

## THE BELLS OF ST. NICHOLAS' CHURCH, NEWCASTLE.

DETERRED, probably, by exaggerated fears of dirt, danger, and fatigue, none of the topographers of Newcastle appear to have examined the bells of the parish church; and their inscriptions are unnoticed in the histories of the town. Having recently taken careful rubbings of the legends on these bells, I am enabled to supply this remarkable omission.

Until the Corporation (who, for the use of the bells, repair the tower,) presented three additional bells in what Bourne (who died in 1732) terms "late years," the church possessed only five bells in the steeple. Of these five, three are inscribed in mediæval black letter, and are connected with saints.

I. One of them was named after St. Nicholas, the patron of the church, and bears a rhyme in Latin:—

✠ *Cunctis . Modulamina . Promans*

✠ *Sum . Nicholatus . Evans.*

("Bearing modulations to all, I am rejoicing Nicholas.") The mark at the commencement, is a merchant's or bellfounder's. It is composed of a cross saltire, surmounted by a plain cross.

II. Another bell bears the same mark, but is of superior workmanship. It exhibits two figures—a flower between them. The Annunciation to the Virgin, to whom the bell is dedicated, is evidently intended to be represented. The legend is—

✠ *O. mater. dia. me. sana. virgo ✠ maria.*

("O, Divine Mother, Mary the Virgin, heal me.") At Heighington, county Durham, is a bell of the same good workmanship, adorned with a figure of the Virgin and the arms of Neville, and bearing nearly the same legend. The second cross in our reading occupies the place of the mark.

III. The third bell of ancient date was that of St. Michael :—

*Campana . Vocor . Micaelis . Dulcis . Sisto . Melis.*

This seems to be the reading, but there is something wrong at the end. Between each word is a circular device. On each of two large leaves or branches of a central stem, which is surmounted by a cross, is perched a bird looking backwards. Round this subject is an illegible blackletter legend. On the top of the same bell is a shield repeated four times. Its bearings are a chevron between three vases or covered cups with handles and spouts. This coat does not occur among the enumerated arms of companies, but it may be certainly considered as allusive to the moulders or other workmen employed in some particular branch of bell-founding. It occurs on one of the bells of St. Bartholomew's, London. On the bells of Scorton chapel, near Rievaulx, a similar device occurs twice in conjunction with the bells of the bellfounders. The smaller bell is old, though it is not that which was removed from Byland by Abbot Roger in 1146. On the dexter side of a crozier is a bell. On the sinister, a bell and double-handed vessel standing on three legs. Round this device runs the legend in the shape of a heater shield, informing us that John Copgraf made the bell. On the greater bell, dated 1676, a shield occurs thrice, with the initials P. W. under it. Three of the tripod cups (no chevron) are impaled with a chevron between three bells, the cups occupying the dexter portion of the shield.<sup>1</sup>

IV. There appears always to have been one bell more exclusively devoted to municipal purposes, called the COMMON, GREAT, or THIEF and REIVER BELL. The last name was applied to it in consequence of its taking the place of (or accompanying) the curfew or 8 o'clock bell on the occasion of each of the fairs of the town—at which, by a custom widely dispersed, none but the greatest malefactors were liable to arrest. In Germany, according to Fynes Moryson, “at the time of public fairs, after the sound of a bell, it is free for debtors, harlots, and banished people to enter the citie.” Another special use of this bell, from which the name of Common Bell seems to be derived, was that of its being

<sup>1</sup> At Norton, county Durham, on a bell dated 1664, the same bearings occurred seven times, the bells being to the dexter. This bell was recast a few years ago. On an old bell at Eggescliffe, dedicated to St. Mark, a bell and a bell-rope occur alternately between each word. At the church of Ellerker, in 1585, were three bells in the steeple. One of them had two trefoiled compartments, one with three fleurs de lis, 1 and 2, the other with three talbot's heads, 1 and 2; an eagle upon a swaddled child also occurred, and the legend “MAY FORTUNE 1577 ABOUT THIS BELL.” On another bell, with an oratory legend to Christ and the Virgin, was a shield with three bells, 2 and 1, no chevron. (Harl. MS. 1394, p. 312).—ED.

tolled to convene the burgesses, and other business. On the great annual election, it begins (says Brand) "at nine o'clock in the morning, and with little or no intermission continues to toll till three o'clock, when they begin to elect the mayor, &c. Its beginning so early was doubtless intended to call together the several companies to their respective meeting-houses, in order to choose the former and latter electors, &c. A popular notion prevails, that it is for the old mayor's dying, as they call his going out of office—the tolling, as it were, of his passing bell." The great bell was also tolled at twelve o'clock at noon of Pancake or Shrove Tuesday, when a general holiday for the rest of the day commenced. Bourne quotes Carr's MSS. for the statement that this bell appears to have been cast in 1593. In October of that year, the Corporation paid "for two band ropes, one to the common bell, and another to the 8 o'clock bell, 3s. 4d. a piece." In October, 1595, (perhaps the date to be substituted for the 1593 of Bourne,) they paid "to William Bome, in consideration of a hauser which was spoilede in haylinge upp the common bell of Sainte Nichol church to steple, 20s." As soon, however, as 1615, according to Bourne, the "great bell called the common bell," weighing 3,120 or 3,130*lb.*, was sent to Colchester to be new cast. Yet it is stated that it was cast again in 1622, and weighed 33 *cwt.* Certain it is that in 1754, when it was again sent to be recast, it weighed at the High Crane 32 *cwt.* 3 *qrs.* 14 *lb.* good. It cracked—during a great improvement in the Newcastle school of bellringing. On February 7, 1754, a young society of ringers rang 2,520 changes of bob triples in 1 hour 36 minutes, being half the complete peal, which had never been performed on these bells before. To complete the whole peal was thought impossible, by reason of the bad hanging. On April 11, as the ringers were about halfway through a peal of grandsire triples, the great bell cracked, and on September 25 was taken down for transmission to London. About 10*d.* a pound was allowed for it, producing 153*l.* The new bell cost 1s. 1*d.* per pound, amounting to 218*l.* 8s. It weighed 36*cwt.* or 4,032*lb.* It was landed on the quay from London on December 20, 1754, and was first rung on January 1, 1755. Mr. Lawrence, a noted bellhanger of London, was sent for by the magistrates. He hung all the bells so effectually that, notwithstanding the weight of the new tenor bell, a complete peal of bob triples was rung with the greatest ease in 3 hours 13 minutes and a quarter, on April 10.<sup>2</sup> The inscription of the present bell is—"CUTH-

<sup>2</sup> In the steeple are tablets with the following records of "native talent"—*Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, 1808.—Nov. 15. A true peal of Holt's grandsire triples, consisting of 5040 changes, was rung by the Newcastle Union Society in three hours and twenty minutes. *Artes liberales ab omnibus nisi imprudentibus diligentur.*

BERT SMITH, ESQ., MAYOR. WILLIAM ROWELL, ESQ., SHERIFF. 1754.  
THOMAS LESTER & THOMAS PACK FECIT."<sup>3</sup>

V. One more bell of the old five remains to be noticed. It has the arms of Newcastle, supporters and crest, the tails of the seahorses being twisted in an unusual form. It runs on two lines thus:—

‘COVRT . TO . THIS . HEIGHT . YOW . WHEN . THIS . TOWRE .  
WHEN . 1658 . . . I . H . . SEE . IT . WAS . BVILT .

Such were the five bells of St. Nicholas up to 1717. We have seen an entry mentioning the “8 a’clocke bell,” or curfew, as distinct from a common bell; and in 1594 the Corporation paid “the under clarke of Sainte Nichol’s churche towlinge the 6 a’clocke bell for schollers in the morninge, 3s. 4*d.*” This is the bell alluded to by Brand in his “Popular Antiquities,” as “rung at six every morning, except Sundays and holidays, with a view, it should seem, of calling up the artisans to their daily employment”—and practically, here and elsewhere, this was doubtless its principal end.

The records of the various occasions on which these bells were rung, belong rather to the illustration of general history and the local feelings of the people, than to that of the bells. They do not, therefore, enter into this brief notice. It may, however, be in place to allude to the peculiar expression used by the Corporation official in stating his payment to the clerk for commemorating Queen Elizabeth’s accession on the 17th of November. It is “for joie of our Majesties raign”—“our Majesty” being his frequent designation of the Virgin Queen. The

*Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, 1809.—Jubilee, Oct. 25. Was rung a 5040 of Holt’s grandsire triples by the Union Society of this town in three hours and twenty minutes, being the only *peal* rung in England in commemoration of his majesty King George the Third entering into the fiftieth year of his reign.

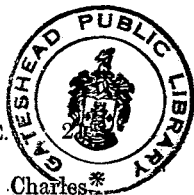
*St. Nicholas*, 1842.—March 27 (Easter Sunday). The Union Society of Newcastle and Gateshead Change Ringers, in company with J. Cox, and J. Freeman, two members of the Society of St. James’ Youths, London, rung a complete *peal* of Holt’s grandsire triples, 5040 changes, in the unprecedented short period of two hours and fifty-nine minutes.

1848, Dec. 8. Eight members of the Ancient Union Society of Change Ringers of Newcastle and Gateshead rung a true and complete *peal* of grandsire triples, 5040 changes, in two hours and fifty-five minutes, the quickest *peal* on record. This ingenious *peal* is the composition of Mr. Thurston, of Birmingham, it consists of 170 singles and 75 bobs. The first *peal* rung by native talent since the Jubilee of Geo. III.

<sup>3</sup> The word *fecit* is below the rest of the inscription.

<sup>4</sup> There is a small mark or character here, something like æ or a black letter t with a curved top to it. “When caught to this height you see when this tower it was built.”

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bells of St. Nicholas are muffled on the anniversary of King Charles the First's execution (1810)—a most unusual custom. Brand suggests that it probably dates from the Restoration, and may be accounted for by the singular loyalty of the King's town of Newcastle.

It remains to glance at the modern additions to the belfry. The three bells which had been added in Bourne's days, were, he says, given by the Corporation.

VI., VII. Two of them read—RALPH. READ, ESQ., MAYOR. FRANCIS JOHNSON, ESQR., SHERIF. 1717. R. PHELPS LONDINI FECIT.

VIII. The third seems to have been recast—as it reads—THOMAS MEARS, LATE LESTER, PACK, AND CHAPMAN, LONDON, FECIT, 1791. It is a "maiden bell, a clean casting in no need of chipping." The above eight bells, only, constitute the fine peal of St. Nicholas. But, above one of the bells of 1717, hangs the largest bell of the steeple, and on it the hours are struck.

IX. This bell was presented in pursuance of the will of Major George Anderson, of Newcastle, dated 17 April, 1824, proved 1831, which contained the following singular bequests for public purposes:—"I leave to the church of St. Andrew's, in the town of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 100*l.* for the purpose of repairing and ornamenting the tower thereof; and if that the tower aforesaid after being repaired and ornamented shall be found capable of bearing and admitting a spire of height of from 50 to 100ft. high, then in that case I leave it £400 more for that purpose. My wish is that it may be seen from Durham Cathedral, and give an exterior dignity to the town of Newcastle. I leave to the church of St. John's, Newcastle, in Westgate Street, 200*l.* for the purpose of creating a spire on the top of the tower thereof, of the height of 50 feet high—which said spire shall have my name and arms thereon, with the date thereof. I leave to the church of St. Nicholas, Newcastle, 500*l.* for the purpose of purchasing a large bell for the clock to strike upon—which said bell shall have my name and arms thereon, with the date thereof, and the purpose for which it was given. These gifts above mentioned I trust the Reverend the Vicar of Newcastle will see properly and correctly applied. But if that the Vicar of Newcastle and the Churchwardens of the aforesaid churches will not comply with the above conditions in the course of three years,

then the aforesaid sums shall be forfeited, and become the property of my godson, George Anderson. I wish that my executors to my will see the bequests left to the churches before-mentioned correctly complied with, as they are intended to be of general ornament, use, and benefit to the town of Newcastle, and also an example to others to imitate of the Church of England—as I hold it in opinion it is the duty of every one to keep up the magnificence and dignity of the buildings erected to the Supreme Being.”

Major Anderson's intentions as to church-towers not having been carried out, the bequests, so far, sunk into the residue.

On December 3, 1833, the bell bequeathed to the parish-church of St. Nicholas was christened “The Major,” and on the 10th hoisted into the belfry. It is hung some four or five feet above the first bell in the north east angle. *Inscription*:—“PURCHASED FOR THE CLOCK TO STRIKE UPON, AGREEABLY TO THE WILL OF GEORGE ANDERSON, ESQ., 1833. CAST AT THE FOUNDRY OF SIR ROBERT SHAFTOE HAWKS & Co., BY JAMES HARRISON, OF BARTON-UPON-HUMBER, NOVEMBER 23, 1833.” (Arms.)

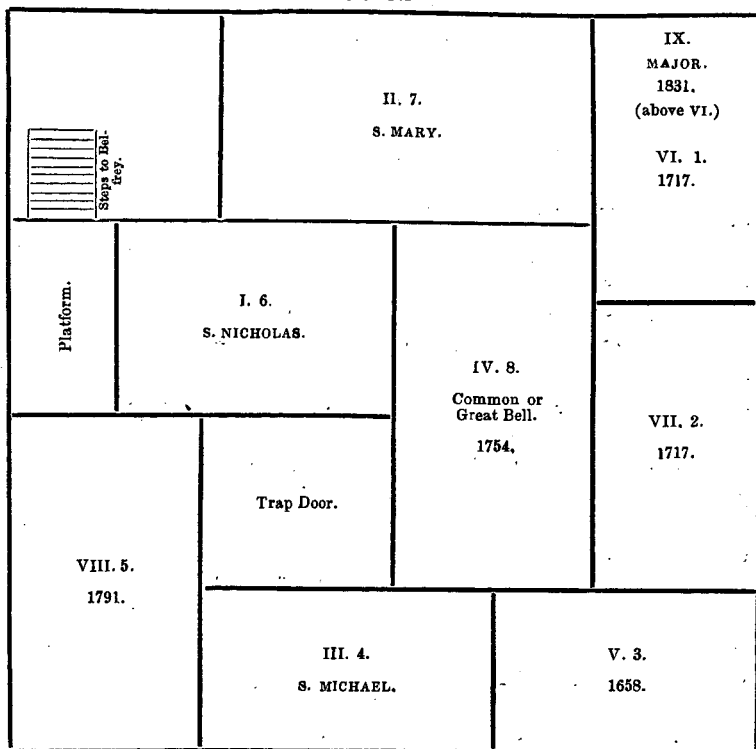
“The Major” is a very imperfect bell, and I have been told by Mr. Laurie that the tenor can be heard at twice the distance. Harrison, the founder, was a son of the celebrated chronometer-maker, who won the Government prize of 20,000*l.*; but he blundered the bell. Bell-metal is a mixture, as everybody knows, of copper and tin. Harrison came to Mr. Robert Watson's foundry in the High Bridge, and got about a hundredweight of brass—a mixture of copper and zinc—to mix with the proper materials. The consequence was, with all the chipping and other expedients he could resort to, the sound was unsatisfactory:—the thing was blundered altogether.<sup>5</sup>

For the guidance of those who may wish to inspect the bells, I sub-join a rough idea of their positions in the tower. The Roman nume-

<sup>5</sup> From the information of Mr. Robert White. Harrison, nevertheless, bore a good professional reputation. The Rev. John Byron, of Killingholme, Linc., has obligingly transmitted the following information from a correspondent, of whom, in consequence of that reputation, he had made enquiries about the failure of skill at Newcastle:—“I have heard from a man that knew Harrison the bell-founder, that the bell at Newcastle was doubtless the result of an experiment. He was too poor to try it on his own account, so he gave the next customer, after the idea originated, the benefit of it. The same person tells me that he was once at a place where Harrison had cast bells for the church. For a time they stood in the church-yard, where the boys frequently took great liberties with them, such as throwing bricks at them, &c. One day Harrison himself, who was a very little man, went to the bells, and began hammering at them with a chisel. The clergyman going past saw him, and bestowed a tremendous whack on the side of the bell-founder's head, asking what he was doing there—and what he had to do with the bells. To his surprise the answer was, ‘I cast them.’”

als refer to the descriptions in this paper, the Arabic signs denote the order of ringing.

NORTH.



SOUTH.

JOHN VENTRESS.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne.