The Bells of the Priory Church of St. Andrew, Hexham

by

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The Entire Article

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XX.—THE BELLS OF THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST. ANDREW, HEXHAM.

By J. P. Gibson.

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Looking back through the history of Hexham in Saxon times, we can find no record that Wilfrid, who built the cathedral church of which he was the first bishop about A.D. 674, placed any bells in it.

Probably Acca, the fifth bishop, who had accompanied Wilfrid as his chaplain in one of his journeys to Rome, may have furnished it with a bell or bells, as we are told that "he finished and decorated the church begun by St. Wilfrid," and that "vases, lamps, and other things which belong to the house of God were added by him."

This church, which declined in importance after the termination of its bishopric, was harried and wrecked by the Danes in 875, and again in 995. It remained in a ruinous state until the latter part of the eleventh century, when a partial restoration took place under Eilaf the priest.

Thomas the Second, Archbishop of York, made it into a priory of Canons of St. Augustine in 1113.

Richard, the third Prior of this order, who was formally installed in 1142, in his history of this church, does not make any mention of bells.

There is no definite record of the time when the building of the present Abbey Church dedicated to St. Andrew was commenced, but the style of the earliest portion of it seems to point to the last quarter of the twelfth century. It was erected on the spot where the cathedral church built by Wilfrid had stood, and his crypt still remains under the site of the nave.

From the great massiveness and strength of the tower it seems evident that it was intended to be used as a belfry, and it was probably furnished with bells on its completion about 1240.

If it had bells, the Scotch, in their invasion in 1296, must have taken account of them, as bell metal was of great value in those days.

The town and the abbey continued to be pillaged at intervals until 1346, when King David, after plundering the church, marched southward and was defeated and taken prisoner at the battle of Neville's Cross.

In 1369, a *levée en masse* was made in the regality of Hexhamshire of the whole of the male population between the ages of sixteen and sixty, by the command of Edward the Third, to meet a threatened Scottish incursion.

Subsequent invasions do not seem to have much damaged the monastery, although the Scottish raids continued until the sixteenth century.

Through all this troublous period the abbey bells would often ring out upon the vale their wild notes of alarm, calling to arms the fighting men, and bringing within the precinct walls of the abbey and within the Peace of the Sanctuary the women and children, to find there such feeble defence against the murderous Scot as the harassed church was able to afford them.

In documents relating to the Priory of Hexham, the first mention of bells occurs in a decree of excommunication issued against the canons by Archbishop Greenfield, who had appointed a Yorkshireman as prior instead of allowing the canons as usual to elect a prior from their own body. This had roused the ire of the canons, and they refused to comply with the mandate of the Archbishop. On the 2nd day of August, 1311, they were excommunicated.

In January of the following year a compromise was effected, the sturdy northern monks practically carrying their point, and no archbishop ever afterwards attempted to control their right of election.

In the decree of excommunication the phrase *pulsatis campanis* (the bells being rung) may be only the usual formula, but it certainly goes to prove the existence of the bells.

Again in 1467 from Archbishop Neville we have an edict of excommunication against a marauding party, who had burned the village of Acomb, about a mile and a half from Hexham. In this village there was property belonging both to the Archbishop and to the cathedral of York.

The edict contains this phrase, *Campanis pulsatis, candelis accensis et extinctis, ac in eorum vituperium in terram projectis cruceque in manibus reverenter erecta.* (Bells being rung, candles lighted and extinguished, and in reproach of them being trodden under foot upon the ground and the cross being raised reverently in the hands.)

As neither the names nor the persons of the offenders were known, this excommunication would not prove very efficacious.

In 1475 an account of the election of William of Bywell to the Priorate records that after the chanting of the Te Deum, the bells were solemnly rung.

At the dissolution of the monasteries throughout England, when the commissioners appointed by Henry VIII. arrived at Hexham on the 28th of September, 1536, the bells rang in the first act of the rebellion, called the Pilgrimage of Grace, which spread like wildfire through the Northern counties, and was not suppressed until the year following, when it was stamped out in blood by the Duke of Norfolk, who, acting on the instructions received from the King, caused "to be tied up without further delay all the monks and canons caught in open rebellion."

This "tying up" was by the neck, and Hexham's last prior finished his days at Tyburn, although tradition reports he was hanged at the gate of his own monastery.

On the entry of the Northumbrian Commissioners into the town (the Southerners had prudently remained at Corbridge), they found an armed assembly, headed by some of the canons, ready to meet them.

The old chronicle says "the common bell of the town was rongen, and straight after the sound of it, the Grete bell of the monastery was likewise ronge."

The common bell of the town may have been the bell of St. Mary's Church, which at that time was in existence, and which is supposed to have had no tower, but merely a bell gable. The Grete bell was the bell named Mary, which Wallis says was also called the Fray bell, and was never rung alone except on the occasion of a fire or the approach of an enemy. It is said to have weighed seventy hundredweights, which is also the weight of the present great bell of St. Dunstan of Canterbury.

Wright, in his History of Hexham, written in 1823, states that the inscriptions of the six old bells were in Lombardic capitals and as follows:—

1.—+AD PRIMOS CANTUS PUISAT NOS REX GLORIOSUS.

"Puisat" is here evidently a mistake, the word intended being "Pulsat."

2.—+ET CANTARE TRA-I FACIET NOS VOX——

The incompleteness of this inscription leaves an opening for ingenious conjecture,

3.—+EST NOBIS DIGNA KATERINE VOX BENIGNA.

4.—+OMNIBUS IN ANNIS EST VOX DEO ORATA IOHANNIS. A.D. MCCCCIIII.

5.—+ANDREA MI CARE IOHANNI CONSOCIARE. A.D. MCCCCIIII.

6.—+EST MEA VOX ORATA DUM SIM MARIA VOCATA. A.D. MCCCCIIII.

These inscriptions, giving us the date of 1404, show us that at least three of the bells had been made during the Priorate of John of Hexham, who was appointed about ten years before by Archbishop Waldby, he, after enquiry, having displaced Prior Marton, who had become old and unfit for work, and had suffered the priory to fall into a state of decay.

Prior John appears to have been a man of energy, and to have had much force of character, and we find that five years after the hanging of these bells he went out in rebellion against Henry IV., along with the Earl of Northumberland and his Scottish allies, and came near to being hanged himself, having had to flee from the monastery to save his life. He and his convent had, however, the good fortune to receive a free pardon from the King shortly afterwards.

Usually the great or tenor bell is named after the patron saint of the church in which it is hung. In this case it was the second bell in size which was named after St. Andrew.

The third bell, John, might be named after the prior himself. Wright says the other three were probably more ancient.

These six bells are mentioned by Mr. William Bell, of High Shield, near Hexham, in a letter written by him to the editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and published in 1755. He says:—"Six bells,

which were broken and in great disorder about sixteen years ago, we had re-cast into eight, and they are now, without controversy, as fine a ring as any in England of their weight. They were made and hung by your London artists."

At this time change ringing had been introduced and had become a fashionable pastime, so fashionable indeed that in many of the belfries rules were posted up imposing fines on any one who should ring the bells in spurs or who should bring a whip into the belfry.

The peal of eight bells was cast in 1742 by Thomas Lester, of London, who had at that time the celebrated foundry now carried on by the firm of Messrs. Mears & Stainbank. Thomas Lester had been foreman to Richard Phelps, under whose management the foundry had very much increased in importance. He had been taken into partnership, and at the death of Richard Phelps in 1738 he bequeathed to him by will the whole plant of materials and implements on the premises. In 1743, a year after casting the Hexham bells, Thomas Lester cast two bells for Westminster Abbey, which are still in existence.

Of Thomas Lester's peal only two bells—the treble and the tenor —remain intact, the other six having been broken and re-cast. The inscriptions on the present bells fairly show their history.

Treble.—1742. T. LESTER.

2nd.—THOMAS MEARS OF LONDON FOUNDER 1833.

3rd.—THOMAS LESTER. 1742.
ALFREDUS S. LAWSON. REFECIT A.D. 1884.

4th has no inscription, but the date 1775 is roughly chiselled on the upper part of the bell, where an inscription has apparently been erased.

5th.—THOMAS LESTER OF LONDON MADE US ALL & TOBIAS BENTON HANGED US ALL.
ALFREDUS S. LAWSON ME ET TERTIUM EX MEIS SOCIIS REFECIT A.D. 1884.

6th.—REVD W. FLEMING M.A. MINISTER
REVD ROBT. CLARKE LECTURER
RALPH LONSTAFF MATTHW LEE EDWD SWINBURN
MATTHW COULSON CHURCHWARDENS.
THOS. MEARS OF LONDON FECIT 1801.

7th.—1742. THOMAS LESTER MADE ME
ALFREDUS S. LAWSON ME REFECIT. 1884.

On Lester's bell, re-cast 1884, after the inscription there was scratched, "AND GAVE TOWARDS WOODWORK AND IRONWORK £10."

Tenor.—WALTER BLACKETT. ESQ. LORD
REVD MR WM GRAHAM MINISTER
WM VAZIE, JOHN JOHNSON, THOS LEE & ROBT. ROBSON, CHURCHWARDENS. 1742. THOMAS LESTER OF LONDON MADE US ALL.

Sir Walter Blackett, whose name occurs on the tenor bell, was nephew of the Lord of the Manor, at whose marriage rejoicings the great bell Mary was broken. The diameters of the bells are :—

Treble	...	...	...	...	...	28½	inches.
2nd	...	...	...	...	...	30½	„
3rd	...	...	...	...	...	32	„
4th	...	...	...	...	...	34½	„
5th	...	...	...	...	...	36	„
6th	...	...	...	...	...	40	„
7th	...	...	...	...	...	43	„
Tenor	...	...	...	...	...	48	„

The treble bell has been very much chiselled on the edge in tuning, and is still scarcely in harmony with the rest of the peal.

The 2nd, 4th, and 6th, have been chiselled inside on the sound-bow. The 3rd, 5th, and 7th, have been tuned by turning, the 5th, inside on the sound-bow, and the 3rd and 7th on the rim. The tenor bell has been slightly tuned by chiselling inside on the sound-bow, and a small piece of the central part of the cannons has been broken away, fortunately without injuring the tone of the bell. Lester's 7th bell, re-cast in 1884, was a maiden bell, never having been tuned.

The note of the tenor bell is E flat, and its weight is about 21 hundredweight.

Tobias Benton, who hanged Lester's peal, used the oak beams of the old bell cage in constructing the new one. That built by him has a gangway about six feet wide around it, rendering access to the bells very easy.

Two of the beams in the base of this, have marks showing where the bushes for the old bell gudgeons have been. These point out the fact that two of the old bell pits occupied the whole width of the tower.

On the east side of the cage is a peculiar old oak windlass, about 7 feet long, of octagonal shape, having holes for the insertion of hand-spikes. This appears to have been used in the moving of the bells.

There is no Sanctus bell, nor any record of the ringing of the Curfew bell.

Formerly a bell was rung every week day morning at half-past five o'clock, to awaken the people who began work at six o'clock, and it was also rung at six o'clock in the evening as a signal for them to finish their day's work. The shortening of workmen's hours caused this old custom to be discontinued some years ago.

On two occasions sets of 5,040 changes have been rung on these bells, once in 1848, and again in 1884, after the re-hanging of the three bells which were then re-cast.

The bells are now rung on Sundays for fifteen minutes at ten a.m. and six p.m., and then the 5th bell is chimed for the quarter hours immediately preceding the church services. This is done by the Hexham Abbey Guild of Ringers, Mr. Robert Robson, the clerk, taking the tenor bell.

The clock put into the church this year by Messrs. Potts and Son, of Leeds, to replace the first clock, which was set up in 1822 by Messrs. Handley and Moore, of London, chimes the quarter hours on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 7th, and strikes the hours on the tenor bell. The chimes are those known as the Cambridge chimes.

The first clock had only chimes for three instead of four quarter hours, so that when they commenced correctly at mid-day, they got curiously inverted between one and three o'clock, and only resumed their normal order after three, six, and nine o'clock, for an hour each time.

This paper is incomplete, as the books containing the accounts of the churchwardens before 1810 are missing, but a strict search is now being made for them, and it is to be hoped that they have not been destroyed, as they doubtless contain much valuable information respecting the church and the bells.

In the book at present accessible, we find the following payments to the bellringers and sexton :—

1810. Rejoicings. For the defeat of the French in Portugal, £1 0s. 0d.

This was undoubtedly for the battle of Busaco, where Wellington gained one of his first successes against Napoleon's Generals.

From 1813 to 1815 there are seven days of rejoicings for victories not specified. There are payments of 6s. for tolling the Great Bell at the death of King George IV., and King William IV., and £1 for ringing muffled peals on the day of King William the IV.'s interment. In 1831, the ringers received £1 for ringing on Royal Oak Day. After that date the special days are not given, being classed generally under the head of holidays, and as this is the year of the Queen's Jubilee, we may fitly close our record with the payment of £2 to the ringers on the day of the Queen's Coronation fifty years ago.

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