The Church Bells of Somerset.

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IN 1875, now forty-five years ago, the Rev. Canon H. T. Ellacombe of Clyst St. Mary, Devonshire, published a monograph on the Church Bells of Somerset, in continuation of his previous work on those of Devonshire. After a brief introduction in which something was said of the inscriptions on the mediaeval bells, and somewhat less of their founders, a list was given of the inscriptions on all (or rather, nearly all) the bells of the Somerset churches, ancient and modern. The indefatigable author had then reached the ripe age of eighty, and the book is a monument of an old man's industry. But for this very reason he was necessarily dependent upon the assistance of correspondents and helpers for all his information, and although he personally visited every tower but one in Devon (previously to 1867), it is probable that he never actually saw a single bell in Somerset. He tells us in fact, in his preface, how his information was all obtained by diligent posting of letters to incumbents, churchwardens, and even parish clerks.

The result of this, however, was that his descriptions of the bells were by no means either as full or as accurate as could have been wished. Many of his correspondents were doubtless inexperienced in reading inscriptions, especially in old lettering, and they were liable to miss ornaments or marks in unusual positions. Thus at Hornblotton and at Lovington mediaeval bells are passed over in silence ;[1] at other places inscriptions

1. On the other hand at Dinder, Templecombe, and Trent, inscriptions are given which it is certain were never on any bells in the respective towers !

are given in such a way that they have obviously been misunderstood by the reader ; and most of the bells by one founder are given without the dates, because of his habit of placing the date on the waist of the bell, where it was easily missed. There are moreover numerous misprints in the text, some obvious, others only discovered by subsequent research, which I fear can only be laid at the door of the revered author himself. The references, for instance, to the figures on the plates, are as often wrong as right !

Further, in the course of over forty years there have been many changes in the towers, due to the re-casting and enlargement of rings or to the renewing of single bells. It may however be noted in passing, as a matter for thankfulness, that not many of the interesting mediaeval bells have perished during the past half-century : less than twenty in all, out of some 260.

Lastly, the comparative study of the subject, and researches in such documents as wills or churchwardens' accounts, have largely advanced our knowledge during the last fifty years ; more names of founders are known, and more information has been collected which enables us to identify bells which do not bear their founder's names. In the days when Ellacombe wrote, little had been done in this direction, and it is therefore no dishonour to him that he should not have been able to identify the founders of the bells or discourse on their history.

But now that fifty years have elapsed since the publication of his work, it is clear that the time is ripe for a new edition. And in this respect an admirable precedent has been recently set us by the veteran author of the *Church Bells of Sussex*, Dr. A. D. Tyssen, whose book when first issued in 1864 was the first attempt of the kind for the bells of a county. He has fortunately been spared to produce a revised 'Jubilee' edition, in 1914, under the auspices of the County Archæological Society.

It was perhaps tacitly assumed that Ellacombe had said the last word on Somerset Bells, for until quite recently no further attempts had been made to throw light on them, with the exception of the Rev. G. de Y. Aldridge's paper in Vol. LX

of these *Proceedings*,[2] which was rather a general survey of the subject than an attempt to contribute new matter. The present writer had been collecting materials for some twenty years during occasional visits to the county, chiefly in the northern part of it, and he soon became aware not only that Ellacombe's descriptions called for drastic revision, but also that it was now possible to add greatly to their interest. The project of seriously tackling the matter was just assuming shape when the War put an end to it for the time being, but after the cessation of those distractions, the writer sought an early opportunity of enlisting the sympathies of the Archæological Society, with a view to putting the matter on a more hopeful basis.

The reception of his proposals has been even more kind and sympathetic than he could have hoped, and there is every prospect that at no distant date it may be possible to issue a separate publication with the generous aid of the Society, embodying the results of all recent researches. Unfortunately, Somerset is a large county, and the re-investigation which would be required of more than 2000 bells is beyond the powers of one individual, even with the leisure and other necessary qualifications available. It is therefore proposed to confine the scope of the work to a revision of the towers reported to contain interesting bells, and to a notification of all new bells added, so far as is obtainable. In addition, a full account will be given of the founders who have supplied bells to the county, in the form of an introductory essay, and this it is hoped will contain much interesting matter now published for the first time, and throw new light on several local foundries. The essay will be followed by a list of the parishes in alphabetical order where any corrections or additions to Ellacombe's work are required.

The writer has personally visited over one-fourth of the Somerset towers, and information has been obtained from some fifty more by the aid of local helpers, making a total of over 180 towers. These include nearly all the bells of special

2. *See* also an article in the *Victoria County Hist.*, II, 431, on the local bell foundries.

interest, or of which Ellacombe's account appeared to call for revision. There are also some 20 churches where the bells are difficult of access, and no description was given of them in Ellacombe's book. In some cases this has now been remedied, though a few still remain unknown. But it may fairly be stated that where no mention is made of a particular parish in the new list, the bells are either of no antiquarian interest or are correctly described by Ellacombe, and this must be my excuse for their omission.

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The county of Somerset is one of exceptional campanological interest, and its bells are, or should be, as famous as the towers which contain them. The great impetus given to tower-building about the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century, from which time the majority of the fine Somerset towers date, was doubtless also responsible for supplying larger rings of bells to many churches than they had hitherto possessed, and the local foundries, especially those of Bristol and Exeter, were for some years busily engaged in fulfilling their requirements. Hence there is an exceptionally large number of these mediaeval bells remaining to this day.

In the 490 ancient churches there are in all about 2300 bells, and of these no less than 240 are of pre-Reformation date, even if we exclude the work of Roger Semson, which is of a transitional character, although his activities began at least as early as Edward VI's reign. The percentage of mediaeval bells is thus just about 11 per cent., a very high one, and only surpassed by five other English counties ; of these five, only Norfolk and Suffolk exceed Somerset in the *total* number of ancient bells. There are also 45 bells which date from the period 1550–1590, which are of transitional character, often with lettering and ornaments of mediaeval type, and if these are added to the number of 'ancient' bells the percentage is of course considerably increased (nearly 13 per cent.).

In 1875 the number of mediaeval bells was about 260,[3] and it is with satisfaction that I have to note the disappearance

3. Ellacombe's estimate of 242 is too small, even if Semson's bells are excluded.

of only 18 since that date. They were at Backwell, Burrington, East Chinnock, Corfe, Great Elm (3), Kilve, Limington, Litton, Milton Clevedon, Norton-sub-Hamdon (destroyed by fire), Nunney, Pitcombe, Rimpton, Rodney Stoke, Ubley, and Wembdon. In most of these cases the old inscriptions have been reproduced in facsimile or otherwise.

Of the mediaeval bells, a large proportion came from the great foundry at Bristol, which flourished from before 1300 to about 1550. There are no less than 133, or more than half the total number, distributed over all parts of the county. From Exeter we have about 50, mostly, as might be expected, in the western districts. London supplied early bells (about 1300–1350) to Trent and Batheaston, and 13 more during the fifteenth century. From the important foundry at Gloucester there are only 2 bells, but Bristol of course here blocked the way. The Wokingham and Reading foundries supplied 7 bells in the fifteenth century, and the supposed Salisbury foundry, whose locality has not yet been proved, 11 or 12.

The remainder, some 30 in all, are of uncertain origin. A considerable number are of types common in Dorset, and may have been cast at Sherborne or Shaftesbury; we know that there was a foundry at the latter place about 1450. The bells in question are all found in South Somerset, and this makes a Dorset origin more probable. There are also 3 by one Thomas Hey, whose name occurs on a Dorset bell, and his foundry *may* have been in South Somerset. But otherwise there is no evidence of a foundry in the county before the Reformation.

It may also be worth while to call attention here to the earliest bell bearing a date,[4] the 4th bell at Bruton, dated 1528, and probably an example of monastic founding.

The 45 bells of 'Transitional' type include 25 by Roger Semson of Ash Priors, and some early examples of the work of the Purdue foundry at Closworth. I hope to be able to throw further light on the somewhat obscure history of this latter foundry, as also of those at Yetminster (Dorset) and Montacute, which have been ignored by previous writers.

4. Ellacombe omits to mention that the date is on the bell!

Apart from the Purdues, the majority of the seventeenth century bells in Somerset are the work of two very puzzling founders. Of the earlier one we know only the initials I. T., and we also have a hint that he may have worked at Yetminster; his bells are about equally divided between Somerset and Dorset. The later one, who certainly inherited his plant, is only known to us by name, viz., Robert Austen, and I have so far failed to discover his locality, but it must have been in the centre of the county. With the exception of one or two late examples in Dorset all his bells (about 50) are in Somerset, covering the ground from Keynsham to Dulverton, and from near Burnham to near Yeovil. It is clear therefore that the locality of his foundry was in the centre of Somerset. I have failed to find his name in the Bridgwater or Glastonbury registers, but I think those of Somerton may yield up the secret, or possibly those of Compton Dundon, which place is hinted at by an entry in the churchwardens' accounts of Tintinhull. He cast the fire-bell and others for Sherborne Abbey in 1652–53, but the accounts unfortunately do not mention his place of abode. I should be most grateful for any further light on the matter.

Somerset is remarkable for the number of local foundries it possessed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of which those of Closworth and Chew Stoke were the most famous. The art of bell-founding hardly died out before the middle of the nineteenth century (at Taunton); but now once more Bristol has asserted her supremacy, and the firm of Llewellins and James holds the same position that their predecessors did in the Middle Ages.

I cannot omit to take this opportunity of expressing my very sincere and hearty thanks to all who have assisted me in my task, and provided me with very pleasant memories of hospitality and services. In particular I wish to show my appreciation of the interest shown by the Council of the Archæological Society, and the efforts they have made to place the work on a satisfactory footing and to find voluntary workers and helpers.

It is an invidious task to single out those to whom my debt is greatest, but I cannot refrain from mentioning the names

of the Rev. Preb. Hamlet; Mr. J. Goodchild of Yeovil; the Rev. C. C. Parker of Corston; the Rev. J. D. D. Keilor of Buckland Dinham; Mr. Wallis Cash of Wincanton; and the Rev. H. C. Tritton of Curry Mallet; all of whom have visited and rubbed bells, and even incurred personal dangers in their pursuit.

The work is not yet completed, and there are still some 40 towers which call for investigation, as well as ten or twelve where the bells are inaccessible or apparently so. Living at a distance, I cannot easily command opportunities of visiting these places, and if full justice is to be done to the subject, I must still appeal to the goodwill and enthusiasm of local helpers. My only excuse will be that I trust they may find the pursuit as fascinating as it has always been to myself, and that interesting discoveries will be their sufficient reward.

Note.—It would be interesting to know what has happened to Ellacombe's collection of Somerset rubbings; they would be very valuable now-a-days. Those made for Devon and Gloucestershire are now in the British Museum (Add. MSS. 33202–33203), but there are only one or two from Somerset in the collection there. There is another valuable collection of rubbings in the possession of Mr. W. W. Gifford of Blackford, near Wincanton, to which the writer has unfortunately not been able to gain access.