



'The Ringing World' was founded in the year 1911 by John Sparkes Goldsmith, who remained its proprietor and editor until his death in 1942.

No. 2560 Vol. LVI

FRIDAY, MAY 13, 1960

Registered at the G.P.O. for transmission as a newspaper.

8d.

## BRISTOL CATHEDRAL THE BELLS OF THE CENTRAL TOWER

UNTIL recently, Bristol Cathedral had been listed as our only cathedral church with less than five bells, having four 'unringable' bells in its central tower. This position has happily been rectified by the installation of the ring of eight in the north-west tower. The history and details of the new ring have already been published, and this has led to a study of the old bells, revealing a story much more interesting and reaching much further into the past than that of their successors.

Unfortunately, the Cathedral records yield little information on the bells, but some references have been obtained from other sources. One of the earliest references appears in the settlement of the accounts of one Richard Poulet, Esq., who had been 'generall receiver . . . concerning all leads and belle metall' at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry VIII in 1539. It reads thus: 'of the late monasterie of Seincte Augustyns by Brystowe in the Countie of glouc. x belles.' However, it seems that the Receiver allowed the Cathedral to retain her ten bells for a time, as we read later: 'The belles of the late monasterie of Augustyns in brystowe in the countie of glouc. remayning in the steeple of the church ther beinge a cathedrall church being in nombre x amounting in weighte to x<sup>m</sup> vij<sup>l</sup>ib.'

Presumably the Cathedral kept these bells until the time of Edward VI, as a receiver's account, dated May 27th, 1553, states that the Lord Mayor and Crown Commissioners allowed 'the Deane and chappitor of the Cathedrall church of Bristol' to keep and sign for 'One great belle for the clocke and iij other belles.'

Later 16th century accounts show that these bells were in frequent use, e.g., in 1581—

'To Sadler for keeping the clock . . . . .2-6  
'To him for rynging to sermons . . . . .1-6.'

and later in 1591—

'Pd to the ringers on the Queene's daye 5  
of them at xx<sup>d</sup> a pece . . . . .8-4.'

The next recorded change is in 1670, when the present tenor was cast, or recast, by Roger Purdue (the Bristol bell founders), probably to replace the 'great belle for the clocke,' about which there is no further evidence.

In 1789 the historian William Barrett records that there were five bells in the tower, although his account of their origin is rather inaccurate, as is his explanation of the absence of the five confiscated bells: ' . . . here were designed to be five more as appears by five more vacant frames, out of which there is a tradition the bells were stolen, but others say they were sold to the church of Redcliff.' These five bells remained in the tower until 1802, when one of them was said to be cracked and useless and was sold by the Dean as scrap. In an invoice dated July 17th, 1802, we read: 'for an old cracked bell wt 11-0-17 @ 10 per lb 52-0-10.'

The other bells were undoubtedly rung after this date, but only on half wheels: only the present tenor was ever hung for full circle ringing, and then only in a crude manner compared with present day standards. It is recorded that in 1859 a Christmas drunk got into the tower and tried to raise the tenor bell, but he had little success as the rope became entangled in the wheel. Could this have been our friend Arney, whose exploits were published in a recent 'Ringing World' and who recorded a similar incident in the Cathedral?

A recent study of the belfry has revealed several interesting features. The bell frame itself is a massive structure (21ft. x 26ft.) of ancient design, and almost certainly dates back to pre-Reformation times. It appears to stand on the floor, supported by massive beams beneath, having no lateral support whatsoever. One visualises that with a ring of eight or more bells swinging, the frame might 'walk' around the floor. The structure is composed of five separate wooden bays running east-west, and two long bays running north-south. The frame is about 7ft. high, and of the first five bays, three are 3ft. 10in. in width, one 4ft. 5in., and the other, containing the Purdue tenor, is 4ft. 8in. wide. The two long bays measure 2ft. 11in. and 3ft. 4in. respectively, and

each is long enough to accommodate two lighter bells, as indeed the smaller does at the present time.

A comparison of the sizes of the remaining bells, with the weight of 10,000lb. or about 90 cwt., suggests that in 1539 there was a ring of eight bells with two small bells, one possibly a Sanctus. These two could have been hung in the ninth bay, but at no time could there have been ten bays as Barrett suggests. Eight bells would be an unusually large number for a church in 1539; five was the usual maximum; but St. Augustine's was one of the great Abbeys of that time.

The history of the bells remaining in the tower is reasonably well known. The two smallest bells were cast in about 1500 by Abbot John Nulande (1481-1515). This appears from the embossed initials (I.N.) on the treble's side; also on this bell appears Nulande's 'rebus'—a bleeding heart pierced by three nails.

Treble (E flat).—Diameter 28½in., height 25in. (first of clock quarters). Sancte: Clement: ora: pro: nobis.

Second (D).—Diameter 31½in., height 28in.

+ Sea: Margareta: ora: pro: nobis.

It is believed that the bell sold in 1802 was a sister bell to these two as (according to Barrett) it bore the inscription 'Sancta Catharina ora pro nobis.'

The third is a tall, straight-sided bell with a rounded crown and thick lip. It has unusually well-spaced lettering and a peculiar Lombardic cross; it is said to date from about 1300 and to be the oldest inscribed bell in the county.

Third (C).—Diameter 35½in., height 33in. (second of clock quarters).

+ CLARA: VOCOR: ET: CLARIOR: ERO.

The tenor was cast with canons but has since lost them. This would seem to suggest a subsequent rehanging, of which there is no record. The bell is hung on a large wooden headstock and is the only one of the four bells without canons.

Tenor (E).—Diameter 49in., weight 20 cwt. (hour bell).

+ ECCLESIA + CATHEDRALIS + BRISTOLL + DOMUM + DOMINI + 1670 + + RP  
+ + CONGREGATE + CETUM + SOLENNEM + IN + DOMUM + DOMINI + +  
1670 + + RP +.

Our examination of the bells has raised more questions than it has answered. How and when were the bells last rung? Each bell, except the third, still has its clapper, hung by the 'hook and eye' method, with a peculiar wooden sheath near the top. Only one of the three older bells now has a wheel (a ¼ wheel), but the tenor has a complete wheel and a pulley block in the floor. This was obviously tolled in the 1850's, but it would have been impossible to ring it a full circle because of the short metal stay and peg to prevent it turning over. It has recently been fixed to avoid damage to the electric chiming apparatus. Before the war the three old bells were 'clocked' by the verges seated in the lofty ringing chamber below. For at least the last century the tenor would have been 'unringable' as it is badly cracked.

Lying in one of the vacant bays is a huge ¼ wheel, 10ft. 3in. in diameter. There is no evidence to show that this wheel was ever used, but it has been suggested that it may be the wheel from the 'great belle for the clocke.'

The central hole through which the bells are drawn up is 4ft. 4in. in diameter, and the beam of one of the 3ft. 10in. bays has been slightly cut away to accommodate this. Thus it appears that the 'great belle' could not have been much larger than the Purdue tenor.

On the inside of the third bell faint chalk marks have been found. These have been deciphered as 'R. (P?) Taylor 1809' (59?) and 'Feb 28/82.' The first agrees with the founders' family tree, but Taylors have no record of anyone being sent to Bristol Cathedral in any of these years.

There is still much work to be done on the history of these old bells, and many blanks need to be filled in. Because of the lack of adequate records much can only be theory, and we would welcome any opinion from other students of bell history. It is hoped that the bells will be open for inspection by anyone interested during the Bristol Ringing Festival on May 14th.

(Thanks are due to C. Godman and R. Gilbert, of the sixth form, Bristol Cathedral School, and to Frank Carter and other colleagues on the staff, by whom research for this article was largely carried out; also to John Taylor and Co. for information.)

P. J. B.