

The Bells of New College, from Five to Eight to Ten

The original bells of New College date from the foundation: Wykeham provided five bells at a cost of £132 16s 4d. Then in 1655 the original five were recast into a ring of eight by the bell-founder Michael Darbie, who cast bells all over England. This was the first octave in the county, and indeed the first complete octave known to have been cast by one founder. The surviving bells from this recast (third, fifth, eighth, tenor) are inscribed ‘Michael Darbie Made Me 1655’, while the sixth bears ‘Henry Knight of Reading Made Me 1672’; the rest now bear the eighteenth-century inscriptions of either ‘Manners Maketh Man’ or ‘Prosperity to New College.’ These were the work of the bell-founding dynasty of Rudhall, based in Gloucester.¹

New College was proud of its 1655 complete octave. Before this the great ring of Oxford was the six-bell ring of Christ Church, as it would become again later in the century, following the final recasting of Great Tom in 1680 and the increase in size of the Christ Church ring from six to ten bells, the first ring of that size in the county.² The earlier Christ Church bells attracted poetic attention. Tom was recast at least six times in the seventeenth centuries, and upon the recasting of 1626 Richard Corbett wrote his verses ‘To Young Tom’, which survive in several different versions.³

At some point just after 1655 an anonymous member of New College attempted some verses on the newly recast New College bells somewhat in the vein of Corbett: bells were clearly a matter of intercollegiate rivalry. The poem also shows that the anonymous Oxford poetaster’s obsession with pun and his debased interest in contrived comparisons imitated primarily from the techniques Donne and Cowley were alive and unwell in the interregnum.

Only one text of this poem now survives, Bodleian MS Rawl. poet. 84, fols. 105r-104r (reading retrograde):

On the Bells of new colledge in Oxon lately were molded; and from 5 were turn’d
into Eight: /

O that I were (as the nightingale) all voice
Cameleon like) all lungs that so my choyce
Of such a theame as this, might pleade pretence
Of venting some rare, new founde eloquence
yet all were vayne, (worth need’s no flattering guest)
my subjects praise sounds in their owne mouths best
New Colledge bells (once Five) as ’tis the fashion
Were lately taught what was regeneration
Oft had I seen them rise; & set, and stand⁴
by th’artfull guidance of a steady hand

¹ Frederick Sharpe, *The Church Bells of Oxfordshire* (Oxford: Oxfordshire Record Society, vols. 1-4, 1949-52), pp. 345-49. For the bells of Wykeham’s other foundation, Winchester College, see T. F. Kirby, *Annals of Winchester* (London, 1892), pp. 62, 224.

² Sharpe, *Church Bells of Oxfordshire*, pp. 246-47.

³ MSS texts are Bodleian MS Ashmole 36/37, fol. 260r; British Library MS Add. 30982, fol. 3v, and MS Egerton 2421, fol. 19r, and a text was printed too in Corbett’s poems; see Sharpe, *Church Bells of Oxfordshire*, pp. 259-66 for discussion. Later, a catch on Great Tom, c. 1654, made it into Playford’s *English Dancing Master*; and Dean Aldrich wrote a famous catch on the bell later in the century. It would be nice to imagine that the tune ‘The Old Tom of Oxford’, still played regularly in Oxford sessions, is part of this tradition. For more contemporary verse on change ringing, see the liminary verses to the Oxonian Richard Duckworth’s *Tintinnologia, or the Art of Ringing* (London, 1668, 2nd ed. 1671).

⁴ These are technical terms, suggesting that the author was himself a ringer.

though they went on apace, when once begun
 yet was it somewhat strange to see them run;
 Some sayd the bells were drunke I cannot tell
 If so, I'me sure casting hath made them well
 Surely some fault there was for downe they come⁵
 ready to be dissolv'd in martyrdom
 So having left the Aery region
 they tooke their station in the torrid Zone
 And to augment the lustre of their glory
 'Tis well that they have ben in purgatory
 They should be bulls Phalaris made such before
 Pull them but by their tailes, they're mad they rore
 And yet (I marvaile at their stunted power)
 though they speake big they'r pris'ners in the tower
 nay And for all they now exalted bee
 There's none but knows there ΓHnealogy
 These new-borne-babes pretty prodigious things
 Now never speakes but all the colledge rings
 Tis very true (though tis a straunge relation)
 Our bells are better for the Reformation.
 Eight out of Five; now then (Tom) hold thy peace
 thou who hast swayd so long, at last must ceace
 Black be the day that brought yee forth from th'ground
 Thou wert but hang'd before, but now thou'rt drownd
 So our are over all the victors growne
 Who strive with them, are surely overthrown
 Eight? Hydraes wounds were fertile thus we see
 one seed springs ten by Palingenestie⁶
 As if the earth Arithmetician growne
 had taught his sons Multiplication
 They'r louder after flames, nor should we wonder
 If after lightning comes a clap of thunder
 Having o'recome therefore they scorne despaire
 And conquer still for now they beate the Ayre
 Sweet! Solemne Melody! Which who but heares
 Cannot but know what musick's in the spheres
 Such were the heavenly ayres of Orpheus lyre
 and such the harmony the gods desire
 Ev'ry one is (for pleasure or for knells)
 So sound, so sweet, that all are passing bells⁷
 I'le adde no more but this; what need we feare
 Who have this Golden-Ring still in one eare:/:

⁵ Even today a central section of each level of the Bell Tower may be lifted to allow the bells to be lowered to the ground within the tower itself.

⁶ I.e. Palingenesis, the regeneration of living organisms from ashes or putrefying matter.

⁷ A clever penultimate pun: on 'passing bells' as funeral 'bells' tolling the 'passing' away of someone, and female 'bell[e]s' of '[sur]passing' beauty.

Nor would this be the end of bell-rivalry in the college: in 1712 Rudhall increased the Magdalen ring to eight, whereupon New College commissioned a willing Rudhall to push their ring up to ten.⁸ This is the ring the college still possesses.

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⁸ Sharpe, *Church Bells of Oxfordshire*, p. 348.