

The Bells of Richmond St Mary, North Yorkshire: a social history

An outline

There is something particular about the bellringing tradition in England that has transcended the centuries and has become the heritage of the English speaking peoples. Once the preserve of the great cathedrals, peals of bells have become a commonplace feature in the soundscape of towns and villages throughout the land. They decorate our churches as well as our town halls and market squares.

The development and resilience of this tradition are essentially bound up with a changing cultural, social and religious landscape of our communities and, to that extent, Richmond in its rich bellringing traditions is not exceptional.

The focus of this paper is concerned with tracing the ties between bellringing and its purposes and the changing social and cultural context in which the physical development of the bell tower and chamber took place together with the more sophisticated ways in which bells were rung. In other words, the human and financial investment in bellringing was not only considerable here in Richmond as was the case elsewhere but, at the same time, it responded to the manner in which the wider community viewed and valued the continuing presence of this tradition in their midst. This involves the difficult task of trying to get into the mindset of peoples who rarely left a record of how they received this sometimes cacophonous incursion into their daily lives but value it they certainly did.

The narrative essentially divides into three parts:

a) A short history of St Mary's tower and its bells for which there exists a full record; a continuum of building, restoration and repair stretching over at least five centuries i.e. the bells mattered.

b) The ringing traditions of the early modern period - from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries; the upheavals of the English Reformation and the survival of bellringing; 'secular' v. 'sacred' traditions and the tensions between church and community. The 'secondary' record has a lot to say about this aspect though the primary evidence for St Mary's is thin on the ground. Nevertheless, we can be certain that ringing was very much the province of men of very modest social backgrounds who valued what they did for the money payments it generated but also for secular purposes as part of the cultural environment in which they lived out their lives e.g church 'ales'; Mayday ringing; perambulating the boundaries; 'rough' music; the extended ringing over 4th & 5th November which was as much a widely celebrated, cultural occasion as it was a political marker. These secular purposes were just as powerful as church obligation and, arguably, more so. There are glimpses of these traditions and practices within the parish and tower records.

c) The eighteenth and twentieth century transitions; the development of ringing methods in an age of science and reason and its impact at the local level. We have virtually no evidence of ringing practices at St Mary's in the eighteenth century. It cannot be assumed that increasing the peal to six bells reflected greater sophistication in change ringing. It is more likely that this remained the preserve of cathedrals and university churches. Nevertheless, significant investment in additional bells must reflect not only the growing prosperity of

Georgian Richmond but also the commitment of the church and its parishioners insofar as the church in this period directly funded its bells and its ringers.

The crucial transitional period at St. Mary's (as was probably the case in most provincial parishes) spanned the late Victorian and Edwardian years for which there is an abundance of primary material. The 1891-1911 censuses provide full detail the social backgrounds of most of the ringers in the period 1897-1904. Census material is also complimented by other sources - churchwardens' accounts'; peal books; attendance records; minutes of bellringers' meetings. Above all, the subscription list behind the purchase of two additional bells in 1904 is of particular value insofar it is possible to trace the social networks and broad social endorsement which made it possible to raise the c.£160 (equivalent to c.£11,600 in current values) needed to complete the work.

The records demonstrate the marked shift in social disciplines as well as ringing disciplines and captured by a pictorial record in addition to the written record. The assembly of the 1902 band dressed in the sartorial, middle-class 'uniform' of the day is particularly telling. What it does is to obscure the social hierarchy of the tower. The similarity between the 1902 band and previous generations is that most of the ringers came from socially modest backgrounds. The difference lies in the fact that the chamber hierarchy was led by individuals of social substance and substantial education e.g. the schoolteacher Richmond Briscoe who captained the band until succeeded in 1902 by the indefatigable Albert Morton, prominent businessman and councillor. The commemorative peal boards stand testimony to their early achievements but also to the social rigour, sobriety and disciplines that describe the age. It is no accident that events in Richmond are also contemporaneous with the expansion in change ringing signalled by the growth in county ringing associations from the 1880s onwards. It would therefore be worth tracking bellringing developments in other local churches for which records are certainly extant. viz: Grinton; Catterick; Bolton-on-Swale.

All of these broad ideas can be filled out to a greater and lesser extent. I have only scratched the surface of some of these sources and more detailed work is needed along with digging into the wider context.

Outcomes could include:

Publication in Richmond Civic Society Annual Report.

Local Historian

Presentations to North Yorkshire Record Office Lecture Series; Richmond Civic Society

Display Boards: St Mary's; Station; Richmond Museum but with appropriate amendments to style and content.

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