

## The 1688 Petition of Lichfield Cathedral to Elias Ashmole concerning their Bells

Elias Ashmole (1617-92), founder of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum (1683), was a native of Lichfield, and as a boy he was a chorister in the cathedral there. Lichfield Cathedral was wrecked in the civil war, and was subsequently rebuilt and reconsecrated after the Restoration. Ashmole himself, who retained close ties with his native town throughout his adult life, presented a new set of service books to the reestablished cathedral in 1662, and helped track down some of the cathedral's plundered manuscript library. He stood unsuccessfully for Parliament as the candidate for Lichfield in 1678, and would have done so again in 1675 had he not been commanded by the king to stand down.

Now Ashmole may have had some involvement with the bells of Lichfield Cathedral too. We know Ashmole cared about the bells, for when in 1653 the Jesus Bell was destroyed, Ashmole recorded the event thus:

The faire Bell called Jesus Bell at Lichf: knockt in peices by one Nickins a Pewterer, who was the cheife officer for demolishing that Cathedrall. About the bell was this Inscription

I am the Bell of Jesus, & Edward is our King  
Sir Thomas Heywood first caused me to ring.<sup>1</sup>

At the Restoration, the cathedral stood in ruins, and Bishop Hacket launched an appeal for £20,000, raising at least £15,000 for the organ, stalls, altar ornaments, and other furniture. He also commissioned a new ring of six bells, contributing £1,300 from his own funds for purpose. Only three were cast in his lifetime, and the tenor alone hung. Just before his death the elderly bishop heard this bell the first time it was rung, observing that it would be his passing bell. After Hacket's death, the project to complete the ring was carried through by his son, Sir Andrew Hacket. These bells, however, proved unsatisfactory, and a further appeal was opened in 1687, with Henry Bagley of Ecton commissioned to recast the bells into a peal of ten. It was not, however, until 1691 that all ten bells were ready. Seven of the bells still bear the inscription 'Conflavit me Henricus Bagley anno salutis 1688'; the remaining three have subsequently been recast.<sup>2</sup>

Some light is shed on the affair of the bells by a begging letter written to Ashmole in 1688 by the cathedral authorities, in which they claimed that the six Restoration bells had proved 'bad & vseless', and the cathedral had then decided to replace the ring with one of ten. We do not know if Ashmole stumped up the money for this new ring, but given his unblemished record of philanthropy to Lichfield and its cathedral, let us pay Ashmole the unscholarly compliment of assuming so without further investigation. The letter from the Dean and other officials of Lichfield Cathedral survives in the Rawlinson manuscripts in the Bodleian Library in a miscellaneous volume of Ashmole's papers, including among many other items the autograph of Ashmole's original rules for the Ashmolean Museum, and a paper on some local dances he remembered as a child. The letter has been published before, in C. H. Josten's 1966 five-volume *Elias Ashmole*, a biography and collection of many such manuscript materials. But as it is unlikely to be known to ringers, I have made a fresh transcript:

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<sup>1</sup> C. H. Josten, *Elias Ashmole*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1966), vol. 2, p. 653.

<sup>2</sup> J. B. Stone, *A History of Lichfield Cathedral* (London, 1870), p. 38; Charles Lynam, *The Church Bells of the County of Stafford* ([Stoke-upon-Trent], 1887), p. 18 and plates 95-98; Ann J. Kettle and D. A. Johnson, *Lichfield Cathedral: A History* (Stafford, 1982), p. 176 (reprinted from the *Victoria County History*).

Honoured Sir,

Whatever Interest this City and Church haue in your birth & Education; hath already already redounded, in so much honour thereby, and in yo<sup>r</sup> continuall bounty, to both: that we haue not the confidence to back with that topick this our Petition for your free gift, towards the finishing of the Ring of Ten Bells, instead of our former Six bad & vseless ones. Nor in truth haue we any other argum<sup>ts</sup>, but yo<sup>r</sup> Charity & our necessity. Of the former you haue giuen vs good proof, as we acknowledg w<sup>th</sup> all thankfullness. And of the latter we haue too much, thro' the misfortunes of the work. The deceitfullness of the ground first making our honest Bellfounder lose his casting the 4 Biggest to the damage of 30<sup>ll</sup>. and now his Errour in oversizing the 8 bells he hath cast, So far that they haue Swallowed vp all the Metall for the Ten; and that requires 80<sup>ll</sup> more to be added to our poor Fund, for the two other Bells proportionable to that bigness. But yet an error so much on the better hand; that would make extreamly for the better advantage & glory of the Cathedrall (The bigness of such a ring far more befitting the place; and these Eight being judged So very good, that all are loth to haue them broken & cast into less) if possibly that additionall Sum could be raised, to this purpose Esq<sup>r</sup> Diot, M<sup>r</sup> Walmisley, the Subchantar; and other Vicars & Ringers are most industriously vndertaking a new Collection, and we and Severall others are willing anew to contribute , and if you will please to put to the helping hand of your Piety & Munificence; you will add signally to those instances thereof already in our publick Catalogue of Benefactors, and will highly oblige both those Zealous vndertakers and especially

S<sup>r</sup>

Lich: 15. Octob<sup>r</sup>. 1688

Your thankfull Humble Serv<sup>ts</sup>

Lanc: Addison  
Hen: Greswold  
Thom Browne.  
Jo: Hutchinsone  
Chris: Comyn<sup>3</sup>

The club of 'Ringers' referred to is probably the recently established Lichfield ringing society, the 'Loyal Youths', founded 20 December 1686. The society was founded by Richard Dyott – the 'Diot' mentioned in the letter above – with himself, then only nineteen, as master; Walmisley was also a member. They met weekly and apparently rang both the cathedral's bells and those of St. Mary's church. The club had a uniform of sorts: each ringer wore a flannel waistcoat edged with black buttons, and a black silk cap. The society still existed in 1690.<sup>4</sup>

William Poole (New College, Oxford)

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<sup>3</sup> From MS Rawlinson D 864, fols. 169r-70v, also transcribed in Josten, *Elias Ashmole*, vol. 4, pp. 1856-57. Addison was the Dean of Lichfield, Greswold the Precentor, Browne, Hutchinson and Comyn Prebendaries. Diot is Richard Dyott of Lichfield, Walmisley possibly William Walmisley, Chancellor of Lichfield, and the Subchanter was William Baker, Vicar of St Mary's, Lichfield.

<sup>4</sup> From the *Victoria County History: A History of the County of Stafford*, vol. 14, Lichfield (London, 1990), pp. 159-170.