET NOS VIRGO BEATA.

Two others (Meppershall third and Warden third) have the prayer :—

CHRISTO AVDI NOS

and one (Maulden first) the joyous :—

TE DEVM LAVDAMVS.

Two have the inscription, found all over the kingdom :—

In Multis Annis Resonet Campana Johannis.

One (Carlton third) is dedicated to S. Martha—an unusual name for a bell—another (Cople fourth) to S. Michael.

The fifth bell at Willington has an unusual dedication in these words :—

O Martir Xpo'fore Pro Nobis Semper Orate.

This bell, like one at S. Mary's, Bedford, bears a stamp with the arms of England, three Lions passant guardant.

The names of the Archangels Gabriel and Michael are very frequently found upon bells, but not so the name of Raphael: the fourth bell at Wymington is therefore of considerable interest: it is said to be inscribed :—

Musa Raphaelis sonat auribus Emanuelis,

but I have not yet been able to ascertain the correctness of this.

Several of these fifty more ancient bells are dated late in the sixteenth century, some bearing the names of the founders, others those of the donors: two of the latter—good specimens of their class—hang at Hulcote, and are inscribed “Rychard Charnock Esqueir Johannes Dier me fecit A. 1593. To God Be Honor and Glorie:” there is much rather clumsy decoration between each word of the inscriptions, which are preceded by the arms of the donor, Argent, on a bend sable three cross crosslets of the first with a crescent in chief for difference.

The bells at Clifton, dated 1590, evidently bore, originally, on each a single line of a complete verse; two bells bearing the two first lines have been re-cast; two others—the present fourth and fifth—now say :—

BVT THER CONSERT IN MEWSIK

DOTH PLES WELL OVR EARE.

There are other English inscriptions, of no special interest, on late sixteenth century bells.

The only complete ring of ancient bells in this county is at Hockliffe : all the three bells there being clearly of the same date, and from the same foundry.

Among the Priests' bells two or three without any inscription may be ancient, but there is only one—a small bell twelve inches in diameter, hanging at Lidlington—which can be pointed out as a specimen of the mediæval Sanctus bell : it bears the single word "Petre" with a founder's stamp.

There are some excellent sixteenth century bells in the county, notably a complete ring of six at Great Barford, and another complete ring of five at Marston Moretaine, both from the famous Leicester foundry, then worked by Hugh Watts. That founder, and the Newcombes also of Leicester, further supplied a large number of single bells. Miles, or "Colchester," Gray, his son Christopher Gray, and the Chandlers of Drayton Parslow, supplied others. John Hodson, of London, sent a few, and several other founders' names appear.

Early in the next century (the eighteenth) a foundry was started at Wootton in this county, by Thomas Russell, and was carried on, in the first instance, by himself alone, then in conjunction with his sons Thomas and William, and afterwards by William Emerton, at whose death, somewhere about the year 1790, after being worked with some energy, the Wootton foundry was closed ; many bells from it hang in Bedfordshire bell-chambers.

There are several bells, in addition to those already referred to at Hulcote, of some local interest as bearing the names of their donors : thus at Bromham is a bell given by Baron Trevor in 1739 ; at Northill hangs one inscribed :—

RICHARD HARDING ET ANNE HARDING, 1589.

At Willington are bells given by members of the Gostwick family, seated there early in the fourteenth century, and probably earlier, and at Heath and Reach is a bell bearing a singular inscription notifying that Richard Wige, gent., was the "oner" in 1695.

The largest bell in Bedfordshire is the single bell given to the new church at Woburn by the Duke of Bedford in 1867 ; it weighs two tons fifteen hundredweight ; and many people will consider the most interesting one to be the fourth at Elstow : it is "an alphabet-bell"—that is, it bears a portion of the alphabet, in capital letters, in lieu of an inscription—and is traditionally believed to be the bell rung by John Bunyan, who was born in the parish of Elstow, and who much delighted in bell-ringing before, as Southey represents it, "he began to think it a vain and sinful practice." His love for bells and their music never left him : it will be remembered that, according to his immortal allegory, when the gates of the heavenly city were opened wide that mortals saw the hidden glory shining forth, "the trumpets did blow, and all the bells of the city did ring for joy."

Of the bell-ringing customs of the county I am not now prepared to speak, my notes not being complete, but that change-ringing was practised here with some success as early as 1655 is shewn by a curious manuscript preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford (Rawlinson, D 886). The manuscript is a curious compound of prose, poetry, and music, in which English, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew are used. A description of this

singular production would be out of date here : a few lines only need be quoted to shew that change-ringing was then in vogue, and that John Palmer and his team—called in the verses “his sons”—were noted ringers :—

“An Epigrame

To Bedford Ringers, especially to Mr. Palmer,
Principle in y^t noble Consort.

What is't I heare ? is some cœlestiall Quire
Of Angels now descended from their higher
Sacred Mansions Here to ring a Peale
In th' eares of Mortalls ? Thus thinking to steale
By these diviner Ayres, each mortall's heart
Into a sublime Rapture Quite a part
From sublunary things ? Or doe I heare
Th' effect of Phansy ringing in mine eare ?
No, no, such Musicke Phansy doth exceede,
And 'tis too meane from Angels to proceede :
But, 'tis brave Palmer's Art, which now doth raise
Such Harmony : Too great for mortall praise,
Which must confesse 'tis farr beneath y^e worth
Of Palmer and his Sonnes, whose happy Births
Are celebrated in these quickning Straines,
Which far exceede y^e Ayres of Vulgar braines,
Who only can admire, not understand,
How you should have your Bells so at command.

: : : : : : : ”

It is worthy of remark that the ringing which was the cause of these, and many more, pedantic lines being written took place during the Commonwealth. The play upon the word “change” is to the point in these four lines :—

“They only now who with the Times can change
Are men of great esteeme ; methinks 'tis strange
That Noble-Bedford-Ringers should be then
(When they so well can change) no greater men.”

Change-ringing, after being neglected for many years in this county, has lately been revived in several parishes, chiefly by the exertions of Mr. Charles Herbert, of Woburn, who doubtless thinks, with the writer of the “Epigrame” from which I have quoted,—

“ But as
Some instruments we know, doe farr surpass
Others for Musicke ; so ye wide-mouth'd Bell
None other musique 'ere could paralell.”