

## The Products of an Eighteenth Century Bell Foundry at Wootton: a static distribution reviewed

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The concerns of the nineteenth century antiquary are rarely those of the archaeologist of the late twentieth century, yet the work of the former is the basic foundation of our study. Their world, both local and national, was very different to our own; and the background of the men whose writings fill the pages of the local transactions of the nineteenth century is certainly not that of the men whose papers have figured in the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal* since its inception in 1962. No clergyman has written for these pages, yet the *Associated Architectural Societies Reports and Papers*, in which the nineteenth century Bedfordshire Archaeological Society published its proceedings from 1849 to 1887, is largely, if not exclusively written by the Anglican clergy of the area. It is therefore not surprising that its pages contain much that is on subjects of ecclesiastical interest.

The cleric-antiquary of the nineteenth century very often did an excellent job in preserving information about material which would otherwise have been lost. Rarely, if ever, is it possible to point the accusation that given the particular circumstances of the discovery, and often his own prior lack of any detailed knowledge of the topic he was required to suddenly become expert in, he, the cleric-antiquary, did not do the best for the discoveries being made. When time permitted and thorough research was possible, his monograph on a topic of deep interest to himself is likely not easily to be superseded.

One such clergyman with a wide knowledge of a particular topic was Thomas North, a Leicester man, who wrote a series of books on church bells published between 1876 and 1886: the last, on Hertfordshire, in fact being published posthumously.<sup>1</sup> These neglected works with much detail cover not only the bells extant in the churches at the time of writing but also those which had been replaced by recasting. Such a monumental collection of factual information is valuable for our own day with its very different concerns: ecclesiastical topics when considered at length can assume an economic aspect.

This note seeks to present an economic aspect of the study of church bells: their distribution. Distributional studies as attempted by North and his contemporaries, of whom J.J. Raven of Cambridge<sup>2</sup> is the most well-known, were limited to listings of individual makers of bells within single counties. Their introductions gave a resume of the work of bell makers found within the county being covered and noted the churches with particular bells by the maker concerned, or considered them to be of general distribution within the county. They gave also, for makers resident in the county being covered, an account of the makers and their foundries, which later work has yet to render incomplete.

Given the completeness of North's summary of the background to the only known Bedfordshire bellmakers of the eighteenth or any other century, this note will give only a brief summary of the two bell founders at Wootton in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The earlier man was Thomas Russell whose bells date from 1715 to his death in 1743. One bell, at Arlesey, was cast by a Henry Russell of Wootton in 1714, and this man may possibly have been his father, to whom he had been apprenticed. Thomas Russell was also a clockmaker: a single hand clock by him is among those in the collection of Bedford Museum. Late in life, Thomas Russell went into partnership with his sons, Thomas Russell of Biddenham and William Russell of Wootton,<sup>4</sup> but excepting two bells at Bromham cast by Thomas Russell senior and his son, William Russell, in 1739 the agreement was limited to clockmaking. Thomas Russell, junior is recorded in 1747 and William Russell remained a clockmaker at Wootton until his death in 1770.<sup>5</sup>

By that year, another clockmaker, William Emerton, had set up in business in Wootton. Described as a clockmaker at his marriage in 1766, he cast his first bell in 1768 and between then and his death in 1790 he continued to be a bell founder, though clockmaking was his main means of livelihood.<sup>6</sup> A rather finely engraved dial and the accompanying mechanism by him is also in Bed-

ford Museum.

For distributional studies, the present location of clocks by such men is not an accurate guide to the area which they served. However, both men cast church bells, and using the nineteenth century monographs it is possible to present maps of the distribution of their products, and to gauge the extent of the area within which their clocks originally may have been sold.

Russell, the earlier man, was active for twenty-eight years, during which he cast no fewer than 51 bells, almost two each year. Two complete peals were cast by him: at Biggleswade four bells were cast in 1721 and in the Northamptonshire church of Walgrave, three bells of the complete peal made by Russell in 1723 had survived in 1878. Another bell which had gone when Thomas North made his enquiries, published in 1883, was the tenor bell cast at Eversholt by Russell in 1727. By that year, when he had been established in the craft for over a decade, Russell had cast bells in each of the four counties outside Bedfordshire where his work is known. The extensive Northamptonshire connection began in 1719 at Rothersthorpe and continued for the remainder of his working life. In 1720, he cast bells in three parishes: Crick, Little Houghton and Staverton. In 1733, bells by him were cast at Killingsbury and at Holy Sepulchre, Northampton, where another was made in 1739. In the last year of his life, 1743, a particularly active one, Russell cast at Flore. Other Northamptonshire bells by Russell are at Harpole, two, one of 1725 and the other undated; at Brafield-on-the-Green, of 1732; at Roade, of 1721; and at Whiston, made in 1729.

The Northamptonshire bells cover his entire working life, and whilst in number those in Huntingdonshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire are much fewer: in total only nine, including that in Eaton Socon parish church, their date range spans the last twenty-five years of his working life. Two are early: at Newton Blossomville, Bucks., in 1719 and Great Paxton, Hunts., in 1721. Others followed in 1726 at Ickleford and in 1731 at Pilton, both in Herts., and in 1733 and 1735, respectively at Olney and Tyringham, both in Bucks. His other work in Huntingdonshire began with a bell of 1733 at Keyston and there are bells of 1740 at Eaton Socon and the following year at Brampton. Both in Huntingdonshire and in Buckinghamshire there was direct competition from other founders. At Eaton Socon, another bell was also cast in 1740 but this was made by Joseph Eayre of St Neots: a

foundry established first as a branch of the foundry of Thomas Eayre of Kettering.<sup>7</sup> In the lifetime of William Emerton, it continued under Robert Taylor, who cast a bell at Cockayne Hatley in 1786. The Buckinghamshire foundry was one at Drayton Parslow, active under Edward Hall between 1726 and 1754.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the extensive Northamptonshire connection, where one-third of his output is recorded, Thomas Russell was a Bedfordshire man and just about half his work is within the county. Excepting the southern parishes and those of the north-west there are few areas without his work.

In the north of the county, some of his earliest bells are found: those of 1716 at Pertenhall, of 1719 at Melchbourne and of 1721 at Renhold. Two of his bells are in Sandy church, of 1723 and 1733, and there is one of the latter year at St Peter's Church, Bedford. Late pieces are the two bells he cast with his son, William, at Bromham in 1739 and that at Blunham of 1741, for which he was paid £12 3s 9d. Apart from the Arlesey bell of 1714 which bears an inscription saying it was cast by Henry Russell of Wootton, but which it has been surmised Thomas Russell may have been partly responsible, the products in east Bedfordshire are few, with the exception of the peal of four at Biggleswade. There is a bell of 1725 at Cockayne Hatley and another of 1740 at Stotfold. There are also scattered instances of his work in the west and the centre of the county. The earliest bells to have an inscription testifying to Thomas Russell's workmanship are two of 1715 at Apsley Guise and Harlington. The last are a whole series of 1743: two at Westoning, one at Barton and in north Bedfordshire one at Thurlleigh. Between these in the centre of the county are bells by Russell at Eversholt of 1727, at Maulden of 1738 and at Wootton itself of 1736.

William Emerton, his successor a generation later, also cast a bell for his village church, in 1779. He was by then established a decade, but never on so large a scale as his predecessor. He cast in all Twenty-seven bells: just over one per annum in his working life of twenty-two years, 1768-1790. However, there is a gap of some years between the first bell, at Amphill in 1768, and the next three, all cast in 1774. Likewise no bells were cast in 1777, 1778, 1781, 1784, 1785, 1788 and 1790. Not merely is his output much less than that of his predecessor, barely half as many, but its geographical range is more restricted. Outside of Bedfordshire there are only three bells: at

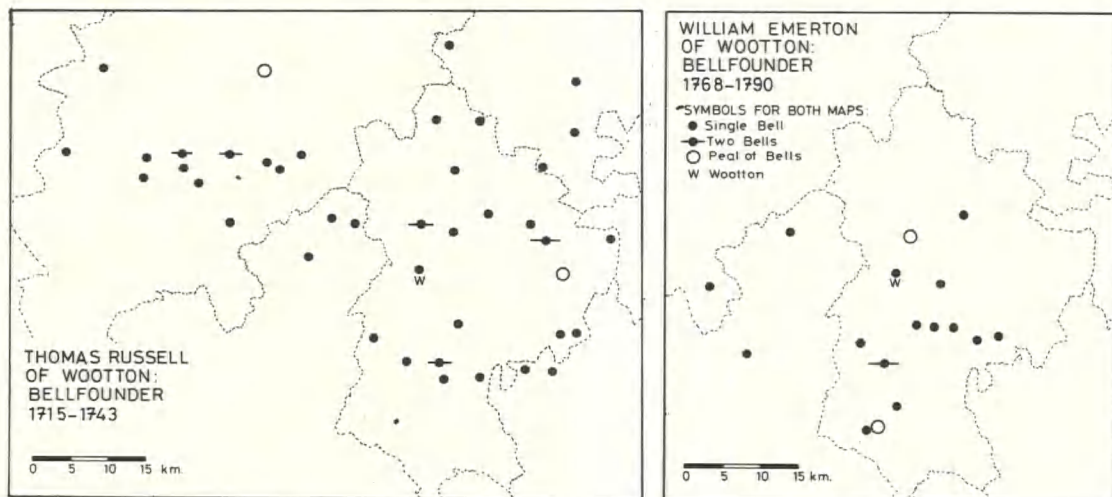


Fig 1 Distribution of bells by the Wootton foundry in the Eighteenth Century. Based on the lists of church bells in the volumes by Thomas North for Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire, of G.A. Cocks for Buckinghamshire, and T.N.M. Owen for Huntingdonshire. County boundaries shown by broken line are those of 1973.

Potterspury, Northants., in 1774, and in two Buckinghamshire villages, Weston Underwood and Whaddon, in 1779 and 1780 respectively. His Bedfordshire range is also more restricted. Apart from the peal of six at Biddenham in 1787, there is a single bell at Renhold, of 1775, from parishes north of Wootton. East Bedfordshire is not represented, but in the south-west of the county, Emerton's products are found at Chalgrave and at Stanbridge, each a single bell of 1775, and at neighbouring Tilsworth, where he cast a peal of five in 1776. The main weight of his products is a belt across the middle of the county. Here Emerton's bells are found in seven parishes. Single examples are known from Meppershall of 1774, from Upper Gravenhurst of 1772, from Clophill of 1774, from Maulden of 1780, from Ampthill of 1768 and from Husbourne Crawley of 1779. Emerton cast two bells at Eversholt, in 1786 and his last bell in 1789. Outside this line there are the bells at Wilhampstead of 1783 and that at Wootton of 1779.

The two men at the Wootton foundry cast less than a hundred bells in two working lives spanning three-quarters of the eighteenth century but with a central gap of twenty-five years. There can be reasonable certainty that the lists made in the nineteenth century are complete and that all the bells either man made have been located. Both distributions are very restricted: neither is found in Cambridgeshire,<sup>9</sup> and while Russell built up a

fair trade in Northamptonshire his successor did not.

The fact that the distributions are restricted, but because church bells are fairly immobile objects, which once hung are unlikely except for being cracked to be removed, they reflect the original distribution of the objects, these maps do permit so further reflections on the general nature of the distribution of material remains to be made. These comments apply not merely to a late object such as eighteenth century church bells but have a wider temporal significance. Indeed, because the church bells belong to a period when documents are plentiful and because they are of themselves dated, with inscriptions giving the maker's name and the date of manufacture, they have a wider background available than would be the case with an older object. Church bells in Bedfordshire in the eighteenth century were not only cast by the two men at Wootton. The note has cited makers from St Neots and Kettering and the county has also examples of work by men from Leicester and London: the bells of the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Luton, were recast by Pack and Chapman of London in 1775. In a monetary economy, competition is to be expected and this is obviously a restricting factor on the distribution of an object. If the other enterprises were more established and more highly organised this would limit severely the possibilities of expansion by the local man. To study this in depth

would not be difficult: all the counties of the east Midlands have been covered by Thomas North and his contemporaries.

If one limiting factor is imposed by the nature of the economy, several are imposed by the nature of the object, a factor upon which archaeologists should reflect. The church bell is an artefact, and a very large one at that. Their production requires a considerable amount of organisation: either in a local workshop, in this case at Wootton, or at the site of use, the church requiring the bell or bells. Both casting on site and casting away from site by the eighteenth century were almost certainly practised, as in gunfounding, with probably the use of a central workshop more usual than the churchyard, at least for new bells. Against this must be weighed the reuse of old bells, a common practice, and here there may have been greater reliance on the temporary workshop.

Whichever location of manufacturing was employed, the fact remains that in total the numbers of these objects known to have been made by one man is very few. And even given that both men were also, and in one case certainly primarily, clockmakers, so this was not the sole means of livelihood, there remains some disquieting feelings from looking at the distribution maps.

Their very smallness in total numbers. Students of classical bronzes for example might ponder how many statues should be attributed to any one man with a working life of just over a quarter of a century. Both men were also clockmakers, and though no count has been made of this side of their business activities, and perhaps by the nature of the objects none can easily be made, one would reveal the extent of their activities. Because of their very ordinariness, the numbers of clocks — and watches also — attributable to either man would not contain spurious examples, though such a collection is unlikely to be complete. If perhaps, Russell made about as many clocks as he cast bells: given the range of competition within that trade and the potential number of customers at the time, this may not be an inaccurate assumption, there might be some interesting comparisons to be made with earlier periods. The man working alone, or with only minimal assistance in his workshop cannot be thought to have made that many individual pieces. Students of the jewellery of earlier ages, when products were individual rather than mass-produced, may have much to learn from a consideration of the

totality of the products of a village clockmaker. One does wonder how many brooches were made by any of the recognised Anglo-Saxon artificers. In this context it might be useful to examine the records of assaying to discover the volume of products of individual silversmiths.

In the pre-industrial world, products, whether Anglo-Saxon brooches or eighteenth century clocks, whether Roman statues or eighteenth century bells, were individually made. The numbers made by the single worker are likely to be small. On occasions they will be very restricted in their locations. The immobile church bell may also be indicative of one aspect of the migratory world of the eighteenth century. The world before the Industrial Revolution was not static, demography has taught historians that, but it was restricted. The maps do show the limit of one, very specialised but nonetheless necessary, craftsman's influence, the restricted and localised spectrum within which he worked. One man acquired a trade in two counties: his successor had to be content with one. Neither was a man who travelled the world, and their products, few in number, are found in few places.<sup>10</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 T. North, *The Church Bells of Leicestershire*, 1876; T. North, *The Church Bells of Northamptonshire*, 1878; T. North, *The Church Bells of Rutland*, 1880; T. North, *The Church Bells of the County of Lincoln*, 1882; T. North, *The Church Bells of Bedfordshire*, 1883; T. North, *The Church Bells of Hertfordshire*, 1886; see also G.A. Cocks, *The Church Bells of Buckinghamshire*, 1897; and T.N.M. Owen, *The Church Bells of Huntingdonshire*, 1899 for counties not otherwise cited. The maps, fig 1, have been drawn from the lists in North's volumes and those of Owen and Cocks.
- 2 J.J. Raven, *The Church Bells of Cambridgeshire*, 1881.
- 3 North, 1883, 37-39; an earlier account is North, 1878, 108-110.
- 4 Beds. C.R.O. documents AD 2421-2; also will of Thomas Russell, senior, ABP/W 1744-5/44.
- 5 Wootton Parish Register; administration Beds. C. R.O. ABP/A 1771/33.
- 6 Wootton Parish Register; administration Beds. C. R.O. ABP/A 1790/9.
- 7 North, 1878, 47-51 and 107; Owen, 1899, 42-48.
- 8 Cocks, 1897, 220-239, for an account of this foundry, active 1636-1756; it was formerly managed by the Chandler family.
- 9 Neither man is mentioned in Raven, 1881.
- 10 Paper completed 25 May 1975; it represents ideas first considered because of a W.E.A. course given at Wootton in 1972 and checking of North's volumes in that year and in 1975.

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