

The Church Bells of Somerset: their History, Use, and Founders.

BY THE REV. G. DE Y. ALDRIDGE, B.A.,
*Rector of Kingweston, and sometime Master of the Bath and
Wells Diocesan Association of Change Ringers.*

THEIR HISTORY.

IN considering the history of Bells it is necessary at the outset to mark the distinction between the great bells in the tower,—the *Signa*, or *Campana* of medieval times,—and the smaller handbells,—the *Tintinnabula*,—which were superseded by the former. The smaller bells are of very much greater antiquity than the large bells, which are almost certainly of Christian origin.

The *Tintinnabula*, not lying within the scope of this enquiry, may be dismissed in a few words. They were used in ancient Rome to summon the citizens to the public baths and the business of the city. They have been found among the ruins of Egypt and Babylon, and in the burial-places of ancient princes of India, and were probably introduced into these isles by the first apostles of Christianity. It is very easy to see the convenience of these handbells to the early missionary; carried by a deacon and sounded to call the inhabitants to worship, and to mark off the hours of devotion. That they were so used we know, and also that they soon gained no little veneration from the members of the British Church. Many of them were credited with the power of working miracles, of

performing cures, and even with powers of locomotion. They were preserved and revered through the Middle Ages as relics of the early founders of Christianity, and many of them remain to this day.

As they are all more or less after the same pattern, it may suffice to describe one only, and that, one of the earliest and most famous,—the Bell of St. Patrick. This bell, the property of St. Patrick, who died A.D. 493, is of rectangular shape, measuring 9½ins. in height, 5ins. in length, and 4ins. in breadth. It is formed of hammered iron plates riveted together and bonded with brass solder. When struck by the clapper a dull and solemn tone is produced. This bell is mentioned as early as A.D. 552, and at the beginning of the XII Century a most costly and beautiful case was made for it, and a special keeper appointed. It was guarded by the same family for many succeeding generations, until at last the family died out. It is now preserved in Dublin.

As Christianity advanced and churches were built, and the art of bell-founding was discovered, the Tintinnabula gave place to weightier and more powerful bells, and were henceforth used only in the mass, and in the offices where a portable bell was required, and for domestic purposes.

The Great Bells appear to have come into use during the V and VI Centuries, and the earliest names for them,—“Nola,” and “Campana,”—are supposed to point to Nola in Campania as the place of their origin. They became fairly general throughout France during the VI and VII Centuries, and Bede tells us he heard them in Brittany about 680.

In the same year, 680, Benedict Abbot of Wearmouth imported bells for his abbey from Italy. Egelric Abbot of Croyland (died 984) caused a peal of bells to be made for his abbey, they were six in number and to each he gave a name. This is the first mention of a belfry and peal of bells in England. In the X Century Dunstan hung many bells in England, and Edward the Confessor in building Westminster

Abbey, 1050-60, did not neglect the bells. A monk of Westminster describing the Confessor's work some 200 years later tells us :—

“ In the centre rises a tower

“ And two at the Western Front

“ And fine and large bells he hangs there.”

About the same time Bishop Leofric, 1050, found seven bells in the Cathedral Church of Exeter and is said to have added six others, and a dozen smaller ones, probably for chiming.

In 1035 King Canute is said to have given two bells to Winchester Cathedral. In fact there seems no reasonable doubt that one bell at least was to be found in every church in England some time before the Norman Conquest. Indeed, judging from the great size and strength of the Norman towers, it seems probable that church bells had at that time reached their largest dimensions in this country.

For the first twenty years, at any rate, after the Conquest the church bells were kept in good order, for, by the king's command, the Curfew sounded every night at 8 p.m., and then all lights and fires had to be extinguished. By a constitution of Archbishop Winchelsey (1294-1313) in every parish the parishioners had to find at their own charge bells with ropes. And from that time until the Reformation we have ample accounts of the founding of many bells, some of them of very great size and weight.

In our own county of Somerset we may believe that from at least the XII Century and onwards church bells were numerous and good. Owing to the flourishing condition of the cloth trade in the XIV and XV Centuries, the county was as a whole exceedingly prosperous, and to that period belong a large number of our ancient and beautiful church towers. These towers were largely built by the munificence of private individuals, and it is not too much to believe that the same munificence placed in them bells of proportionate beauty and value. Indeed extracts from wills of the period show

the loving care of the churchman of the day for the bells which summoned him to his devotions during life, and called for the prayers of the faithful on his behalf when passing to his rest. The following are some extracts from *Medieval Wills* for which I am much indebted to the Rev. F. W. Weaver, of Milton Clevedon.

- 1406 for making anew the bells at Milverton 40s.
- 1408 to the beles of the Church of St. Michael without the gate Bath, Two marks.
- 1413 to the bells of Curry Rivel 12d.
- 1426 to the fabric of the belfry of the Church of Asshill 40s.
- 1457 to the repair of the great bell of the Church of Luccombe 40s.
- 1467 for the bells of the Cathedral Wells 100s.
- 1489 to the bells of the Parish Church of Keynsham 3s. 4d.
- 1494 to the reparation of the bells of the Church of Shepton Mallet 3s. 4d.
- 1503 to the Church of Wedmore 40s. to the making of a new bell.
- 1508 to the makyng of the great bell at Keynsham 10s.
- 1508 to the Church of Curry Rivel £7 6s. 8d. to buy a trebill bell.
- 1512 to the Church of Blagdon to make a new bell 6s. 8d.
- 1524 to the casting of a bell for the Church of Chard 6d.
- 1524 to the Church of Cossington to buy a tenor bell £20.
- 1525 to the bells of Shepton Mallet 6s. 8d.
- 1533 to the reparation of Kylve bells a sheep.
- 1533 to the bells of Bradford 8d.
- 1533 to the belbed of the Church of Corff near Taunton xiiid.
- 1540 to the bells of Keynsham my best gowne.

The above are a few extracts from Somerset wills, and many more might be quoted, but taking us over a period of 150 years of the Middle Ages they show us that the bells of Somerset were numerous, and that they were loved and cared for by the men of Somerset.

This brief sketch brings us down the ages to the time of the Reformation, and unfortunately the inventories of the commissioners of Henry VIII and Edward VI of church goods in Somerset exist now in only a very mutilated condition. But knowing the conservative spirit of the West of England towards the old form of religion, and judging from the large number of church bells left untouched in the time of Edward VI in the neighbouring county of Devon, and also taking into consideration the very fair proportion of pre-Reformation bells which remain in our towers to the present day, it seems probable that, except as regards those in monastic foundations, and chantries, the church bells of Somerset escaped in large measure the fury of the Puritan reform. The diminution in their numbers to-day is attributable to several causes which will be mentioned presently, but first it seems convenient to give some little description of the founding and use of these medieval church bells.

Medieval Bells were as a rule larger in size and fewer in number than our present day bells. Some of them indeed, if we are to trust contemporary records, were of immense size and weight. Prior Conrad gave to Canterbury five large bells, the first and second of which required 10 men, the third 11, the fourth 18, and the fifth 24 men to ring them. In 1342 four bells were hung in Ely Cathedral which weighed respectively 18, 21, 27, 37 cwt. In 1409 five new bells were hung in Canterbury Cathedral with an aggregate weight of 10 tons. In the reign of Edward III a bell tower was built for St. Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, with three great bells weighing about 8 tons, which were rung at coronations and on great state occasions. In the bell-tower of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds there were in 1538 four bells of the immense weight of 23, 50, 140, 180 cwt. respectively. A statement which is confirmed by the witness of John Major, who wrote in the reigns of Henry VII and VIII: "In the Abbey Church of St. Edmundsbury is reputed to be the

greatest bell in all England, altho in England there be a vast number of bells of the finest tone." It seems probable that these bells were not intended for ringing in peal, and were at first seldom so used. Indeed there are not many belfrys in England capable of holding 50 or 60 men with freedom to work. Each of the four or five bells in the tower had its own use, *e.g.* for the Canonical Hours, the Mass, the Angelus, the Curfew, the Sanctus, the Passing Bell, etc., though no doubt on certain occasions, and in towers where it was possible, the bells were rung in peal. Such occasions would be the visit of the bishop or archdeacon to the parish, when the bells were ordered by canon to be rung, and also for "Funeral Peles" or "Obits," when an adequate sum was provided by the deceased, or relatives, for the purpose. The manner in which the mediæval bells were hung also would militate very much against good striking when rung in peal. Not only were the bells heavy, but they were hung in a very different way to our modern practice. They were fitted with a half-wheel only, and raised only to stock-level, *i.e.* until the mouth of the bell was on a level with the stock. Consequently there was only the "dead rope pull,"—one pull for two swings of the bell. Needless to say this method demanded very great strength on the part of the ringers.

These early bells were as a rule cast in the place where they were wanted, generally in the church-yard. Bell-foundries, as we know them, were in the olden days few and far between, and the means of transit were not suitable for carrying heavy bells any great distance. But the bell-founders were very numerous and the majority of them appear to have been skilled craftsmen. They would journey about from place to place, the parish supplying the necessary materials and labour, and they the skill and experience. Thus as early as 1284 at Bridgwater the parishioners bought the materials, made their mould, and founded a bell of 1781 lbs. on the spot. No doubt many of our Somerset churchwardens' accounts contain

charges for similar expenditure. From those that have been published we find the usual items were: Clay (for the mould), Copper and Tin (for the bell-metal), Charcoal or Wood (for the furnace), Wood and Iron (for the framework and fittings of the bells), Ropes, and always much "Beere." The church-wardens' accounts of Kirby Malzeard, Yorks, contain a curious account of the expenses entailed in casting a bell *inside* the church in 1591. The total expense was *xiii*l*. ix*s*. viii*d*.*, of which the founder had *iiii*l*. vii*s*.* for his trouble, and *vi*s*. iv*d*.* was expended on ale; which ale moreover at *vd*. (some 4/- of our money) a gallon must have been of a fairly generous nature.

The bell when founded was of a somewhat different shape to modern ones. It was rather longer in the waist and higher in the shoulders, and consequently had more metal in it, *note* for *note*, than our modern bells. This will probably account for the superior tone of old bells to modern ones, as the metal in the waist though useless as affecting the *note* of the bell, seems to give depth and fullness to the *tone*. But it must also be remembered that bells like many other musical instruments mellow and improve with time and use.

The bell at its founding had some saint's name moulded on it, and the next step was its consecration to the service of God, and dedication in honour of the particular saint. For this there was a solemn and imposing office ordained, and the rite was performed by the bishop. The bell was set up on a frame in the churchyard and close to it was placed the bishop's faldstool. Also basins of holy water, of salt, and of the holy oil used for anointing the sick, together with clean linen, incense, myrrh, and a censer, had to be provided. Then the bishop robed in amice, girdle, stole, alb, and mitre, and carrying his pastoral staff, and attended by the ministers and deacons came to the bell and took his seat at the faldstool. After Psalms 51 and others had been chanted, the bishop exorcised and blessed the salt and the water, and then sprinkled

the salt in the water in the form of a cross. The deacons then washed the bell inside and out with the consecrated water and dried it with the clean linen, while psalms were chanted by the other ministers. Next the bishop anointed the bell in five places in the form of the cross, and dedicated it in the name of the Trinity to the honour of its particular saint. The bell was then censed and once more blessed and the service ended.

The bell now had its clapper attached (this was done by means of the baldrick, a strip of leather or horse hide) and was hung in its place in the tower.

Such is the history of most of the medieval bells, of which some 200, out of possibly nearly 2000, remain in our Somerset towers to-day. Founded in the parish which they were to serve; consecrated by solemn rite; dedicated to a saint and bearing his name; they sounded daily at mass, meridia, and vespere, until the Reformation, and having passed that time of wholesome discipline and escaped a hundred dangers which threatened their existence they still call the parishioners to worship as they first did some 500 years ago.

Many reasons may be adduced to account for the disappearance of the noble bells which we believe once graced our towers in olden days. The fair wear and tear of time and usage, and the many accidents to which bells are liable would account for many. And doubtless of the hundreds of bells recast in the XVI, XVII, and XVIII Centuries, the majority were ancient ones which had fallen into disrepair. The suppression of the monastic foundations, and of chantries and free chapels, 1533-8, of course involved the removal of the bells in them, but the parish churches do not appear to have suffered very much in this respect, at least in the West. In the Protestant revival under Elizabeth, 1558, I fear a good deal of irreparable damage was done. The queen issued orders to remove from the churches certain Romish ornaments which had been re-introduced by her sister Mary. Under

cover of this order in many places the bells were removed and sold, the steeples turned into pigeon-houses, and the lead stripped off the roofs. So outrageous was the damage done that the queen was forced to issue a further proclamation in Sept. 1560 to forbid the throwing down and appropriating to private gain of the church bells.

Another cause of the disappearance of the old bells is said to be the introduction of Change Ringing, and though a change ringer I must admit the charge. The old bells were, as we have seen, few and heavy, and when in 1637 change ringing was introduced and quickly became popular, the ringers sought for bells of lighter weight and greater number. This end was gained in most places by melting down the ancient heavy ring of 4 or 5 into a lighter ring of 6 or 8. This was particularly the case in the towns, and accounts for the fact that in most of the large centres the old bells have been entirely done away, and only in the country villages, where change ringing did not penetrate, are they still to be found. The same practice is still, most unfortunately, advocated in certain quarters, and the present writer may take this opportunity of entering a protest against it. Better far to wait until funds admit of adding really good new bells to the ring, than to break up ancient and tuneful bells, the gifts of departed benefactors, and produce in their place a miserable, jangling, toneless ring, an offence alike to eye and ear.

So much for the ancient town bells. Unfortunately another set of circumstances is responsible for the disappearance of ancient country bells,—the neglect and parsimony of churchmen in the XVII, XVIII, and even in the XIX Centuries. As churches fell into decay it was a common practice to obtain funds by gaining the bishop's consent to sell some of the bells; this was especially the case in rural districts, and thus no doubt many bells have been lost from our country churches.

Under the circumstances it is perhaps a matter for con-

gratulation that so many of these mediæval bells remain in our towers. They are to be found in many of our country towers still doing amid altered and altering surroundings the work to which they were consecrated centuries ago. There is an interesting ring of four ancients in Thurlbear in their original cage, all of them by the same founder,—Robert Norton of Exeter, 1422-61. There are also original rings of three at Holton, Pitcombe, South Barrow and Weston Bampfylde.

THEIR USE.

Before passing away from these ancients it may be interesting to note some of the work they did in years long gone by.

The Curfew was introduced by William the Conqueror from Normandy in 1068, and was abolished by Henry I in 1100. It sounded every night at 8 p.m., and then all fires and lights had to be extinguished. This may seem now to be a very hard law, but it was enacted with a view to preventing a conflagration at a time when houses were chiefly built of wood and other light material. It is curious how in many places the custom of ringing the Curfew has lingered on into our own day.

The Sanctus Bell was hung usually in a bell-cote between the chancel and the nave, and during the celebration of the mass three strokes were struck upon it by the priest or his server as the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy) was sung. At the lesser altars of the church handbells would be used for this purpose. The Sanctus Bell is to be distinguished from the

Sacring Bell which was sounded at the elevation of the Host.

The Passing Bell. Canon 67 ordered: "When anyone is passing out of this life a bell shall be tolled, and the minister shall not then slack to do his duty. And after the party's death if it so fall out, then there shall be rung no more than one short peal, and one other before the burial, and one other after the burial."

This explains the inscription so often found on old tenors :

" I to the Church the living call,
And to the grave I summon all."

or—

" I sound to bid the sick repent,
In hope of life when breath is spent."

At the present day the Passing Bell has sadly fallen from its high estate, and instead of rousing the parishioners to prayer for the passing soul and to thoughts of their own mortality, it is often not rung until hours after the death and calls forth no particular emotion from those who hear it.

Before the Reformation it was customary to toll the Passing Bell at all hours of the day and night as occasion might require. The churchwardens' accounts for the parish of Wolchurch, under date 1526, give an interesting list of the sums charged for the use of the various bells on such occasions :

- " Fyrste for the leste belle to ryng the space of
one ower, for man, or woman, or chylde 0s. 4d.
- " Item, the seconde belle to ryng one ower 0s. 6d.
- " Item, the thyrde belle to ryng on ower 0s. 8d.
- " Item, whate persone wyll have the thyrde to
ryng 6 owers before none, or after none, with
the three smallyst belles to ryng at dyrg
and masse, to pay 3s. 4d.
- " Item, whate persone wyll have the fourthe belle
to ryng 6 owers, before none, or after none,
withe the four smallyst belles at dyrg and
masse, to pay 5s. 0d.
- Item, whate persone wyll have the 5th belle, whych
is the greatest belle, to ryng 6 owers by fore
none, or after none, with alle the belles to
ryng at dyrg and masse, shall pay 6s. 8d.
and the Sexton to have for the same great
belle, fyndinge alle the ryngers 6s. 8d.

"Item, the Sexton to finde the roope for the same,
and also the bawdrycks for the same belle, at
hys own coste and charg.

"Item, the Clerke to have for tollynge of the
passinge belle, for manne, womanne, or
chylde, if it be in the day Os. 4d.

"Item, if it be in the night, for the same Os. 8d.

And so on. The first items are for ringing the "Funeral Pele" at the obsequies. And the burial of a man of substance whose relatives determined to have the "Greate Belle" for "6 Owres," and "Alle the Belles" at "Dyrge and masse" must have been, if one may be permitted to say so, a striking ceremony. This was certainly the case at the funeral of Lady Isable Berkeley, 1516. For we are told that on that occasion: "There was rynging daily with all the bells continually: that is to say, at St. Michael's xxxiii peles, at Trinity xxxiii peles, at St. John's xxxiii peles, at Babylake, because hit was so nigh, lvii peles, and in the Mother Church xxx peles, and every pele xiid."

The Passing Bell was also sometimes called the
Soul Bell.

"Toll the bell a solemn toll,
Slow and solemn let it be.
Cry for the departing soul
Miserere Domine."

Old Poem.

(Canon Ellacombe, *Bells of the Church*).

The Angelus was a bell rung morning, noon and evening, every day, as a bidding to the people, to the sick in bed, and to the healthy, to those at home, and to those abroad, that they should, as the sound floated through the villages, the maiden in her cottage, and the labourer in the field, reverently kneel and recite the allotted prayers, in remembrance of Christ's incarnation for us, viz: "Angelus Domini," etc. (hence it was called the Angelus Bell), and "Ave Maria," etc. (hence called also the Ave Bell).—Barker's *Wensleydale*.

The ringing of this bell morning and evening was ordered by the constitutions of 1347. The bell rung for the Angelus was usually dedicated to the archangel Gabriel; hence it was also sometimes called

The Gabriel Bell; original Gabriel bells are still to be seen at Martock, Brompton Ralph, and (recast) at Preston near Yeovil.

The Pardon Bell.—The Angelus was also sometimes called the Pardon Bell on account of the indulgences attached to the recitation of the allotted prayers.

The Sermon Bell.—It was customary in old times, and the custom still obtains in some country places, to toll the tenor bell for a few minutes before service on Sunday when there was to be a sermon preached; hence the name.

The Induction Bell.—When a new incumbent is inducted to a benefice by the archdeacon it is customary for him to toll a few strokes on one of the bells. Thus at once asserting his authority over the belfry, and at the same time announcing the fact of his induction to the parishioners. There is an old superstition that he will remain in the parish as many years as he strikes the bell.

Such are some of the religious purposes served by the bells of old; but they also entered in a hundred ways into the secular and business life of the people. Thus there was—

The Tocsin Bell.—The expression is said to be derived from two old French words “tocque—sing,” from “toquer”—to strike, and “sing”—a little bell. It was usually a bell which was rung only in cases of danger or alarm, such as fire, the approach of an enemy, or the outbreak of a revolution. It was rung in a wild and hurried manner.

The Market Bell.—This bell gave the signal for the commencement of the business of the market. Before it sounded no buying, selling or even bargaining might be done under heavy penalties. And very stern was the law against “fore-stalling,” i.e. buying or selling before the whole world was awake and ready.

The Mote Bell—summoned the people to the popular assembly.

The Vestry Bell—called the parishioners to the discharge of the parish business.

The Harvest Bell and Seedsowing Bell—called the labourers to their various works.

The Gleaning Bell—fixed the hours for beginning and leaving off gleaning in the harvest fields, ensuring a fair start and a fair chance to all alike.

The Pancake Bell—still rung at Ilminster on Shrove Tuesday, was originally a call to confession before the beginning of Lent.

The confession has been discontinued, and where the bell still rings it is associated with the pancake, which is the only thing which particularly distinguishes Shrove Tuesday now.

The following extract from Hone's "Everyday Book," 1827, gives a graphic picture of the part bells paid in the daily life of Sherborne, *cir.* 1820:—

"At Sherborne they have an almost endless 'ding-dong,' 'twing-twang,' or 'bim-bone,' throughout the day. Happening to be lately there on a market-day I was awakened in the morning, at four o'clock, by the ringing of the 'Church Treble Bell'; and at six o'clock the church 'chimes' were in play; at a quarter before seven the 'Almshouse Bell' began and continued until seven; which is said to be for the purpose of calling King Edward VI Grammar School to their studies, who were no sooner assembled than the 'School Bell' announced the master's approach. At half-past eight the 'Almshouse Bell' summoned the almshouse and women to prayers; at nine 'the chimes.' At eleven the 'Wholesale Market Bell'; at twelve the 'Chimes'; at one the 'School Bell' for dinner; at half-past one the 'Retail Market Bell'; at three the 'Chimes'; and the church 'Great Bell' tolled twice at a short interval; when, what is appositely called 'the tanging bell,' rang until the minister and religiously inclined had

assembled for prayer ; at four the ' Alms-house Bell ' ; at six the ' Chimes ' ; at seven the ' School Bell ' for supper ; at eight the ' Church Bell ' which rang a quarter of an hour, and concluded by giving eight strokes ; at nine the ' Chimes,' and the ' School Bell ' for bed."

Sic transit. Almost every one of these old uses of the bells is passed away, and some are even forgotten, but still the bells, and in some cases the identical bells, remain, and in changed and changing circumstances they do their duty by us as they did by our forefathers.

INSCRIPTIONS ON CHURCH BELLS.

The oldest bells had as a rule no inscription at all beyond the name of the saint to whom the bell was dedicated. Thus the oldest bells would simply have some such inscription as " Sancta Margareta " (Charlton Adam), " Sancte Andrea " (Puckington), " Maria " (Poyntington), the inscription being all in small lettering, without capitals, date, or founder's name. All early inscriptions are of course in Latin, though there are exceptions to this rule, as *e.g.* the tenor at Brompton Ralph,— " Gabriel is mi name in me sholle finne ne blame," and the third at Pitney, " John help now." But these are exceptions to prove the rule, and broadly speaking, English inscriptions did not come into general use until well into the XVII Century. The next class of bells, somewhat later than those mentioned above, bear in addition to the name of the saint the significant words, " ora pro nobis." Thus :—

Sancta Anna ora pro nobis (High Littleton).

Sancta Maria ora pro nobis (Shapwick).

Sancte Paule ora pro nobis (Nettlecombe).

These bells, dating from the beginning of the XV Century, have, many of them, very beautiful lettering, and often most artistic stops and devices between the words.

About the same time, or a little later, the Leonine verses—monkish hexameters—with the middle and end rhyming toge-

gether, came into use on the bells. The best specimens of these inscriptions are those so freely used by Robert Norton, 1422-61, many of which remain in our towers to this present.

Est michi collatum IHS istud nomen amatum.

JESUS the name I bear, Name beloved beyond compare.

Protege Virgo pia quos convoco sancta Maria.

Holy Mary Guardian be, to all whom I shall call to thee.

Voce mea viva depello cuncta nocua.

Every evil thing, or fright, with living voice I put to flight.

Plebs oīs plavdit ut me tam sepius audit.

All the people much rejoice, because they often hear my voice.

Me melior vere non est campana sub ere.

A better bell in sooth than I, you will not find beneath the sky.

Misteriis sacris repleat nos dēa Iohannis.

May St. John, his holy lore, fill us all with sacred awe.

The translation of the first of the above is by the late Rev. W. T. Dyne; the remainder are an attempt on my part to supply a hint at the *spirit* of the legend for those who care to avail themselves of it. Robert Norton carried on his foundry at Exeter, and had an extensive connection; and many of his bells and inscriptions are still to be found in our county.

The third of the above inscriptions—"Voce mea viva depello cuncta nocua"—is specially interesting as proof of the medieval belief that storms, tempests, and evil spirits, were driven away by the sound of bells. Lawrence Beyerlink, Canon of Antwerp, in a sermon on the Blessing of Church Bells—1627—quotes Baptista, the poet of Mantua, that, "bells are effective to restrain evil spirits, when the winds roll the clouds together, and are about to inflict injury on the abundant plains." The same preacher also relates two remarkable examples of the power of evil spirits being checked by the sound of a blessed bell:—"One was of a witch, which hap-

pened in Italy in the year 1524, and the other of a man of the same character which happened in the year 1580. They were returning from their nightly meetings under the devil's guidance, when the morning signal for saluting the Virgin was given by the ringing of a bell, and they were deserted by him, and afterwards on being closely questioned, confessed the whole matter." A tourist in the Tyrolese Alps in 1865 tells of bells being rung as the accompaniment of thunder-storms. But whether they were supposed to have a physical effect on the electricity or were rung from religious feeling with a view to averting calamity, he was unable to say.

Passing on from the Leonine verses, we come to the eve of the Reformation, when we find inscriptions freely invoking the prayers of all the saints, and especially of the Blessed Virgin, *e.g.* :—

Ave Maria Gracia Plena Dominus Tecum. (Nunney).

Sancta Maria ora pro nobis. (Northover).

Sca Margareta ora pro nobis. (Sutton Montis).

The inscriptions of this date are beautifully designed and moulded and accompanied often by ornamentation of high artistic merit. Roger Semson, a Somerset man, and noted founder in the West of England, had his foundry at Ash Priors at this time, *cir.* 1500-50 ; he appears to have dedicated the vast majority of his bells to the Blessed Virgin. The bell used for ringing the Angelus was usually dedicated to the archangel Gabriel, and such inscriptions are to be found at Brompton Ralph, Martock and Preston. But the Angelus was also sometimes called "the Ave Bell," and where we find the "Ave Maria," in whole or part inscribed on a bell, it seems probable that that bell was the one used to remind the people of the necessary daily recital of the Ave. These Ave Bells are to be found at Bishop's Hull, Charlton Horethorne, Chedzoy, Combe St. Nicholas, Ditcheat, Emborough, Fitzhead, Nunney, etc., etc.

Among the dedications of the pre-Reformation bells in our

county are found the following: Jesus (several), The Holy Trinity, The Blessed Virgin (many), The Archangels Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel, and SS. Augustine, Andrew, Anna, Barbara, Clement, George, Gregory, John, John the Baptist, Katharine, Luke, Margaret, Paul, Peter, Stephen, Thomas.

Immediately after the Reformation a great change comes over the inscriptions on the bells. All mention of the Blessed Virgin is at once abolished, invocation of the saints, and even mention of the saints, disappears once and for all. But for a time something of the old veneration for the bells seemed to linger on, and although the bells were no longer consecrated to their office, and solemnly named, they were treated with respect and had moral or religious maxims or platitudes cast upon them. These were, as a rule, still written in Latin, but about this time the date was added. Examples of such inscriptions are: "Gaudete semper in Domino 1583" (Broadway). "Gloria in excelsis Deo 1612" (Camely). "Soli Deo detur Gloria 1625" (Nettlecombe). Very often they are found in English: "Geve thanks to God 1591" (Barton St. David). "Lord have mercie upon us 1596" (Templecombe). "Prayse God 1610." "Love God 1611" (Babcary).

The XVIII Century was a time of stagnation in the Church of England, and the parish priest was not only, in many cases, unmindful of his duty to his people, but was also neglectful of the church and its furniture in his cure. Very often the bells were taken down and sold in order to find funds to repair damage caused to the fabric of the church by criminal neglect or carelessness, and many a noble bell has come by its end in this way. When bells were recast, no interest seems to have been taken by the clergy or churchwardens in the inscriptions to be cast on them. It was left apparently entirely to the founder. Under these circumstances it is not surprising to find that the XVIII Century bells bear for the most part merely the names of churchwardens and founder with the date. Sometimes the founder, if a man

with some good feeling about him, like the Rudhalls of Gloucester, would add some little pious or loyal maxim, as : "Fear God, honour the King," but more often he would utilise the space on the bell as a means of advertising his own skill, or even of slandering that of a rival.

Some of the more harmless XVIII Century inscriptions are : "My treble voice makes hearts rejoice" (very common). "When you us ring we'll sweetly sing." "Peace and good neighbourhood." "Prosperity to this Town" (Shepton Mallet). "Come let us ring for Church and King." "God preserve our King and Kingdom and send us peace" (Selworthy). "Prosperity to the Church of England" (Pylle).

The tenor has always some reference to its use as the Passing Bell, the most common being :

"I to the Church the living call,
And to the grave doth summon all."

OR—

"I sound to bid the sick repent
In hope of life when breath is spent."

Other bells have inscriptions which can only be termed ungodly : some examples are subjoined.

Come here brother Founders and here you may see
What sort of a workman young bilbie may be
Hele challenge all England for casting a bell
Who will be the workman can be but dun well. 1727.

MARK.

Com here friend Knight and Cockey to
Such work as this you cannot do. 1736.

MILBORNE PORT.

Bilby and Boosh may come and see
What Evans and Nott have done by me. 1758.

BACKWELL.

Harke how the chiriping treable sounds so clear
While rowleing Tom com tumbleing in the reare. 1732.

DUNKERTON.

My sound is good my shape is neat
Twas Bayley cast me so compleat. 1770.

KINGSBURY EPISCOPI.

And so on, for there are plenty of examples of this XVIII Century wit to be found in our towers.

Modern inscriptions usually record the names of benefactor, incumbent, churchwardens, and founder, with or without some text or motto, and are for the most part of no more than local interest. Several bells have inscriptions on them which apparently have no meaning whatever, the legend consisting either of a jumble of letters or of the alphabet arranged in more or less order round the bell. Where there is simply a jumble of letters we can only imagine that the founder or his man, having no instructions as to inscriptions, simply filled in the usual space on the mould with the first letters which came to hand. Alphabet bells, on the other hand, are found in all parts of England and on the Continent, and no satisfactory explanation of them has ever been given. There are four examples of them in Somerset; one at Stoke St. Mary, with A—N set backwards, the work of Roger Semson; one at Creech St. Michael dated 1590; one at Closworth, probably recast by Thomas Purdew from an earlier bell by Roger Semson; one at Walton all in confusion.

FUNCTIONS OF A BELL.

Men's deaths I tell by doleful knell.
 Lightning and thunder I break asunder.
 On Sabbath all to Church I call.
 The sleepy head I raise from bed.
 The winds so fierce I doe disperse.
 Men's cruel rage I doe assuage.
 "Helps to Discourse."

THE PASSING BELL.

Come list and hark the bell doth toll
 For some but now departing soul,
 Whom even now those ominous fowl,
 The bat, the Nightjar, or screech Owl
 Lament; hark! I hear the wilde wolf howle
 In this black night that seems to scowle,
 All these my black book shall enscole.
 For hark! still still the bell doth toll
 For some but now departing soul.
 Heywood's "Rape of Lucrece."

DISLIKE OF EVIL SPIRITS TO THE SOUND OF BELLS.

"It is said, the evil spiryts that ben in the region of th'ayre, doubte moche whan they hear the bells rongen : and this is the cause why the belles rongen whan it thondreth, and whan grete tempeste andto rages of wether happen, to the ende that the feinds and wycked spiryts should ben abashed and flee, and cease of the movynge of tempeste."

Wykin de Worde, in "Golden Legend."

BELL FOUNDERS.

The following are some brief notes as to the founders of the bells which hang in our Somerset towers. Many of our bells are not the work of Somerset founders, but of men, who had foundries at a distance, or who travelled from their homes outside the county and did their work on the spot as occasion demanded.

Of the founders of our most interesting bells—the old pre-Reformation ones—in most cases little or nothing is known. It must be remembered that in the old days the bells were all consecrated by solemn rite, and the founder of those days would no more dream of using his bell as a means of advertisement than would the maker of the altar vessels to-day. For this reason it is rare to find even the initials of the founder on a pre-Reformation bell, and although in many cases the work of the same founder can be traced in many different towers by the peculiar beauty of his lettering, or cross, or ornamentation, his very name is unknown, and all that can be told of him is that he was a good craftsman who gave his best for the church.

The oldest known founder in our Somerset towers dates from about 1400, and the only fact known about him with any certainty is his initials. These initials "t.g." in small unassuming type are found on some 19 bells in the diocese, and they have been conjectured to be those of a certain Thomas Giles,

bell-founder of Lewes. This t.g. used a small clear type in his lettering; his inscriptions are all short and widely spaced and in some cases he uses a crown as a stamp. Characteristic examples of his work may be seen at Whatley (3), Shapwick, Charlynch, etc.

A little later we come to the work of Robert Norton who flourished at Exeter from *cir.* 1422—1461. He used as a trade mark his initials r.n. on either side of a miniature bell, and the whole surrounded by a twisted cable. His workmanship is of the very best; the capital letters beautifully ornamented in most cases, the lettering clear and in good type, pretty mouldings and beads round the shoulder of the bell, and above all, his bells are I believe in all cases of an excellent tone. His six favourite inscriptions have already been alluded to, and examples of his work may be seen at Thurlbear (4), W. Quantockshead, Over Stowey, etc. There are in all some 33 bells by him in the diocese. It is sad to be obliged to add that although an excellent craftsman Robert Norton was not a very honest tradesman, as the following record taken from the early *Chancery Proceedings* in the reign of Henry VI, and quoted by Canon Ellacombe, proves.

“To the right worshipfull fader in God, the Bishopp of Bathe, Chancellor of England.

Beseechith mekely the pore parshenēs of Plymtre in Devenshere, that were as they by John Forde one of the same Parisshe, bought of one Robert Norton of Exeter, Bellemaker, iij belles to pay for every Cli of the wight there of xxvijs there the said John and Robert by ontrewe ymagynacion coneyn and desseit enformyd the said paryshenes that the said belles were of the weight of ij mill. ^{xx}cc^{iiij} ij li. where as in dede they weyyd but xvij c. li. so that the said parishenes have paid therfore the said Robert by the handys of the said John accordant to ther said ontrewe enformacion that ys to sayng for ^{c.xx}vij^{iiij} of metall more than the said belles weyn to the grete hendryng

of the said parishes, where of they may have no remedy by the comyn lawe ; plesse it your gracious lordship to com- pel and to make the said John and Robert to apere byfore yowe at a c'tain day by yowe to be almytyd to answere to the said mater and to do right there of after your high discrecion for the love of God, and in the werk of charite."

No record of the result of this application is extant, but the date of the above petition is 1432.

Robert Norton was succeeded in business by a man whose initials are "i.t." He used the same stamp and moulds and lettering as his predecessor, and examples of his work in this county can be seen at East Quantockshead and Crowcombe.

Robert Norton is to be distinguished from Stephen Norton of Maidstone, Kent, who died *cir.* 1500. Stephen was also a very excellent craftsman and there is one very beautiful example of his work at Chiselborough.

There is one bell in the county—at Kingsdon—by the celebrated William ffounder. His private name was William Dawe and he carried on from 1370—1420 an important foundry at Aldgate, London. Examples of his work are found in all parts of England, and in 1385 he was busily engaged in casting guns for Dover Castle.

About the year 1408 William ffounder had in his shop a foundryman of the name of John Walgrave, as we know from the fact that he received in that year a legacy of *iiis. iiid.* under the will of one John Plot. This John Walgrave afterwards either succeeded to his master's business or set up for himself and carried on a most extensive business in the South and Midlands. His mark is found on two bells in this county, at Angersleigh and Bawdrip.

There is one bell at Whatley by William Henshaw who died *cir.* 1500. He was one of the succession of founders at Gloucester.

Passing on a few years we come to the first celebrated Somerset founder, and an excellent craftsman he was,—Roger

Semson, of Ash Priors near Taunton. His name is now unknown in his native village, and all memory of his foundry is lost, but his bells can be seen in many of our towers to-day as good as when he cast them more than 350 years ago.

There is a very interesting account in the churchwardens' books of Woodbury, Devon, in 1548 of a journey from Woodbury to Ash Priors with bells to be recast by the celebrated Roger Semson. They started from Woodbury on a Sunday, a party of seven men and nine oxen, with the churchwarden accompanying on horseback. The first day they got as far as Kentisbeare and lay the night there. Monday they slept at Milverton. Tuesday they refreshed themselves at Halse en route and then pushed on to Ash Priors. Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, were occupied in the casting of the bells, the clappers meantime being made at Bishop's Lydeard, and on Saturday the work was completed, and the warden and his men started home in triumph. They stopped at the same places on the journey home and arrived at Woodbury amid great rejoicings on the Tuesday following. The whole expense of the journey and cost of rehangng the bells was £29 : 3 : 7.

The date of this journey is 1548, but Ellacombe says he has found bells by Semson in Devon which he would date at least 100 years earlier. So that possibly the Ash Priors foundry may have been carried on for some time by successive generations of Semsons. In the case of all old foundries the founder's stamp was, I believe, always handed on to his successor, so that it often happens that a bell is found bearing a founder's stamp and yet evidently cast years after he was laid to rest.

There is a goodly number of Roger Semson's bells in the county, but by far the best and most interesting is the tenor at Bradford. This is a very noble bell, 46½ ins. in diam. in E.

It bears the inscription "OMNES SCANCTI CONFESSORES ORATE P NOBIS," and on a medallion the arms of Joanna de Beauchamp, Countess of Warwick, who died 1436, the

whole very beautifully wrought. Both for appearance and tone this bell is generally accounted as one of the best in the county; there is one precisely similar though smaller at Tala-ton, Devon.

After the Reformation we find a foundry carried on at Montacute from *cir.* 1580-1650 by Thomas and Robert Wiseman. Robert Wiseman's will was proved Aug. 16, 1669. No doubt many of their bells still hang in our towers, but as their name never appears on their bells they can only be recognised by a careful examination of the lettering and crosses. Two good examples of Robert Wiseman's work are the 2nd and 3rd (recast) at Farrington Gurney, dated 1598. It is very probable there was also a foundry at Montacute in pre-Reformation times as one or two bells still remain with the inscription, "Sancta Katerina de Monte Acuto."

We next come to a very noted family of bell-founders in the Purdues, and various members of this family seemed to have carried on their business in this county from about 1584—1711. The most celebrated of the family were George Purdue and his three sons, William, Roger, and Thomas.

George Purdue, whose earliest work in this diocese is dated 1584, is described in an agreement with the churchwardens of Nettlecombe, dated 1613 as "of Taunton." A large number of bells are to be found bearing his initials G.P., and dating from 1584 to 1620.

William Purdue was the eldest son of George, he did a little work in this county, but seems to have lived chiefly at Salisbury. He there recast in 1661 the 6th bell of the cathedral ring, the only one now remaining. He afterwards removed to Ireland and died at Limerick in 1673. He apparently did good work in the cathedral there, for a monument was erected to him in the cathedral, with the epitaph:—

Here a Bellfounder honest and true
Until the Resurrection lies Purdue.
William Purdue Obit IIIo
Xbris Ao Dni MDCLXXIII.

Roger Purdue, the second son of George, carried on business as a bell-founder from about 1609 onwards. His earliest bell is found at Biddisham, dated 1609. There is an agreement extant between him and the mayor of Wells and churchwardens of St. Cuthbert's for the recasting of the tenor bell at that church. This agreement is dated 30th April 1624, and Roger Purdue is described as "Freeman of the City of Bristol."

Thomas Purdue was by far the most famous and most skilful of the Purdue family, which is saying a good deal. He was born in 1621, and for many years carried on his business at Closworth in this county, where he died in 1711 at the ripe age of 90. Examples of his work can be seen in almost all parts of the diocese, and he was one of the last founders to travel the country and do his work where required. He did a good deal of work at Wells Cathedral as the cathedral documents show, though all the bells have been recast since his day, but his most famous work was certainly that done for Exeter Cathedral in 1676. In that year he entered into agreement with the Dean and Chapter of Exeter and recast for them the 4th, 7th, and 9th, of the cathedral ring, and also the clock bell, Great Peter. This latter bell is 76 inches in diameter, the thickness of the sound-bow is 5ins., the note is A, and the reputed weight 125 cwt. . . . All these are "Maiden bells."

Thomas Purdue was joined in his later years, and afterwards succeeded by Thomas Knight. His initials "T.K." appear in conjunction with Purdue on bells from about 1700 onwards, and after Purdue's death we find him in business on his own account, but using the Purdue stamp. All the Purdues used rather large flat letters in their inscriptions, and ornamented their bells with a pretty running device round the shoulder representing vine leaves and grapes, with a cluster of small stars for stops. Thomas Purdue also used a running freize of roses and leaves, and occasionally a quaintly

formed letter with a crown and saltire on top and sprigs intermixed.

Almost all the Purdue bells have their founder's mark in some form, *i.e.*—the initials G.P., W.P., R.P., T.P., in large flat Roman type with a bell, or in the case of T.P. a scroll ornament, between the letters.

John Wallis carried on a foundry at Salisbury from about 1600-30, and we have a few specimens of his work in this county. His business was taken over by Robert Austen, 1640-70, and eight of his bells with the mark R.A. remain in our towers.

Another Salisbury foundry was that carried on by the Lotts from about 1620-1720. John Lott's mark, I.L. with a bell between the letters, will be found on 16 bells in the diocese, dating from 1624-1691, and there is one bell by Edward Lot, dated 1718. The lettering on these bells is large, clear, and flat, and the inscriptions for the most part consist of only the date and founder's name.

A very famous Somerset bell-foundry was that carried on by the Bilbies at Chew Stoke from 1690-1815. This firm, which has given a multitude of bells, not only to Somerset but to the whole West of England, was founded by Edward Bilbie *cir.* 1690, and the oldest bell by the firm is appropriately found at Chew Stoke, dated 1698. Edward Bilbie was followed successively by William, Thomas, Thomas Junr., Abraham, and Thomas and John. About 1750 Thomas Bilbie, who was a freeman of Bristol, migrated from Chew Stoke and set up at Cullompton, Devon, "The West of England Church Bell Foundry," which flourished there until the death of his only son, Thomas Castleman Bilbie, in 1813. The business was then taken over by the Pannells and continued until 1855. This Devonshire branch supplied several bells to towers in West Somerset.

The Bilbie bells are too common and too well known to need any description; suffice it to say these bells are almost without

exception of good tone, the castings clean, and the lettering clear and distinct. There is no difficulty in recognizing any of their bells as they are invariably marked with the Founder's name or at least initials. Perhaps the only exception one can take to the Bilbies is that they allowed their ardour to get the better of their good taste, and introduced on some of their church bells inscriptions more fit for the pot-house than the church.

However in their day trade rivalry was undoubtedly keen and means of advertisement were few.

A rival of the Bilbies was the great Gloucester foundry, conducted from 1684-1830 by the Rudhalls. This Gloucester foundry, which was probably in existence for more than 500 years, for there is an early record of money paid to John of Gloucester for bells in the reign of Edward II, came into the possession of Abraham Rudhall in 1684. Abraham Rudhall was succeeded by his sons, Abraham and Abel, who were followed successively by Thomas, Charles, and John Rudhall down to 1830, when the foundry was closed. This firm is literally of world-wide reputation, for they supplied bells to all parts of England and Ireland, the E. and W. Indies, N. and S. America, and in all turned out some 5000 bells from their foundry. They supplied a large number of bells to North Somerset, and good examples of their work can be seen in many churches in Bath and the neighbourhood. Lady Hopton's fine tenor in Bath Abbey, 58½ inches in diameter in C, cast by Abraham Rudhall in 1700, was cracked through "clocking" in 1869 and re-cast by Warner. The Rudhalls were people well affected to both church and state, and most of their bells express good wishes for one or other.

From about 1694-1750 a bellfoundry was carried on at Wellington by Thomas Wroth. His Mark "T. W." with a bell in outline between the letters will be found in several towers in West Somerset, but most of his work was done for Devonshire, and much of it is very poor.

The celebrated foundry of the Evans at Chepstow, which flourished during the middle part of the XVIII Century, supplied some bells to this county. There is a ring of six by Evans at Selworthy, date 1757, and one of five at Luccombe, date 1759.

The Cockeys had a foundry at Frome for more than 100 years from 1714, and many of their bells remain to do them credit in that district. This firm still carries on business in Frome as engineers and iron and brass founders.

During the XVIII Century various founders flourished in Bridgwater. The chief of them were George Davis, Thomas Pyke, John Kingston, Thomas Bayley, and Bayley and Street. Their work does not call for any special mention and was, I believe, almost invariably the work of re-casting ancient bells.

All the great modern bell founders, Messrs. J. Taylor and Son, Mears and Stainbank, Warner, and Llewellins and James are well represented by good work well done in our Somerset towers, and ample scope—unfortunately—still remains for their skill.

NOTE. I am indebted for much of my information to the late Canon Ellacombe's "*Church Bells of Somerset*," "*Church Bells of Devon*," "*Bells of the Church*," etc. ; also to the late Canon Raven's "*The Bells of England*."