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THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. DUNSTAN, CANTERBURY, KENT

By Rev. David Cawley, A.K.C., F.S.A. (Scot.)

"You could never get six bells in there", said the schoolboy to the organist. "Well, if you don't think so, why not go along and see". The presumptuous schoolboy "went along", and found the steeplekeeper not only prepared to show him the bells but to teach him to ring. He survived the experience and lived, fourteen years later, to write this article.

St. Dunstan's, Canterbury, is the "Spiritual Home" of the Canterbury District of the K.C.A.C.R., and when the district welcomes the association many members wend their way to the tall, thin tower at the corner of the ancient London Road. It is

therefore fitting that this article should speak of the bells of St. Dunstan, Canterbury.

There are in the fabric of the church traces of Saxon long-and-short work; so it would seem that worship has been offered here for over a thousand years. The church stands well outside the city walls, and probably served a community originally separate from the city like its counterparts at St. Stephen's, St. Martin's and St. Nicholas' (Thanington). But it was on the altered course of the Watling Street (later the A2) and soon houses and shops were going up near it. The church itself was largely re-fashioned in the late Decorated period; while the Perpendicular period gave it a most lovely arcade, a soaring tabernacle font cover, and the slender tower with its simple

quadrupite vault in the ground floor. Meanwhile the Roper family had built their great house directly opposite—only the gate survives today, a splendid piece of Tudor brickwork, and in the same mellow brick they added, in the last years of the 15th century, their own chapel.

One of the Ropers who lived opposite became the husband of Margaret, daughter of Sir Thomas More. When "The Man for All Seasons" was executed, this plucky girl took a boat down the Thames, and had thrown to her, by a compassionate boatman, the head of her illustrious father. She kept it in spices until her death, and now it reposes in the Roper vault beneath the chapel. In 1935 a fine black marble slab was placed over the vault as a memorial to

(Continued overleaf)

ST. DUNSTAN'S, CANTERBURY

(Continued from front cover.)

the man who was the "King's good servant, but God's first", with the motto "Ecclesia Anglicana Libera Sit"—"That the English Church might be Free".

FOUR FOUNDERS

In the tower hangs a ring of six bells, representing the work of four founders of Kentish origin—William le Belyetere and Thomas Palmar II, both of Canterbury; Joseph Hatch of Ulcombe; and William Mears, a Canterbury lad who, whilst watching the making of the mould for "Great Dunstan" of Canterbury Cathedral, was himself noticed by William Chapman, who took him to London and so began the synonymy of the names "Whitechapel" and "Mears".

The fifth bell is the earliest of the ring, and is one of seven bells definitely cast around 1325 by William le Belveter, who lived in the city, buying a house there around that time. He was probably already an established "Belyetere", or Bellfounder, as he uses this name in the deed relating to the house (Pedes Finium, 18EDii). There are bells by him at St. Peter's, Canterbury, and at Bridge, Kingston (cracked), Patixbourne, Postling (two) and possibly the tenor at Snargate, from his early days. The crest he uses at St. Dunstan's bears three ovals containing the figure of a king, and two creatures.

There is extant an unusual amount of documentary evidence as to the bells and ringers in the years preceding the Reformation. The accounts begin in 1485 with the following:

Item for a rope for the gret bell	viiij d
It. for a rope for the wackerell	ij d
It. payde to John Long for bawderyks	xj d
Item for ryngyng ij pryncypall dayes	iiij d
It. payd for the reparacions of the bells	iijs. x d
It. spent at Wylliam Sprotts when the clappers were mendyd	j d

What the last princely sum was for can only be left to the imagination of the more thirsty members of the Exercise.

"WACKERELL BELL"

It would be good to be able to quote at length from these accounts, but they fill a bulky volume. Incidentally, a "Wackerell" bell was the Canterbury vernacular for a sanctus or saunce bell; baldricks are the leather lined iron U-pieces connecting the clappers to the staples; originally they would have been of leather only, and hence had to be frequently renewed. The accounts record the careful payment of the ringers, very often for a two-year stretch, in varying sums. The clergy seem to have been appreciative of their ringers then as now (the late Canon A. L. Lawler, vicar, 1954-1969, was a great friend of Kentish ringers and followed the adventures of his own band with great enthusiasm); in the years 1522-1531 they seem to have been regularly rewarded for their labours by being feasted with "calves hedes"; after that, until the last such record in 1545, they had to be content with a "ryngers brekefast".

The bells were the subject of constant minor attentions—to stocks, wheels, "yrens" and of course ropes and baldricks. Nor were the ringers unmindful of security, for in 1524 iiij d. was paid to Mathew Lokear "for a key for the vpper stepyll dore". A bigger item was the recasting of the Wackerell in 1500; the work was carried out by Richard Kerner, of Canterbury (a specimen of his work is preserved in the modern St. Mary Bredin Church in Old

Dover Road), and this cost iij s. viij d. Quite how many bells there were at this time is not clear; the accounts distinctly mention the 'lytyll bell', the "ij bell", the "mydyll bell", the "fore bell" and the "grete bell", in addition to the sanctus; and in 1548/50, however, it is clear that there must have been three and a sanctus, ropes being bought for the "Waggerrell", "Fyrst", "Second" and "Thyrde", which would have included the present fifth most probably as the tenor, and in 1566 the inventory gives "In the steapele iij great belles furnished, one wakrell bell . . ." In 1605 the middle bell was recast by Joseph Hatch of Ulcombe; he (probably) augmented the ring to four by addition of a treble in 1629. The second of this ring of four in G-sharp minor was recast in 1660 by Thomas Palmar I of Canterbury, the inscription being THOMAS PALMAR MADE ME 1660 THO SIMPSON CH: WARDEN; and in 1676 his son augmented the ring to five by adding a tenor.

NO FINER MEMORIAL

Thomas Palmar II, whose family's foundry was on the site of the present West Station, left only this one bell behind him. But, as anyone who has heard this superb bell will testify, he needs no finer memorial. The last addition to the ring was made in 1777 by William Mears. He was not a partner at the time, and it is interesting to know where he had his premises and got his plant. He cast a ring of eight for St. Peter, Sandwich, two years later, a very fine ring by all accounts. The St. Dunstan treble proclaims that it was cast by voluntary subscription (not by a church rate); and at the same time the old second was recast as the third of the present ring of six. These bells were squeezed up all on one level at the top of this very small oblong tower, and very little seems to have been done on them; "peal" boards record 720s in 1848 (by the Cathedral band) and in 1884 by the local company. There was a very tight rope circle, and one can see, in the arch over the east window of the ringing room, where the rope of Palmar's tenor chafed while the clerk tolled it, standing on the flat leads outside, observing the procession passing to the grave.

In 1921, Mears & Stainbank reported that the frame was not in good condition, and that the fittings, once disturbed, could never be re-used satisfactorily. Shortly afterwards ringing ceased, and chiming

hammers were locally installed, the bells by this time being quite unringable. It was also noted that the tower had been chopped out right, left and centre to get the frame in, and in 1935 the bells were removed to allow massive concrete ring-beams to be installed. It was intended to hang them, as funds provided, one at a time in a two-tier iron frame. In the event, the money was found and the whole ring was tuned (it was noted that Joseph Hatch had already had trouble with the fourth and had skirted off most of the bottom "wires" in an effort to sharpen it; the bells were therefore tuned to this bell. It will be noted that the second is appreciably lighter than the treble). They were then quarter turned and rehung on new teak canon-retaining headstocks, in two quite separate frames, bells 1, 3 and 5 swinging north-south, and 2, 4 and 6 east-west beneath them. The work was carried out by the Whitechapel Foundry.

THE BELLS

Treble (27", 4 cwt. 9 lb. in D sharp): THIS TREBLE WAS ADDID TO THIS PEAL TO MAKE THEM SIX (ornament)/MEARS & Co. LONDON FECIT VOLUNTARY SUBSCRIPTION 1777

Second (28½", 3-3-27, C sharp): iofeph hatch made me 1629 ANTHO ROOP ARM IAC PENY VIC SPENCER / W SANDYE OECONOMICIS

Third (30½", 5-1-6, B): THIS BELL WAS RECAST BY VOLUNTARY SUBSCRIPTION 1777 (ornament)/MEARS & Co. LONDON FECIT

Fourth (34", 7-0-16, A sharp): IOSEPH HATCH MADE ME (Medallion) 1605/ I F C W

Fifth (38½", 10-1-22, G sharp): + (crest) AVE: MARIA : GRACIA : PLENA : DNS : TECV

Tenor (44", 13-2-15, F sharp): T.P. M. 1676 HENREY LANMAN (roundel) IOHN FLACK TNO CW

N.B.—Inscription on 5th is contracted form of Angelic Salutation (Dns Tecv= Dominus Tecum, the Lord is with thee).

Note the illiteracy of Joseph Hatch and Thomas Palmar II (2nd and tenor). Hatch used a whole patera for each word, and was in no trouble when he had to put only his own name. The writer ventures to suggest that the No. 2 inscription should read: "Anthony Roper Armiger, Iacobus Peny, Victor Spencer, W. Sandye Oeconomicis". Armiger=Knight. The writer offers no translation for the last word. On the tenor it is presumably "T. P. M(ade me). 1676 . . ." and the last name should be "Flackton". An oblique stroke (/) denotes a new line of inscription.

This excellent installation and the work on the tower cost £1,000, and the bells were rededicated in the summer of 1936. Since then they have had an enviable reputation as one of the best rings in Kent, despite the smallness of the tower and the rather peculiar rope "rectangle". Despite being on two separate levels, they are very well balanced outside and in, and sound particularly grand when heard at the east end just outside the Roper Chapel. The skill and devoted attention of the steeplekeeper, Mr. James Stockbridge, is testified to by the fact that the only work done since 1936 was the rebushing of the clappers in 1969. Not only that, but he has taught a great number of youngsters to ring, on behalf of whom the writer would here pay grateful tribute.

Ringers are always welcome in Canterbury! When you ring St. Dunstan's bells, the oldest now in its seventh century, the newest nearly two hundred years old, it is the earnest wish of all of us here in the city that in these bells you may have something in which you may rightly find great joy.

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