Beverley St Mary

St. Mary's Church began as a chapel of ease attached to St. Mar­tin's altar in Beverley Minster, about the year 1120. The origi­nal Church was a long, aisleless building with a central tower and no transepts.

Immediately, the Church was adopted by the many trade gilds of the town which made it necessary to extend the Church, first by the addition of transepts (1180 - 1220) and subsequently by the addi­tion of nave aisles (1225 - 1250), the large Holy Trinity Chapel (now vestry) and crypt beneath (1280 - 1310), the extension of the chancel eastward and St. Katherine's Chapel (1300 - 1310). The climax of all the building was the splendid chapel of St. Michael with its priests' rooms above. This latter addition dates from the second quarter of the 14th century, just before the black death halted building for several decades.

Fragments of the original 12th century church still exist - bases of walling under the chancel porch, the original altar slab with its consecration marks, and a lot of 12th century masonry.

The 15th century saw the doubling of the height of the church by the addition of lofty clerestoreys, the building of the great west front (often likened to King's college chapel at Cambridge, but a century earlier than King's) and the South West porch (1420). The heightening of the 12th century tower to accommodate the cleresto­reys was a misguided addition, for it led to the collapse of the tower in 1520 during divine service when it caused the destruction of the nave and the loss of many lives.

The rebuilding of the nave, and the slotting of the fine tower into the existing church was completed in the incredibly short space of four years, and by 1524 the church had arrived at the proportions which we see today, virtually unchanged in over four and a half centuries.

Notable among the carvings in the church are the heads over the piers of the north arcade recording the townspeople who contribut­ed towards the cost of the rebuilding. Many of the carvings depict mediaeval musicians, probably because the Northern Gild of Minstrels was centred on Beverley. Most famous, of course, is the Pilgrim Rabbit carved about 1325 and thought to be the inspiration for Tenniel's illustration of the white rabbit in Lewis Carrols' "Alice in Wonderland".

The history of the bells in the church poses more questions than I am able to answer. Nevertheless, the questions are intriguing.

It is known that *"there were more than four bells in the tower of St. Marys' before 1417"* (the reign of Henry V. two years after Agincourt). Were these bells of roughly the same date and by the same founder as two ancient bells in the Minster i.e. 1360 Jo­hannes de Stafford ? Were these bells still in the tower when it collapsed on 29th April, 1520 ? Were they recast and placed in the rebuilt tower. A tower of these dimensions was not just built for decorative effect, it was intended to contain the *"Greate Belles"* which at that time figured so largely in church life. It is known that, a frame for six bells was in the tower in 1744 installed by Harrison of Barrow. At that time bell No. 2 (possi­bly) and bells 3 and 4 were dated 1599, No. 5 was cast in 1631, No. 6 was cast in 1700 by Samuel Smith of York and No. 1 in 1760. It seems possible that these later bells were recastings of earli­er bells, for bell metal is not difficult to re-cycle. In 1888, two trebles were added to form a peal of eight bells. Were these to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 ?

In 1900, the brave decision was made to install a peal of bells worthy of the Church and, to quote the inscription on the present tenor bell, "By reason of a gift of £850 by Mercy Crust, and using metal from the old eight except the fifth" a fine ring of ten bells with a tenor of 34.3.12, in D, was cast and installed in an iron frame by John Taylor of Loughborough.

All the bells have inscriptions which are in Latin, difficult to translate when they totally encircle the bells, but those on the 9th bell read "Piety, Death and Pleasure bid us to resound" and on the tenor "I Praise God, I call the Living, I bewail the Dead". According to Wright & Hoggard (1908) bells nos. 5 and 6 of the earlier ring of six (7 and 8 of the 1888 octave) had typical 17th century inscriptions. On no. 7 "As with a trumpet - so with my sound, I summon the Hosts of the Lord", on No. 8 "Before you lay them in the ground, learn wisdom by my mournful sound".

. A few years ago, there were difficulties in the tower, due both to damage to fittings and to a shortage of ringers, which prevented the full peal of ten bells being rung regularly. However, these have now been resolved. Damage has been repaired, former ringers have returned to the band, experienced ringers have come to live in the district and have joined the band, and a group of enthusi­astic learners is progressing well. So there is now a band capa­ble of ringing ten bells regularly for Sunday services.

Today's band is representative of many in the exercise. Perhaps younger than average, with a lively outlook and with a determina­tion to provide only the highest standards of ringing at St. Mary's. To this purpose, there are quite frequent quarter peal attempts on Sunday evenings.

Derek H Watson