DOVER'S BELLS

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IN MEDIEVAL TIMES the ears of Dovorians were constantly assailed by an astonishing and tuneless clamour from many competing tower bells. They had many functions to serve in the Middle Ages and in consequence they were regarded as an essential part of every religious and civil institution.

Their first use was to record the passing of the hours, an important matter for a community without individual time-pieces and therefore dependent upon the position of the sun or the clanging of a communal clock.

It does not seem known that early clocks possessed no hands to give a visual indication of the hour, but functioned entirely by striking the hours, and later the half and quarter hours as well, upon a bell. Anyone passing through Salisbury, Wiltshire, can see such a clock, still in working order (probably indeed the oldest surviving working clock on public display) in the nave of the cathedral there.

Besides the many bells in Dover there was the 'great Bell' of the town, at first hung in the old religious institution of St. Martin-le-Grande, and later in the town church of St. Peter which then stood on the site now occupied by Lloyds Bank in the Market Square. This bell is mentioned in many old documents since it not only served the people of the town as their only clock but was also used to regulate the various public and private activities of the people.

In A.D.1481 for instance, the market regulations read as follows:

> ITEM. THAT ALL MANNERS OF VICTUALLERS THAT COME TO MARKET, THAT IS TO SAY SUCH AS SELL BUTTER, EGGS, GEESE, CAPONS, HENS AND CHICKENS SHALL SELL AT ALL TIMES LAWFUL OF THE DAY.
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> ITEM. THAT ALL VICTUALLERS THAT BRING IN CORN SHALL BEGIN TO SELL AT 8 O'BELL, AND TO SELL UNTO 12 O'BELL, UNTO THE COMMONS OF THE TOWN.
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> ITEM. THAT NO STRANGER BUY, NOR INDWELLER FOR ANY STRANGER BUY, ANY MANNER OF CORN BEFORE 4 O'BELL UPON PAIN OF FORFEITURE.
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> ITEM. THAT ALL VICTUALLERS, THAT IS BUTCHERS, MERCERS, DRAPERS AND OTHERS THAT COME IN TO MARKET, THAT THEY KEEP OPEN NOR SELL NO LONGER THAN 12 O'BELL AND THAT THEY BE READY PACKED AND TRUSSED BY 1 O'BELL UPON PAIN OF FORFEITURE OF 12D AT EVERY TIME THAT HE OR THEY DO SO BE FOUND.

It seems that the town's 'great bell' was always rung at the four hours, at 4 am, 8 am, noon and 4 pm, besides at the market hours. It was also used to summon the population to the Market place for important public announcements and also to give warning of sudden danger or emergency. The ringer of this bell was a town official on the payroll, since in 1516 it is recorded that the town paid him the princely sum of £1. 6s. 8d. a year for his services.

The other important town bell was the curfew bell, and after this was rung no alien or stranger was allowed to be out in the town under threat of fine or imprisonment. It seems that this curfew bell always hung in St. Peter's church tower and it was probably part of the town's bell ringer's contract to ring it.

Bells served to call the faithful (and this of course meant the whole population in early days) to worship and there were many such occasions in Dover, which possessed seven parish altars and two monastic institutions, besides St. Mary-in-Castro at the Castle.

Bells by the score celebrated saint's days and times of public rejoicing or mourning,

besides welcoming distinguished visitors to the town.

These early bells must have produced a remarkably discordant clamour since they were hung 'as cast' unlike modern bells which are tuned on great bell lathes after casting to produce the correct pitch and tone. It is indeed now an exact science.

Before these lathes were invented the sound of bells depended entirely upon the skill and good fortune of the bell founder, who was one of the great craftsmen of medieval times.

Because of transport difficulties most bells were cast beside the tower in which they were to be hung, no mean feat when one considers that many of them weighed a ton or more.

The first local bells of which we have any direct record in Dover were those in the Pharos. This building was converted into a bell tower in very early times and two small bells were cast for it in the middle of the 13th century. In the Statutes of Dover Castle bells there are several references to the castle bells. Statute 14, for instance, reads:

> AT CHRISTMAS, EASTER, ASCENSION, AND THE FEASTS OF OUR LADY, AS WELL AS AT ALL THE CHIEF FESTIVALS, SHALL ALL THE PEALS, GREAT AND SMALL, BE RUNG: AND ONCE ALL TOGETHER FOR THE GREATER SOLEMNITY.

From this it seems that there were two separate sets of bells which were in regular use throughout the year besides the curfew bell which was rung every evening.

Some repairs were made to them in AD1286 and since the castle was royal property the king's exchequer paid the cost. The exchequer's entry reads:

> ITEM: 2 LBS OF SEA COAL BOUGHT TO MAKE BANDS FOR THE BELLS IN THE SMALLER BELL TOWER, AND FOR MAKING BANDS FOR THE TOWER OF JULIUS CAESAR, 8 PENCE.

The tower of Julius Caesar was the Pharos, and the smaller tower was Peverell's, which was in early times known as the bell tower.

These repairs were followed in the early years of the 14th century by a disaster in which several of the bells in the Pharos crashed to the ground and were cracked badly and of no further use, so several bells were re-cast and hung in new wooden frames sometime between 1345 and 1348. Once again the exchequer paid the cost and every tiny detail was accounted for in the Pipe Rolls. These entries give us a fascinating insight into the workings of such early undertakings, and priceless material relating to the old bell founders, an elite of the medieval world.

Two new bells were cast, one weighing nearly one and a half tons and the other over half a ton and as was usual in those days the whole operation was carried out in a bell pit dug close to the Pharos in which they were to hang.

A bell founder and his workmen, together with their tools and equipment, were fetched from Canterbury in an ox-drawn wagon at a cost of eighteen pence, the unskilled men and a few woodworkers being obtained locally. These included several sawyers to make the wooden beams for the bell frame, a carpenter to shape and fit them and a blacksmith to make the clappers, fixings, iron fittings and metal tools.

Sea coal was brought into the harbour by ship from the north-east and a search was carried out to find additional quantities of copper and tin, the two constituents of bell metal. These locally obtained supplies were found in Canterbury, Sandwich and Dover, and were added to the metal obtained by melting down the old bells.

Teams of oxen were engaged in hauling the wood on huge sledges for the bell frames and scaffolding, and also the wood to feed the huge fire needed to melt well over two tons of metal, a process which would have taken several days and nights, and consumed many trees in the process.

A bell pit was dug beside the Pharos and in it the founder and his men made and shaped the moulds, made of sand and cow dung, and then built a furnace nearby, with a channel in the ground connecting the

furnace with the mould, blocked until the metal was molten and ready for pouring. The fire was started with charcoal and then fed with logs of wood until the whole was a veritable inferno which was kept going until the metal was molten. Finally, when all was ready, the channel between the furnace and the mould was unblocked, permitting the golden coloured molten metal to flow into the mould until it was full to overflowing. The mould was then completely buried to guard against the new bell from cracking through being cooled too rapidly.

The day of pouring was always a great occasion and at Dover it was celebrated by an ample supply of food, bread, meat and ale to the workmen engaged in the project at a cost of 10s 4d, a sum which would have paid a good craftsman for weeks.

The individual costings are most interesting. Carpenters were paid half-a-crown a week, the smith and his boy together cost 3s 6d and the sawyers 4d a day. The master bell founder was paid a halfpenny per pound of the weight of the cast bells and in this case it amounted to £9 2s 2d, a considerable sum in those times. This payment by weight of the finished castings is interesting since many modern foundries still use this method of computing charges, a custom which is centuries old, yet still commercially acceptable.

The founders used 11 quarters of charcoal, the old bells, 164 lbs of extra copper, and 60 lbs of tin. The whole operation cost £15 18s 5d, a price which included even such small items as grease for the bell yokes. These bells seem to have survived for upwards of three centuries since no further reference to work involving the castle bells seems to have occurred until the 17th century,

In Dover town there were, as has been mentioned, a large number of bells. Old St. Martin-le-Grande, part of whose ruins survive just to the north of the stairs leading up to the "White Cliffs Experience", had bells which were used by the three parishes which had their parish altars under its hospitable roof, old St. James's church had several bells in its tower and St. Peter's, the church of the Corporation, which stood on the site now occupied by Lloyds Bank, had a peal besides the 'great Bell' of the town, and also the curfew bell.

Further peals of bells, in the great Priory of St. Martin of the Newark (where Dover College now stands), in the tower of the Maison Dieu (now of course the town hall), and in St.Mary-the-Virgin's tower, added their not inconsiderable cacophony which assailed the ears of medieval Dovorians. Yet even this formidable collection is not complete since various other smaller foundations of one kind or another had a bell or two which could, and did, add to the chorus.

The bell ringer was a recognised official of many of these institutions and Lenham's accounts of the priory for 1530, for instance, lists a bell ringer who was paid 20 shillings a year for his services.

It is recorded that two bells were hanging in St. Mary-the-Virgin's tower in 1497 and within a few years more were added, since in 1538 five were hanging there.

When one considers that all these many bells were hung 'as cast' and that many, if not all, were at least in some degree out of strict tune and tone, it must have been bedlam indeed and it is perhaps fortunate for the institution concerned that the Noise Abatement Society was not then in existence!

After the Dissolution, St. Martin of the Newark, the Maison Dieu and St. Peter's were all cannibalised and the materials dispersed. Since bell metal was valuable the bells were soon destroyed and by 1550 the only bells surviving in the town were those of St. Mary-the-Virgin which had become the town's church following the gift of it to the townsfolk by King Henry VIII, and those of old St. James and of St. Mary-in-Castro in the castle grounds. However a sixth bell was added to the five in St. Mary's tower in 1663.

In 1630 new bells were proposed for St. Mary-in-Castro at the Castle and the Master of the Ordnance was instructed to deliver 'two bronze sakers to Dover Castle

to be converted into bells'. Sakers were small muzzle-loading cannon. These sakers were made of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin called gun metal and this name survives today for a particular alloy of copper and tin. Bell metal was of course a bronze, with copper and tin roughly in the proportions of 13 parts of copper to 4 parts of tin.

Several bells were cast for the castle in the next few years and one of them survives. It hangs in St. Mary-in-Castro on a wooden frame, bearing the date 1639 and the initials I. G.

With the coming to an end of the Stuart line of kings the castle ceased to be a royal residence and became instead a military barracks. No rector was appointed to serve the church there after 1690, and the church fell into ruin and its bells were silent.

And now the story of the bells in the Pharos takes a new twist with the emergence of a character called George Rooke. He came of an old county family whose country seat was near Canterbury. He entered the Royal Navy, achieved rapid promotion, became a vice-admiral and was knighted. Turning his attention to politics he was not however as successful. To bribe the electors of Portsmouth, whose votes he solicited, he got official permission to transfer the bells from the Pharos to a church in his desired constituency in Portsmouth. This gave rise to the old local saying that 'the bells of Dover Castle can be heard in Portsmouth'.

There are two tail pieces to this story. Vice-Admiral Sir George Rooke was indeed elected to parliament from Portsmouth but there his success ended. After a period he lost his seat there and retired to the family estate. The second concerns the small bell still in St. Mary-in-Castro. Why was it not also sent to Portsmouth? Perhaps it got lost at Dover when the others were sent away? Or did some unwilling old Dovorian hide it under a pile of rubbish in silent protest at the stealing of the other bells? We shall never know, but a few years ago this old bell was discovered under a pile of rubbish and was restored to its place at the church to which it rightfully belongs and where we can still see it today.

In 1724 Samuel Knight, a famous early 18th century bell founder re-cast the six bells of St. Mary-the-Virgin into eight tuneable bells and these are the ones we still hear today. Samuel was perhaps the leading bell founder of his time and many of his bells still sound out across the rolling acres of the county. In the eastern part of the county we have perhaps the three finest sets of his bells which survive. They are at Whitstable, Wingham and, of course, in Dover.

STOP PRESS – 2

A busy year for Dover's BLACK WATCH

THE BLACK WATCH is the newest acquisition of FRED OLSEN LINES and joins the BLACK PRINCE in making Dover its Home Port. Unfortunately she has encountered several problems before setting off on her maiden voyage — due to start on 15th November for a 21-day cruise in the Mediterranean.

Thereafter she has an exciting programme of itineraries. The brochure shows that after two shorter cruises in December to Spain and the Canaries, she embarks, on 4th January 1997, on her longest cruise of the year, a 64-night trip around Africa, returning to Dover on 9th March at 08.00. On the same day at 18.00 she leaves again for the Caribbean.

In the summer she alternates between the Mediterranean and the Norwegian fjords, then has a 24-night cruise to Canada and New England in the fall.