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'Miles Graye Made Me...'

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It is sad that we so often fail to notice the local history that is all around us. For 40 years I have sat in Newport Church Sunday by Sunday and seen the shield often the wall of the north aisle with the words: 'Miles Graye made me 1620'.

I knew that it was taken from one of our church bells when it was recast in 1926, but I had never wondered either who Miles Graye was, or where he had made the bell – until earlier this year when someone lent me an old copy of *Essex Countryside*, dated 1955 which contained a short article on Essex Bells.

There was one short paragraph that aroused my curiosity: 'journeymen craftsmen for centuries travelled Essex making bells in the fields, among the most famous being the three generations of Miles Graye, who came from Colchester and practised the craft from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I to James II'. How were bells made 'in the fields'?

From H. B. Walters' well-known book, *Church Bells of England*, I learnt that the first bell-founders in England were often described as tinkers' and also made pots and pans in brass and copper. The travelling bell-founders were particularly busy after the Reformation as during the time of Cromwell there was no demand for bells and many of the great medieval foundries had closed. Because of their great weight, bells were extremely difficult to transport and required large teams of oxen and a number of men, who 'required the assistance of large quantities of beer', which no doubt slowed their progress! It was therefore obviously cheaper and easier for the bells to be cast on the spot by a travelling bell-founder. Temporary furnaces could be erected and local labour employed to assist. Usually the bells were cast in the churchyards, but there are some records of repairs being carried out to church floors when a bell had actually been cast inside the church, probably under the tower so it could easily be hauled into position.

The history of the Graye family of Colchester has always been difficult to define with any accuracy as the parish records for the relevant period are very incomplete due to the Civil War in England. However it seems generally accepted that the outline given in *The Church Bells of Essex* is the most likely and accurate.

A Miles Graye was known to be a householder in Colchester in 1567, and it was his son who became the famous bell-founder, Miles Graye I. He has been described as 'the prince of bell-founders' and began his career as an apprentice at a foundry at Colchester belonging to a Richard Bowler. The exact date of his birth is not known, but it was not later than 1580. Unfortunately the first definite reference to him as a bell-founder is, as stated in *The Church Bells of Essex*, 'by no means creditable to him'. In 1598 Miles was examined by the bailiffs of Colchester and made a voluntary confession acknowledging paternity of a child expected by Alice Mullynges whom he had met at the house of Richard Bowler, and who may well have been a domestic servant there. However matters were put right and Miles duly married Alice. We know from his will that Miles Graye I had four children living at the time of his death, Miles, James, Ann and Mary. Alice must have died some time previously as he leaves most of his property to 'Dorothy my loving wife'. He made his will in 1643 when he describes himself as 'being weak in body and crazed with age, but yet in perfect mind and memory'. He died in 1649 and may well have suffered from privation during the siege of Colchester when some of his property was destroyed by fire.

His son, Miles Graye II, was born about 1599 and married Jane Banishe of Stratford on 16 August 1622. Miles II is known to have worked in Saffron Walden and to have cast bells there between 1629 and 1641. The registers of Saffron Walden Church contain the records of baptisms of five children of Miles and Jane Graye between 1630 and 1639, and also the burials of two, the last being in 1643. The family therefore lived in Saffron Walden at least from 1630 to 1643. We know that Miles II had a foundry in Saffron Walden as there are records of bells being carried there by cart from Hertfordshire. The foundry was obviously not far from the church as the cost of carrying bells to and from Saffron Walden Church is very low. It has been suggested that Miles employed his son as his agent in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire at this time with his headquarters in Saffron Walden. However the Newport bell was made in 1620 before young Miles moved to Saffron Walden and is listed among those made by his father, Miles I. There are no bells cast by Miles Graye II after 1642 and he appears to have left the trade at that time, probably due to the Civil War, although it has been suggested that there might have been some quarrel with his father, as he was cut off with the proverbial shilling in old Miles' will. Miles II is believed to have died in 1666.

There was a third Miles Graye, son of Miles II and Jane, born at Colchester in 1628 who carried on the bell-founding business after the death of his grandfather in 1649. He worked mainly in Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Huntingdonshire and continued to cast bells until his death in 1686. Miles II and Jane also had a son Christopher, born in 1626 who became bell-founder, but he did not work in Colchester or cast any Essex bells. Ann, daughter of Miles Graye I also married a bell-founder, John Darbie, who is known to have cast 161 bells in Suffolk.

A total of 415 Miles Graye bells remain today and we can be proud to have one in Newport. Nowadays we normally only hear it ring on Sundays to summon people to church, but in the past the bells rang out at midday each Sunday as the churchwardens, carrying their wands as symbols of authority, went round the village clearing all the alehouses and inns – the origin of 'Time gentlemen please'.

After the restoration of the monarchy there were also compulsory bell ringings paid for out of the parish rates to mark the anniversary of the restoration, the coronation of Charles II and the discovery of the gunpowder plot on 5 November. In the early 18th century the ringers of Newport were paid five shillings a day to ring on these anniversaries, and they also rang on the Queen's birthday.

One final intriguing question remains; where was the Newport bell made? Was it made in Colchester and transported by cart, or cast 'in the fields',

or could it have been made much nearer home? In the deeds of Rooke's House on Elephant Green, we find an entry made in 1755: 'The South side of the property adjoins the land of the late Edward Barron, formerly the Bell Yard, and includes the site on which the Bell House formerly stood'. Could Miles Graye have made our bell in Newport?

Note: This article is reprinted with permission from *Newport News* August 1999 issue. See also *Newport News* December 1990 issue and *Saffron Walden History* No 26, pp 57-58.