Beverley Minster Church of St John the Evangelist

A few years ago, in one of several series of T.V. portraits of English towns, Alec Clifton-Taylor described Beverley Minster as the finest Gothic non-Cathedral Minster Church in England after Westminster Abbey. How right he was! How nobly it stands out over the flat Holderness plain or against the gently rolling Yorkshire Wolds when it is viewed from a distance in any direction. What a light and airy - and uncluttered - aspect of lofty space is pre­sented by its interior view, so different from so many contempo­rary buildings whose stones have become blackened with age, and whose walls and floors have been filled with the gamut of tombs and memorial stones.

The earliest benefactor, St. John of Beverley, was born at Harpham near Driffield in 640 A.D. He was educated at Canterbury and then under the famed Abbess Hilda of Whitby. He became Bishop of Hexham from 687 - 705 and then of York from 705 - 718. He founded a Christian community and a Church dedicated to St. John Evangel­ist here in Bever-lac. In 706 he enlarged the Church and founded a monastery in which he was eventually buried in 721. The church was destroyed by the Danes in 866 and the succeeding Church was destroyed in 880. In 937, Athelstan, first King of all England, in fulfilment of a vow made before the battle of Brunanburh, enriched the monastery, granted it the rights of Sanctuary and refounded it as a college of secular canons - hence Minster - the church attached to such a college. Athelstan's foundation was maintained and improved but it still remained a collegiate Church. The increasing wealth and size and importance of the town and its wealthy and well-organised trade guilds necessitated the provision of a parish Church for the people, and so the building of St. Mary's Church commenced in 1120. Beverley must be unique in having two such magnificent Churches in such a small town.

The Minster Church built in 1140 was destroyed again in 1188 by fire and in 1213 the central tower collapsed. Commencing in 1220 the present chancel and transepts were built in the Early English style; and from 1308 the nave was built in the decorated style and from 1380 to 1420 the Minster was completed by the building of the west end in Perpendicular style.

The college of Secular Canons was dissolved in 1547 and the Church was re-established by Queen Elizabeth I in 1558, endowing it with some of the confiscated funds.

In 1717, the North Transept gable had moved four feet out of the perpendicular at its apex. It was forced back into position by Thornton, a carpenter of York by means of wooden shoring and wedges, a feat of structural engineering remarkable even by today’s standards!

The history of the bells is long and quite complex. There were two bells in the Church in 1050 which were probably destroyed when the central tower collapsed.

In 1360, there were four bells and a Great Bell. In 1663 a treble was added to give five bells and the great bell was recast. In 1747, two more small bells were added to give seven, plus the great bell. From 1799 to 1900 a further small bell was added to give a peal of eight bells. In 1900, the great bell was sent to Downside Abbey.

The present peal of ten bells including four recast bells was installed by John Taylor in 1901 in the N.W. tower with a tenor of 41 1/2 cwt in C. Some of the bells have inscriptions commemorat­ing, among others, St. John of Beverley, St. Hilda, St. Aelred of Beverley, St. Winwald, St. Brithunus and King Athelstan. At the same time, a Bourdon bell of 7 3/4 tons was installed in the S.W. tower which also contains the ancient bells Peter and Brithunus cast by Johannes de Stafford in 1360. The Minster is unique in that the quarters are chimed on the peal of ten bells to tunes composed by the organist John Cammidge, while the hours are tolled on the Bourdon in the other tower.

In 1756, a chiming apparatus, the winding mechanism of which can still be seen near the belfry door, was installed by Harrison of Barrow, who had also installed the frame for bells at St. Mary's. The Harrisons were clock makers who were probably also-carpenters, and John Harrison was the inventor of the first accurate chronome­ter used in maritime navigation.

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