Addendum No 4 to *Musical Handbells*

WHO CAST THESE BELLS?

Since the publication of *Musical Handbells* in the year 2000 I have had many intriguing queries regarding the origin of old handbells. In some cases I have been able to answer these: in others I have only been able to indicate a possible source. One such query concerned a set of six handbells purchased at an Antique Fair in Newark.

The six bells range in size from 12F to 17A, three of which have numbers on the crown, parallel with the argent. Unfortunately, these do not help us very much in identifying them for a number of founders used 7 mm stamps with similar characteristics.

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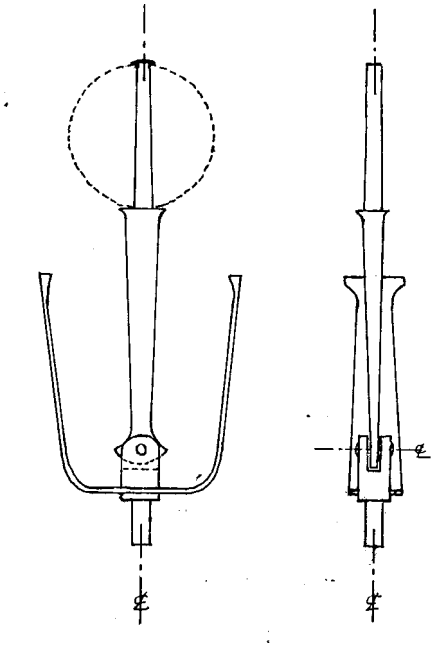
As may be seen from this photograph of the largest bell, they have rounded shoulders and domed crowns, which suggests that they could be of early manufacture. They all have a button under the argent and a recess around the staple-hole, but so do most bells of the period. Two have casting blow-holes in the waist of the bell which only affect the appearance and not the tone.

All show signs of being lathe turned. The turning marks are quite deep and there has been no attempt to finish or polish them. The treble, illustrated on the next page, shows the deep cutting on the inside of the bell. The tenor has only been turned near the lip on the inside of the bell; the remainder has been left as cast.

It is the fittings that are of greatest interest on this set of bells. The clapper assembly is of iron, the staple being square in section with the end rod being a push-fit into the bell and held by friction. Modern clapper staples are threaded, of course, but in earlier days a pin through the argent would hold in a push-fit staple.



The clapper shaft is nearly square in section at the ball and tapers down towards the staple end. The shape of the staple end is quite unusual and unlike any that I have seen and recorded in *Musical Handbells*. An iron pin, riveted over at each end, acts as a pivot for the clapper in the staple. Only the treble retains its clapper ball which appears to be made of sycamore. This has been pushed over the clapper shaft and then riveted over.

The two springs are made in one piece with a square hole cut to fit over the staple and then brazed into place. The end of each spring has been slightly curved to fit around the clapper shaft.

The leatherwork is plain with just a single line close to the edge of each side of the strap and a single annular ring around the cap. This is reminiscent of the work of Tom Miller, of Birmingham, but the bells are not his.

What can we make of all these facts? First, let us look at the bells. From their shape they appear to be eighteenth century. I'm inclined to suggest the latter part of the century, but it is possible that they may be earlier. However, most early handbells were cast for multiple use as hand/animal/servant bells and had cast-in iron crown staples, which were broken off when, made into handbells. These bells lack these cast-in iron staples. The fact that they have been partially turned suggests the late 1700s, although Whitechapel did introduce the first lathe for tuning handbells in 1738.

However, the fact that they have been turned doesn't fit in with the clapper assembly. The Cors of Aldbourne produced handbells with wooden balls as strikers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. William Rose, whom I conjecture produced handbells at Lambourn a short while later, used iron for his clapper assemblies, although his springs were riveted to the staple. (I discuss the work of these founders in chapters 3, 4 and 7 of *Musical Handbells.*) Brass was the usual material for clapper assemblies from the mid to late1700s.

The other intriguing fact is that the clappers are held into the handbell by friction alone. I suggest that the action of ringing would work these loose very quickly and once loose it would not be possible to replace them and the bells would not be ringable. No other examples of clappers being held in by friction alone have been found: maybe it put the founder out of business, or perhaps it led to them being pegged by a pin through the argent.

If the latter is the case, then they could be a very early set of handbells. However, this clashes with the bells not having cast-in iron crown staples which have been broken off and the lathe-tuning. Taken altogether, it is very confusing and I can offer no explanation; hence the title of this article!

I should like to thank Vaughan Evans for bringing these bells to my notice and his meticulous documentation and excellent photographs and drawings, and also for allowing me to use them in this article.