

THE BELLS OF ST. MARY'S

Abraham Rudhall, and his son of the same name, were bell founders in Gloucester from 1690 onwards. Their handiwork still rings out from Pershore Abbey, Abbot Lichfield's Tower in Evesham, and many other places, including our little church of St. Mary's in Wick, where the bell is inscribed:

ABRAHAM RUDHALL 1722

Today, and for many years past, St. Mary's has had just this one bell, but it seems certain that there once were more. Indeed, C.E. Mogridge Hudson, writing at the end of the 19th century, said that Wick Church had a western belfry with, by then, just one bell in it, but :-

"At an earlier period there was a tower containing several bells, but it has always been understood that they were sold in the XVIII century to raise funds to repair the church. One of them I know got domiciled in a belfry on top of Glenmore Lodge. It was a beautifully toned one and, when I was a lad, was rung four times a day and could be heard for a couple of miles around. There was originally a western entrance to the church under the tower."

Going back rather earlier than C.E. Mogridge Hudson, when the Rev. W.T. Humphries was instituted to the Vicarage of Wick by the Bishop of Worcester in 1878 he was surprised to find :-

".....no record of or connected with the Parish, and I felt it to be advisable to gather together what I can respecting its ancient condition."

He first describes the church and what he knows of its origins, and then quotes from the Inventories of Church Goods in Worcestershire temp. Edw.VI, (that is around 1550), that the church at Wick juxta Pershore was possessed of :-

..... i chales with a patten gylte, a sylver coppe, iii bells in the steple, a cope of grene velvytt..... a crofse of brafs."

Rev. Humphries added :-

"There is now only one bell left, not in a steeple but in a wooden dovecote like erection it is believed that the other bells were sold to defray some expenses of repair. I have heard that they within the memory of man were in the roof."

So, with two separate writers reporting the loss of Wick's bells, it remained only to confirm the actual occurrence and its date and this is now achieved by a careful perusal of the Churchwarden's Account Book for the early part of the 19th century. The Accounts disclose tiny incomes from rent of the Church meadow land, which are always spent on defraying the £1 or £2 cost of each annual Visitation together with numerous payments for bread and wine, washing of surplices etc. Then, suddenly, we read :-

"Year 1824

Received for Bells
Bell metal sold to Hope

£73. 4. 0.
£ 1.10. 0."

At the same time it is clearly shown that all this money raised was immediately expended in meeting large bills of £40, £20, and £26.13.05. due to Richard Hope for repairs to the building. Two centuries ago these amounts were of course substantial.

The records show that the fabric of Wick Church had been in a state of steady deterioration for many generations before this, and it would appear that the sale of the bells was most likely a drastic, even desperate attempt by the Churchwardens to put things right. Sadly however the situation continued to worsen, and by 1859 the Architect, Mr Dawkes, was prescribing the immediate building of a buttress on the south side to *prevent* chancel and nave from falling apart. A *rate* of first *one* penny and then twopence in the pound had to be instituted to keep the village from losing its place of worship.

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This concludes the story of Wick's missing church bells, though who actually purchased them and where they might be now remains a mystery. As for the western tower or steeple in which they hung it is probable that only modern-day archaeology could confirm exactly where it was, or indeed if it ever really existed.

LCC
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Addenda:

Since writing the above, further references have come to light in the "Inspections of Churches and Parsonage Houses in the Diocese of Worcester" in 1676 and 1684:

1676 "No hersecloth, no byer; they bury at Pershore, and make use of the doth that belongs to Pershore. The steeple fell down in the Wars but never yet repaired."

1684 "The great Bible being of the old translation, a Bible of the new translation in octavo which belongs to the parish is commonly used in the church. No carpet for the communion table. The steeple being long since fallen down, the bells hang in the church. Covering of the chancel a little out of repair."

So there we have final confirmation, viz: In the mid 1500s Wick Church had three bells in a steeple. The steeple "fell down" in the mid 1600s, whereupon the bells had to be rehung inside the church. In 1824 the bells were sold to raise funds for repair work, but around then the former tower and steeple had been replaced by a simple wooden bellcote holding the one tolling bell made or recast by Abraham Rudhall in 1722.

LCC
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