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The bells and bell-towers of Rochester Cathedral in the early thirteenth century

Two manuscripts written by Rochester scribes during the first half of the thirteenth century include some incidental references to bells and bell-towers. This article aims to present and interpret the available evidence, so far as it helps towards answering the following questions: how many bells did the church possess, and where were they hung?

1

Vespasian A xxii is one of the Rochester manuscripts which, some time after the dissolution of the priory, were acquired for Sir Robert Cotton's library in London. It contains an assortment of material relating to Rochester's affairs;/1 but the article which has particular importance for us is a long list of the church's benefactors (fols. 81v–91r), recording the various good deeds which they had done./2 This list was put together circa 1220. It is not very well organized, and many of the facts related are difficult to date with any degree of accuracy. But it is full of useful information on many subjects, including the church's bells.

The first relevant entry is this:

> Prior Reginald made two bells and put them in the greater tower. One got broken and was put to use for making another bell./3

We know that Reginald was prior in March 1155,/4 and possibly also towards the end of 1160./5 Working backwards, we know that he was not appointed till after 1146, when the prior in office was Brien; working forwards, we know that he had ceased to be prior before 1174×80, when the prior in office was Ernulf./6 In short, Reginald served as prior for an unknown length of time, beginning in the interval 1146×55, and ending in the interval 1155×80 (possibly 1160×80).

The wording of the entry – 'prior Reginald made two bells' – is not as straightforward as it seems. The author is telling us that the Reginald who made the bells was the person remembered later as prior Reginald: he does not necessarily mean to say that Reginald made the bells while he was prior. From other evidence,/7 it seems clear that the making of bells would usually have been the sacrist's responsibility, not the prior's; and we happen to know that a monk named Reginald, presumably the same man, was serving as sacrist in the 1140s./8 It seems likely, therefore, that Reginald had the bells made while he was sacrist, before being promoted to the priorate. On that view, the bells would be earlier (perhaps considerably earlier) than 1155. Possibly they had names; but if they did the names went unrecorded.

All we can say with assurance is that before 1180 a monk called Reginald, who

may or may not have been prior at the time, was responsible for making two bells, and for having them hung in a tower. The thirteenth-century scribe calls this tower the 'greater tower'; but we do not know whether that is what Reginald and his contemporaries would have called it. Later on, one of Reginald's bells became cracked, and the metal was reused (see below); but the other bell, by implication, remained hanging in the 'greater tower' and was still there when this list was written, circa 1220.

In the same list, further on, we find this entry:

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> Thalebot the sacrist made ... a great bell which till the present day retains the name of this Thalebot./9

We have no good clue when Thalebot served as sacrist, but it seems a safe assumption that his term of office preceded (perhaps by a large margin) the term of Radulf de Ros, who was promoted from sacrist to prior in the early 1190s (see below). The phrase 'till the present day' tends to imply that the making of the bell was ancient history by 1220./10

Further on again, we are given a more circumstantial account of the making of a bell named Breton. On of the monks, Radulf Breton, had 15 marks of silver (2400 pence) entrusted to him by his brother. The brother then happened to be 'killed while crossing the Channel'; and some time later, when Radulf himself was about to die, he arranged for this sum of money to be used to make a bell 'for the soul of his brother'. Accordingly,

> the money was given to Radulf de Ros, then sacrist, who took a broken bell which for a long time had been standing in the nave of the church, transported it to London, and made the bell which is called Breton./11

The cost of this bell amounted to 44 marks; the rest of the money was presumably found by the sacrist.

Though the compiler does not say so explicitly, it seems fair to assume that this broken bell is the same broken bell which he has mentioned previously – the bell made by Reginald which later broke (see above). When it cracked, apparently, the bell was unhung, lowered to the floor, and parked in some corner of the nave. Some 'long time' later, the metal was recycled. Radulf de Ros, the sacrist responsible for making Breton, went on to become prior in the early 1190s (not before 1190, not after 1193). The bell must have been made earlier than that, but we have no means of knowing exactly how much earlier.

By 1220, therefore, the monks owned three bells that we know about: Thalebot, Breton, and one of the pair of bells made by Reginald. This third bell was (so it seems) still hanging where it had been hung originally, in what the thirteenth-century scribe calls the 'greater tower'. He does not tell us where Thalebot and Breton were put; but we discover, from a slightly later source (see below), that they too hung in the 'greater tower'.

The mid thirteenth-century *Custumale Roffense* seems mostly to have been copied directly from Vespasian;/12 but it also includes several items which do not occur in that register. One of these is a text entitled 'What we should do for our benefactors on their anniversary days'. Since this text mentions the anniversary of every bishop from Siward to Benedict (who died in 1226), but not of Benedict's successor (who died in 1235), it seems safe to conclude that the list was drawn up circa 1230.

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The anniversaries were graded in importance, and one of the ways in which this gradation was expressed was by varying the number of 'large bells' rung to mark the occasion: sometimes one bell, sometimes two, but three bells only on the four most important anniversaries – Gundulf's, Ernulf's, Lanfranc's, and Radulf's./13 It is, I think, a safe inference that three was the total number of 'greater bells': the monks would have wanted every bell to be rung on Gundulf's anniversary.

But these 'large bells' were not the only bells the church possessed. On occasions when all three 'greater bells' were rung, they were rung 'together with the others'; and on several less important occasions, when only one 'large bell' was rung, it was rung 'together with the others in the little tower'./14 The fact that elsewhere we find repeated references to the 'greater tower' tends to imply that the tower called by this name was not the only tower in existence; but this is the only explicit reference we have to a 'little tower'.

3

In the Vespasian register, from the 1220s onwards, additions were made by many different hands. Most of these additions date from the thirteenth century; some are later still.

Among the thirteenth-century additions is a copy of a text entitled 'Concerning the duties of the servants', *De ministerio seruientium* (fols. 110r–115v); another copy of the same text (perhaps by the same scribe) occurs in *Custumale* (fols. 53r–60v)./15 The date of its composition is not easy to determine,/16 but I assume, provisionally, that it was written in the period circa 1230–50.

One chapter is devoted to the responsibilities of the vergers – the 'church servants', *famuli ecclesie*. There were two of them, but normally only one would be on duty: they each worked one week on and one week off. All sorts of interesting details occur in this chapter, but two passages are specially relevant. First, on the 'principal feasts',/17 during supper, the vergers were to strike three times 'in the greater tower on one of the greater bells, either on Breton or on Thalebot'./18 The implication seems to be that on these occasions both vergers would be in attendance, and that both were needed to ring one of the 'greater bells'./19 Second, when the body arrived of some layperson who had arranged to have himself buried by the monks, 'the bells in the greater tower' were to be rung, 'more or less', as the sacrist thought proper./20

In this author's view of things, it seems, there were only two 'greater' bells. One of the three greater bells existing circa 1220 – Reginald's bell – has gone missing. Perhaps it broke; perhaps it was moved to the other tower; or perhaps

it was still in the 'greater tower' but was now not considered large enough to be counted as a 'greater' bell. I see no way of deciding between these possibilities.

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On certain important occasions, not only were both the church servants required to be present: additional men were hired for the day, to help in 'putting up the curtains and ringing the bells' (Thorpe 1788, p. 31, from fol. 58v). On the most important occasions of all (i.e. the 'six principal feasts'), when the monks would have wanted every bell in the church to be rung, the number of hired men was eight; so the total number of ringers available was ten. Thus, if we are right in thinking that it took two men to ring either of the 'greater' bells (see above), the total number of bells would appear to be eight – Thalebot, Breton, and six smaller bells. Thalebot and Breton were hung in the 'greater tower'; some of the smaller bells were hung there too, the rest in the 'little tower'.

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The identification of these two towers is a matter on which there continues to be disagreement. There are two possible theories. The first was put into print by Hope (1884, 1886, 1898), though the evidence on which it was based was discovered in the 1870s by J. T. Irvine, the clerk of works responsible for some of the restoration carried out at that time. According to this theory, the Norman church did not have a central tower: the central tower which exists today did not exist until the fourteenth century./21 In consequence, the two towers mentioned in the thirteenth-century sources – the 'greater tower' and the 'little tower' – have to be looked for elsewhere. One of them can be identified with the north tower; the other has to be assumed to have disappeared, since the thirteenth century./22 The alternative theory was first proposed by Fairweather (1929). According to this, the phrase 'greater tower' can be taken to mean what it would normally mean, i.e. a central tower, and the 'little tower' can be identified as the north tower.

I do not propose to pursue this question here, though in my view Fairweather's theory is sure to be the right one. The only point I would stress is that the written evidence does not take us far on either interpretation. It tells us that the north tower existed, and had bells hung in it, either by circa 1180 (on Hope's interpretation) or by circa 1230 (on Fairweather's). But it cannot possibly be made to tell us when exactly the north tower was built, or what function was intended for it by its original builders./23

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Notes

1. The contents are listed by Flight (1997, pp. 81–3).

2. Printed in full – and fairly reliably – by Thorpe (1769, pp. 116–24). The last entry written by the main scribe is the one beginning with the name *Matildis de Luchedale*. Subsequent entries (pp. 124–5, from fol. 91r–v) were added later, by at least three different hands.

3. *Reginaldus prior fecit duas campanas et posuit eas in maiori turri. Una fracta apposita est*

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ad aliam campanam faciendam (Vespasian A xxii, fol. 83r–v). The last few words are difficult
to make out: this is how they were read by Thorpe (1769, p. 118), correctly as far as I can
see.

4. When a letter from the pope was addressed to him by name: 'to Reginald (*Reinaldo*) the prior
of the church of the blessed apostle Andrew of Rochester and his brethren' (ed. Holtzmann
1936, p. 265). Rochester's fourteenth-century chronicle, Cotton Nero D ii, incorporates a
copy of the letter, wrongly entering it under the year 1154. Hope (1898, p. 202) gives 1154
as the date of Reginald's death, but that is doubly wrong.

5. When the monks of Westminster put together a dossier of letters asking the pope to canonize
their abbey's founder, king Edward. An edited copy of this dossier survives in Rome. One of
the letters was written by somebody whose name appears, in a shortened and possibly
mangled form, as 'brother R. priest (prior?) of Saint A. of R.', *frater R. sancti A. de R. presbiter*
(sic). This evidence is easily accessible (Barlow 1979, pp. 322–3), and readers can judge for
themselves how far it is to be trusted.

6. Prior Ernulf is absent from Greenway's lists (1971, 1972), but his existence was recognized
by Wharton (1691) and is well enough attested (Flight 1997, p. 241).

7. Two sacrists are credited with making bells, Thalebot and Radulf de Ros (see below). There
is also an added entry in Vespasian, written by a late thirteenth-century scribe, stating that
'Ricard de Waledene monk and sacrist made the bell called Andrew, which cost 80 marks'
(fol. 91r). The same sacrist was also in charge of the building of the south transept, but we
do not have any good dating evidence for that, nor for Ricard's career.

8. He occurs, as *Rainaldus secretarius*, among the witnesses to a charter dated 1143 (Thorpe
1769, p. 653, from the original, DRc/T191/1). This charter relates to a piece of land in Strood
called Pinindene, the rent from which, around 1220, was one of the assets belonging to the
sacristy (Vespasian, fols. 92r–94v).

9. *Thalebot sacrista fecit ... cloccam magnam, que usque in hodiernum diem optinet nomen
predicti Thaleboti* (fol. 87r). The word *clocca* certainly means 'bell', cloche in French.

10. Hope, mistakenly, attributes this remark to a 'fourteenth-century chronicler' (1898, p. 202).

11. *Radulfus Bretun habuit in custodia de fratre suo qui necatus est transfretando xv. marcas
argenti. Qui Radulfus in articulo mortis assignauit predictas xv. marcas ad faciendam
campanam pro anima fratris sui. Qui denarii traditi sunt Radulfo de Ros tunc sacriste, qui
cepit campanam fractam que longo tempore in naui ecclesie steterat et duxit Londonias et
fecit campanam que dicitur Bretun, que custauit xliiii. marcas* (fol. 87v).

12. The textual relationship and dating are discussed by Flight (1997, p. 84). I do not know what
reason Hope had for thinking that Custumale was 'written about 1300' (1886, p. 326),
'compiled circa 1305' (1898, pp. 202, 264n, 294).

13. *... signum grossum unum ... signa grossa duo ... tria signa maiora* (Thorpe 1788, p. 37,
from Custumale, fol. 68r–v). Here and in the other passages quoted below, the word *signum*
certainly means 'bell'. This Radulf is the man who was bishop of Rochester (1108–1114)
before becoming archbishop of Canterbury (1114–1122).

14. *... tria signa maiora cum ceteris ... signum grossum unum cum ceteris in parua turri* (ibid.)
The second formula applied on nine occasions, including the anniversary of Odo bishop of

Bayeux (7 January).

15. The whole text was printed by Thorpe (1788, pp. 28–32), from a transcript of the latter copy. There is a third copy in *Reg. temporalium*, fols. 109r–112r, a register compiled by a clerk in the bishop's registry during the 1320s.

16. Internal evidence does not get us far. The custom of ringing the church's bells whenever the archbishop arrived in Rochester began, we are told, 'in the time of archbishop Baldwin' (Thorpe 1788, p. 31, from *Custumale*, fol. 59r); so the text is certainly later than circa 1190.

17. The 'six principal feasts' were Christmas, Easter, Whitsun, the Assumption of Saint Mary (15

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August), and the feasts of Saint Andrew (30 November) and Saint Paulinus (10 October).

18. *Faciunt etiam tres ictus inter cenam in turri maiori de maiori signo uel de Bretun uel de Thalebot* (Thorpe 1788, p. 31, from fol. 58r).

19. Possibly this was the basis for the implicit distinction between 'greater' and 'lesser' bells: a bell was a 'greater' bell if it took two men to ring it.

20. *Cum corpus alicuius laici defuncti a conuentu recipitur, ... ut libet sacriste signa in maiori turri uel plus uel minus pulsentur* (Thorpe 1788, p. 31, from fol. 58r–v).

21. That is when bishop Hamo 'caused the new bell-tower (*campanile nouum*) of the church of Rochester ro be raised higher with stonework and woodwork, and caused it to be covered with lead; and he also caused four new bells to be placed in it' (Cotton Faustina B v, fol. 90v, a fifteenth-century copy of a chronicle written by somebody closely associated with the bishop). By the way, this happened in 1344, not 1343, and the renovation of the shrines of Saint Paulinus and Saint Ithamar (fol. 91r) took place in 1345, not 1344. The misdating of these passages originated with Wharton (1691).

22. The idea that the church built by Gundulf lacked a central tower originated with Ashpitel (1853). Irvine inherited it from Ashpitel; Hope inherited it from Irvine. The possible existence of a vanished south tower was also first suggested by Ashpitel, for no reason beyond an assumption of symmetry.

23. The north tower used to have an upper stage, apparently of wood, carried on a projecting stone platform. (Though the woodwork had gone, the stonework was still there in the eighteenth century.) For the dating of this upper stage (and perhaps of the buttresses added at the north-east corner of the tower) the following evidence – not known to Hope – would seem to be decisive: on 5 June 1253 the king ordered that the prior and convent of Rochester were to be given twenty oaks from the wood of Marden 'for rebuilding their bell-tower', *ad clocherium suum relevandum* (Calendar of close rolls 1251–3, p. 364).

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