



Bicester's Bell Foundry

Seventy years ago this month the Shambles Bell, cast in 1732, was hung in the grounds of the Garth, where it still hangs today.

In the latter years of the seventeenth century and during the first half of the eighteenth century a family of craftsmen named Hemins lived in Bicester. Edward Hemins was the town clockmaker and gunsmith who supplied a clock to Islip Church in 1707.

His son, also called Edward, was baptised in St Edburg's Church on 11th September 1698 and eventually went on to succeed his father in the family business. Their tower and grandfather clocks are fine pieces of craftsmanship and many still survive today.

Edward Hemins, junior, added bell founding to the business in the late 1720s. In following the occupations of gunsmith and

clockmaker he was already skilled in the art of casting brass and gunmetal, and bell-metal is very similar to the latter. Their foundry was in Bell Lane, giving the road its name today.

Hemins's bells were always finely moulded and well cast; usually inscribed in neat lettering, and for founders' marks Edward used at least three types of fleur-de-lys, two of which were quite elaborate in design. The tone of his bells always compared favourably with those of his contemporaries. One of his last castings, for Ambrosden Church, was taken as the standard for the other bells in the tower to be tuned to when they were renovated in 1928, showing that, even after nearly 200 years of use, it was still just as good as the day it was hung.

The earliest of Hemins's bells that we know of date back to 1728. In

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Bicester Advertiser Local History Article	17th June
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The town house bell now hangs in the grounds of the Garth. Pictured here in the 1970s.

that year they supplied one to Preston Bissett and a ring of five to Wootton Underwood. The following year they supplied bells to Oriel College and All Saints Church, in Oxford, and cast bells for Ardley, Broughton Castle, Hook Norton and Piddington.

In 1730 Edward supplied a bell to Edgcot, in Buckinghamshire. But the inscription on it is the earliest one we know of where he uses the spelling "Bister", any inscriptions before that had always used the spelling "Bissiter".

In 1731 he cast a bell for St Clements Church, Oxford. Then, in 1732, he cast a ring of five bells for Wootton, near Woodstock, as well as

one for Waterperry and one for Stowe House, near Buckingham.

In that same year he also cast the most significant of his bells, at least from a local history perspective, for this bell now hangs in the grounds of the Garth. It was originally cast for the Town House that stood in the middle of Market Square, adjoining the Shambles. It was used as a call bell and clock bell there until the building was destroyed in a riot in 1826. Ten years later Bicester Workhouse was built and the bell was hung there, where it stayed until it was taken down in 1950 and moved to the Garth. It is 13 ½ inches in diameter and, as well as the founder's mark, it bears the inscription "R. Walls, R. Maynard, Overseers. E. Hemins. Fecit 1732".

Over the following twelve years he cast bells for Water Stratford, Aston Rowant, Cowley, Bletchingdon, Piddington, King's Sutton, Grendon Underwood, Warksworth and Culworth.

On 28th May 1743 the furnaces of Hemins's bell foundry were used for the last time when Edward cast a



Town House and Shambles, in Market Square. The original home of the bell.

fifth bell for Ambrosden Church and a small clock bell for Caversfield House. He died the following year and, according to the parish registers, was buried in St Edburg's Churchyard on 8th April.

His will provided for his wife and instructed his brothers, Joseph and Benjamin, Mr John Walker, maltster, and Mr Richard Walls, draper (named on the Town House bell), to sell his "foundering shop" and other

goods and divide the proceeds among his mother and four children, Martha, Edward, John, and Richard. He left his gunsmith's tools and stock-in-trade to his brother Benjamin.

No bells made by Joseph or Benjamin are known of, but it is known that Joseph later moved to Banbury and worked as a clockmaker there.

- Matthew Hathaway



Bicester Workhouse, where the bell was last used.

Straight Joints & Curved Braces Talk

An introduction to observing dateable features in old buildings - a talk prepared for BLHS, by Heather Horner and presented via a Zoom meeting.

Heather lives in West Oxfordshire. She's had a long interest in landscape history, particularly buildings in the landscape, and she is an active member of Oxfordshire Buildings Record, an organisation dedicated to studying old buildings. Her professional background as a research scientist comes in use for making detailed observations of vernacular buildings, and it is this aspect that she talked about. Heather explained that her talk would cover:

- What makes a dwelling?
- What do you build with?
- What drives change?
- What big changes can you see from the outside?
- Which came first? Clues to sequence of changes.

Possibly the oldest continuously inhabited dwellings still standing are Westwick Cottages in Hertfordshire, a timber framed building infilled with brick. Dendrological studies date the timbers to the 12th & 13th Century. Obviously people lived in "buildings" prior to this date but the use of brick gives longevity to a building. Those constructed solely from timber no longer survive.

Early buildings used local materials, the practicalities of moving heavy timbers and stone and bricks being a limiting factor. Most villages and towns in Oxfordshire had a local quarry that supplied building stone, and some had their own brick kilns. The canalisation of some rivers in the 16th & 17th Century and a comprehensive canal system for the UK was developed in the 18th and early 19th Centuries which allowed more sophisticated building materials to be used.

Roofing construction and the materials used for covering the timbers are a good guide to the history of the building. Timber was always used to support the roof but the use of straight(ish) tree branches for the rafters rather than straight sawn timbers, indicates an earlier construction. The pitch of the roof is important as a modern tiled roof sitting on an old stone building with a steep pitch, usually indicates an earlier thatched roof (needed to shed the water more efficiently).



The Queens Head, Crowmarsh Gifford

Original floors may have been simply earth and lime, to be replaced later with stone, pavements and brick. Where they still exist, the pattern of wear may give a guidance as to age.

Most buildings evolve over time – maybe to create more space for people and/or animals. But with the basic requirements for a dwelling – heat, light, cooking, weatherproofing, sleeping accommodation, toilets, etc., most buildings will show signs of at least some of these requirements being updated. For example, the change from an open fire, a fire with a smoke hood, adding a chimney, modifying the hearth to burn coal, and modifying the hearth for more efficient cooking (addition of ranges). Many of these changes are influenced by economics and fashion.

Many changes can be seen from the outside – style of stone brickwork courses, the style of a roof, which way the gable ends face, the filling in of windows to avoid window tax and, as mentioned before, the availability of building materials often dictated by the arrival of canals (nearest canal to Bicester is Lower Heyford) to transport coal, and then the railway (1850 Bicester Town station with adjacent coal-yard).

Heather illustrated her talk with some delightful pictures as examples of what to look for to date a building and I've included some of these in this report. But I've not mentioned styles of windows and doors, fireplace design, staircases – all important factors to aid dating buildings.

- Bob Hessian



Interior of the Queens Head



Carpenter's marks on floor joists. Off-site manufacture with the numbers aiding reassembly on-site.

11th May 1861

A NEW FIRE BRIGADE FOR BICESTER

We are happy to know that very active measures are in operation for the formation of an efficient fire brigade, for the town and district. This is a step in the right direction, and the moment is most opportune. A meeting is about to be held for the purpose of ascertaining the amount of outlay required for the equipment of the brigade, and the best mode of obtaining it.

The men selected should be trustworthy persons whose services could always be made available, and upon whom the utmost dependence can be placed. Let them be provided with waterproof boots, caps, coats, any other simple requirements, and they will cheerfully acquire whatever discipline is necessary in the organisation of an efficient brigade.

Get the two small engines into good repair, and half a day's practice in each month will not only keep the three engines in proper working condition, but answer all the purposes of drill for the men, and constitute a brigade that would be worthy of the district, and equal to any emergency.

And as to the cost of all this, it would be as nothing in comparison with the incalculable utility, and the spirit of confidence it would create in the public mind. If the matter is taken up energetically by the right men, the funds would soon be obtained. What farmer, or tradesman, would refuse his 10s. annually, and this, added to the donations which the gentry would very willingly give, will supply an ample fund.

In a few days the public will, in all probability, be in possession of the intended scheme, and we feel confident there will be no lack of public sympathy when the appeal is made.

...a few weeks later...

25th May 1861

NEW FIRE ENGINE & BRIGADE

The want of a well-organised body of men, acting under proper control, to attend with the Engines, having been seriously felt during the late disastrous fires, the Engine Committee have taken the matter in hand, and have resolved that an efficient Fire Brigade shall be at once formed, consisting of Superintendent, Foreman, Engineer, and an adequate number of Fireman, who shall be provided with suitable clothing, be properly trained, and remunerated for keeping the Engines in good working order.

The Committee have procured a new and powerful Engine, by Mereweather of London, and have had the old ones put in a good state of repair.

To be enabled completely to effect the above desirable objects, the Committee beg to solicit donations and annual subscriptions towards the equipment and maintenance of the Brigade. Annual subscribers of 5s. and upwards to be entitled to the use of the Engine free of charge. Donations and subscriptions will be received at Messrs. Tubb and Coleman's Bank, or may be paid to G. Kirby, Esq., Bicester.

22nd May 1896

DIOCESAN EXAMINATION

The annual Diocesan Examination in Religious Knowledge of the scholars attending the National Schools here was conducted by the Rev. A.R. Price, rector of Hethe, on Monday last, that of the boys in the morning, and the girls in the afternoon. The Inspector's report has not yet been received, but we are able to state that the Bishop's prize in the Boys' School has been awarded to Willie Collins, nephew of Mr Alfred Collins, Woodfield, and grandson of Mrs Collins, Henley Gardens; while in the Girls' School Hetty Clifton, of King's End, has gained the much-coveted trophy.

It is worthy of notice that Willie Collins is (we believe) the sixth representative of the Collins family who has been successful in winning the Diocesan prize at the Bicester National Schools.

10th May 1918

BAD LANGUAGE ON THE HIGHWAY

Matilda Ellen Winman, married woman, of Bicester, was summoned before the Bench for using obscene language on the highway at Bicester, on April 22nd. The defendant pleaded guilty.

PC Phipps said: "On Monday, April 22nd, at about 8:35 pm, I was on duty in North Street, Bicester, when I saw the defendant with a crowd of women around her. She was throwing her arms about and making use of obscene and abusive language towards a girl named Botley. I cautioned her respecting her language and advised her to go away. She refused, and also refused to give me her name and address. She was afterwards taken away by her daughter, and I told her I should report her." The words the defendant was alleged to have used were written on paper and handed to the Bench, afterwards being read over to the defendant.

The defendant denied using all the words complained of and said the girl Botley was the cause of the row. She was fined 5s. and allowed a week in which to pay.

27th May 1938

AIR RAIDS PRECAUTIONS MEETING AT BICESTER

A public meeting, called for the purpose of explaining the air raids precautions scheme, was held at St. Edburg's Hall, Bicester, on Monday evening, when there was a large attendance, and the majority of those present signified their willingness to attend a course of lectures on Mondays and Fridays by Mrs J.F. Erskine, Middleton Cheney, who has been officially appointed lecturer for the county.

Mr Fred Hudson (Chairman of Bicester Urban District Council) presided, and he was supported on the platform by Col. Bartlett (county organiser), Miss Bliss (hon. sec. Oxfordshire Red Cross), Mrs Erskine, Brig-Gen. W.T. Hodgson, Major G.E. Gosling, Major A.G.C. Fane, and Mr T.W. Liddington (clerk to the Bicester Urban and Ploughly Rural Joint Air Raids Precautions Committee).

Col. Bartlett gave a short address, in which he dealt with the possible result of air raids on a civil population. He said if they learnt what to do then, if the time ever came, there would be no panic.

Miss Bliss appealed for helpers so that England could show the world what could be done by a voluntary system. Other nations, she said, had had to do that work by compulsion. She spoke at length of explosive, incendiary, and gas bombs, and said their respirators were ample protection for all gases likely to be used in warfare. The air wardens' job was a difficult one, and they would need everyone's assistance.

The chairman spoke, and on the motion of Major Gosling, a vote of thanks was passed to Miss Bliss.

Talks Update

Our next talk, presented via Zoom, will be on the **21st June, at 7:30pm**, when Matthew Armitage will be giving his talk about **The History of Tooley's Boatyard** and the Oxford Canal. Complete with a selection of photographs. As before, the link for the talk will be emailed out to members nearer the time.

Roll of Honour

The following are the local men, and those buried locally, who died in the Second World War, 80 years ago this month.

Dr. Richard Edmund Symes-Thompson, of Finmere.

Died: 11th May 1941 Aged: 28
(Wounded in an air raid and died at St Luke's Hospital, Chelsea.)

Sergeant William Keith Clarke, of Toronto, Canada.

Died: 15th May 1941 Aged: 30 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Upper Heyford, buried in Upper Heyford)

Sergeant James Lyle Newton.

Died: 15th May 1941 Aged: 20 Served in: Royal Air Force
(Died on service at RAF Upper Heyford, buried in Upper Heyford)



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