Howden Minster

The Collegiate Church of St Peter and St Paul.

There are no remains of any pre-conquest church at Howden, although the Domesday book (1080) records a church and a priest here. It seems likely that work began in 1228 on replacing the Norman church with a new building in the early English style and the present church started to take shape. The base of the tower and the transepts were completed by about 1250, and after the church became collegiate in 1267, the rebuilding of the nave and choir was undertaken on a very lavish scale. The choir belonged to the Canons and it was here that they lavished their money on the finest and most intricate work. The nave was probably completed about 1300, and the choir between 1320 and 1340. In 1380 Canon Henry de Snaith left £10 in his will towards the building of the Chapter House and, after his appointment in 1388, Walter Skirlaugh, Bishop of Durham, assisted generously with the building, this beautiful structure being the last octagonal Chapter House built in England.

Contemporary with the Chapter House is the lower section of the tower with its great slender perpendicular windows recalling the windows in the tower of Durham Cathedral. In his will of 1403 Bishop Skirlaugh left £40 towards the building of the tower. The topmost section was added towards the end of the 15th century, the design of the tower being known as a lantern tower.

Not being a monastery, Howden Minster survived the Dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1540, but fell victim to the Dissolution of Collegiate Churches and Chantries in 1548, when the rectorial revenues went to the crown. Suddenly after being a particularly wealthy Church it was almost totally impoverished. The beautiful and spectacular choir at the East end of the church fell into disrepair and, despite repeated efforts by the parish-ioners to compel the new owners of the Canons income to repair it, nothing was ever done. In 1609 the choir was abandoned as a place of worship and it was blocked off, the nave only now being used.

More damage was to occur to the Minster, when in 1644 during the Civil war, some Parliamentarian soldiers stabled their horses in the North Transept and Choir, and did great damage to the tombs, brasses and monuments. A new organ had been built in 1639 which they destroyed and when leaving Howden the following day were seen to be trying to play the organ pipes as they marched to Selby. Finally after 148 years of neglect, on the 29th September 1696 the roof of the choir collapsed during a thunderstorm. On the 26th December 1750 the roof of the Chapter house collapsed and the ruins lay where they fell until 1784 when they were cleared out. Several old houses in Howden have bits of Minster masonry in their rockeries to this day.

The earliest record of bells at Howden Minster are from the Churchwardens accounts of 1595, when various items of expenditure were recorded to do with the installation of five bells, but no records exist as to the name of the founder. A few extracts from the accounts from March 1595 to 1602 are as follows:

1595. *Item to ould Turner, joiner, for fowre pulles for the bells -- 12d (5p)*

*Item to Thomas for one daie for helping to rayse the bells -- 6d (2.5 p)*

*Item to John Petch for halffe a year for keeping the cloke and wringing curfews 10/- (50p)*

*Item to John Petch for sex cotterills for the bells 2/- (10p) (Cotterills were the iron pins for fastening the bells)*

*Item for grease to the bells -- 8d (3p)*

1596*. Item for grease and tallowe for the bells on coronation day -- 8d (3p)*

*Item paid to 5 wringers that gyded the bells on coronation day -- 1/8 (9p)*

1597*. Item to John Petch for mendinge fyve bell tyers and maykinge bowsters and cotterills -- 8d (3p)*

 *Item to John Petch for one ironstay and stapples for the great bell whele -- 2/6 (12.5 p)*

1601*. Item paid to Mr. Martom for chiming the bells the seconde of October -- 3/4 (17p)*

*Item paid to John Petch for mendinge a greate shackle and a greate bar of the fourth bell and a goodgin of the,ladye bell and a shackle of the four bell -- 2/10 (14p)*

1602. *Item given to wringers when the kinges majestie was pri claimed 2/- (10p)*

Nothing else is known about the bells or what happened to them until 1775 when a new ring of eight were cast by Pack and Chapman of London with a 27 cwt Tenor in E flat, and were first rung on Friday the 14th of July 1775. They were reported to be of a particularly sweet and musical tone. The Treble and the fourth were recast by Taylors of Loughborough in 1869 and the fifth recast by Taylors in 1909. The 9th October 1929 is the next infamous date stamped on the tower and bells of Howden Minster. A travelling circus was performing in the Market Place that day and one of the circus workers was reportedly sacked for drunkenness. Sometime during the night he decided to vent his fury at being sacked by setting fire to the tower. The fire destroyed every-thing in the tower, a fine turret clock made by W Potts and Sons which had been installed in 1869, and all documentation which had been kept there about past ringers, peals, weights of the bells. All of it went that night. The bells at that time were hung at the top of the tower, the fire brought six of them crashing 120 feet down onto the High Altar with two left hanging precariously in the frame. Work soon got underway repairing the tower and the bells and fragments of bells were dispatched to Taylors of Lough-borough for recasting, but it was to be three years before they rang out again in Howden. When, in 1932, they were rehung in a new frame it was decided to place them at the base of the tower (from where they were rung before the fire), because it would cause less strain on the tower which had suffered much heat damage to the stonework. Placing the bells low down certainly caused less strain on the tower but caused much consternation to the local population living close to the Minster. When the previous bells hung at the top of the tower the sound travelled uninterrupted across Howden. The new ring of eight at the bottom of the tower, although better tuned now, echoed off surrounding buildings and for many years there were complaints about the bells being too loud. The ringers of the day found the only way to reduce the sound echoing off the higher buildings was to ring the bells slowly so each bell could be heard distinctively, peal times give an indication of the this with a minimum of 3 hours 15 minutes being the norm. The first peal on the bells after restoration was on Monday 26th December 1932 when a peal of 5040 Grandsire Triples was rung at 22.9 changes per minute, the band that day being the following:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Treble | L Rodmell | 5 | A E Sellars |
| 2 | H Fairlam | 6 | R B Smith |
| 3 | H S Morley | 7 | W Middleton |
| 4 | G F Williams | Tenor | E Philpot |
|  | Conductor: G F Williams |  |

The weights of the bells are: Treble 5 cwt, 2nd 6 cwt, 3rd 7 cwt, 4th 9 1/4 cwt, 5th 11 1/8 cwt, 6th 13 cwt, 7th 16 1/4 cwt, Tenor 22 1/2 cwt in E flat.

The bells were overhauled in 1985 and the frame cleaned and paint-ed, after which the long process of forming a band was started. As in most towers recruiting has its ups and downs, but at Howden we have managed to maintain regular Sunday service ringing for a number of years now and hopefully we will continue for many years to come.

David Powell