

PRIMITIVE HAND-BELLS.

“ Notices of some popular Superstitions still extant, in connection with certain of the primitive Ecclesiastical Hand-Bells of Ireland,” by John Bell, Esq., Dunganon, F.S.A. Scot. In this communication Mr Bell remarked :—

“ Of the greater number of these curious bells, little more is known than merely their names, which have come down to us traditionally, from a very remote antiquity. Their sacred character, and the veneration in which they were held, no doubt tended to their preservation. I have seen these rust-corroded relics preserved in beautiful and costly reliquaries, which give a lively idea of how much they had been valued by our ancestors. The shrine formerly possessed by the late Major Nisbet, in the county Donegal, is of this description, but that ‘ presented by Domnald O’Lachlin to Domnald the Comorbha of Patrick,’ lately in the possession of Mr Adam M’Clean of Belfast, is decidedly the finest piece of Irish antiquity extant. It is remarkable for the richness and beauty of the elaborate decorations, consisting of fine gold and silver, modelled into basso and alto-relievo figures of birds, interwoven serpents, and elegantly twisted filagree work. It is likewise ornamented with crystals and other gems, several of which have fallen from their sockets and been lost. Notwithstanding the great care with which some of the bells have been kept, others have suffered mutilation from having been thrown into fires by the superstitious, who entertain an idea that a blessed bell has the power of arresting the progress of conflagrations. From the bell of St Basdain or Bothan, it is a common practice of the people of Donegal to allow their herds to drink annually of the water of St Bothan’s river ; the people, too, in that district admit the curative efficacy of quenching their thirst with a draught of the river water from the bell. From another of these bells in the county of Sligo, a medicated draught was believed to stop the progress of Asiatic cholera, and for each draught, so administered, fivepence was charged ; so strong is the faith which these relics still command. Those who swore by the Clog na fuila or Bloody Bell, kept near Ballieborough, in Cavan, were enjoined to throw the relic, by means of an attached cord, three times round their heads. These barbarous usages, the judicatory purposes for which bells were in requisition, the miracles narrated of them, and the veneration with which they were regarded, render relics of this kind valuable from their illustration of ancient Celtic manners, and connect them with the history both of the Irish people and of the Scottish Gaels, whose reverence

for the same primitive ecclesiastical bells has already been illustrated by the researches of Dr Wilson.”

THE GUTHRIE BELL.

John Guthrie of Guthrie, Esq., exhibited the Inscribed Bell of Guthrie, (Plate III.) This remarkable Scottish relic is an ancient heir-loom of the family, and is believed to have pertained to the old church of Guthrie, Forfarshire, erected into a collegiate church by Sir David Guthrie, in 1479. The church of Guthrie, or Gutheryn, as it is styled in the earliest charters, was an ancient prebend of the cathedral of Brechin, and is enumerated in 1372, among the benefices of the chapter “*antiquitus fundata.*” The chapter of Brechin was originally a body of Culdees, and it is not improbable that Guthrie may have formed one of the primitive Christian settlements in Angus.

The patronage and tithes of the church of Guthrie were conferred by William the Lion, on the Abbey of Aberbrothoc; and in the fifteenth century, Richard Guthrie, one of the abbots, and almoner to James III., according to the Rev. Mr Will, formerly minister of Guthrie,¹ alienated the patronage to Sir David Guthrie, who is elsewhere said to have been a brother of Abbot Richard. Sir David had previously purchased the lands of Guthrie, and out of these he founded and endowed a collegiate church for a provost and three canons. The foundation was confirmed by Pope Sixtus IV., under the date 14th June 1479, as appears from an inventory of writs in possession of the family. The foundation was subsequently enlarged, with the addition of five canons, by Sir Alexander Guthrie, Sir David’s son, who was slain at the battle of Flodden, in 1513. The church, which now forms the parish church of Guthrie, was decorated with fresco paintings, the greater portion of which remained until its repair in the summer of 1817, when it was left for nearly three months unroofed, and exposed to the destructive action of the weather.

The Guthrie Bell measures $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, including the handle, and $5\frac{1}{8}$ by $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches at the mouth, and is obviously a relic, pertaining, in its present state, to more than one period. It has consisted originally of one of the rude primitive iron hand-bells, already described in previous communications, and this, after suffering considerable dilapidation from age and violence, has been inclosed in a casing of bronze, and richly decorated with gilded bronze, silver work, and niello, as shewn in the engraving. The inscription, which is inlaid in niello, on a broad silver plate attached to the lower edge of the bell in front, is:—

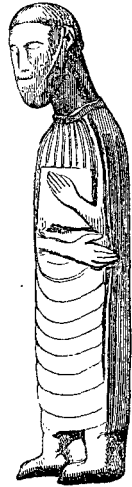
joHannes alexandri me fieri fecit.

The principal figure, that of our Saviour on the cross, is of bronze gilt, and

¹ MS. letter to General Hutton, Advocates’ Library.

obviously belongs to an earlier period than the other figures, of silver, with which it is now surrounded. Instead of the crown of thorns he is represented wearing a cap closely resembling the common Scottish blue-bonnet; and in this, as well as in other respects, the decorations correspond to early byzantine-work. The figure represented in the woodcut the full size of the original, is the only decoration on the right side of the bell, though the pins remain by which a second has been attached to the same side.

This figure corresponds in style and material to that of our Lord, though greatly worn, and the features of the face nearly obliterated, owing to its more exposed position. It retains the traces of gilding, and is the only one ascribable to the same period as the principal figure, certainly not later than the eleventh century, and probably of a much earlier date. The Bishops placed on either side, not only overtop the extended arms of the Saviour, but a closer inspection serves to shew that they each cover a second waving ornament, corresponding to that seen on each side of the cross, between which figures of smaller dimensions, and more in proportion to the original central one, it may be presumed, have been originally placed. It is by no means improbable that the figure now on the right side of the bell, represented above, is one of these removed from the front, in which case it may possibly have been designed for St John, with a corresponding one of the Virgin, to whom the collegiate church of Guthrie was dedicated, on the other side.



It will be seen that it represents an ecclesiastic, dressed in a plain sleeveless gown, and holding a book in his left hand against his breast. It is worthy of note that the hair is well defined on the uncovered head, without any indication of the tonsure, in the form of which the primitive Scottish church adhered to the practice of the Eastern, in opposition to that of the Western Church; until it was remodelled under St Margaret in the eleventh century. Above the cross is a venerable bearded old man seated, no doubt designed to represent the First Person in the Trinity. He wears an open crown, the points of which are now so much broken and turned in that they scarcely shew in the engraving. This figure is of the same material (silver), style, and apparent date of workmanship, as those of the Bishops, and all greatly differ in style and execution from the earlier bronze figures. Judging from the costume of the ecclesiastics, and the form of their mitres, they appear to be ascribable to the middle of the thirteenth century. The inscription is of still later date, and is wrought in

niello, on a plate of silver which covers the base of the cross and portions of the original ornamentation. The two Bishops in front appear to have held the crosier or pastoral staff in their left hands, while the right hands are in the attitude of benediction. The episcopal figure on the left side of the bell, also of silver, though now mutilated, has probably corresponded with them in all other respects, except in its larger proportions. The slight variations in the ornamental patterns of their vestments are not sufficient to suggest their having been designed as the representations of any particular saints. They wear the chasuble, above which the apparel or parura of the amice is boldly defined in all. On the right hand figure the parura of the dalmatic appears also distinctly indicated. The low form of the mitre affords a tolerably clear guide to the date of these additions to the bell. It does not occur on sepulchral monuments or other contemporary representations of episcopal costume of a later date than the thirteenth century. On the back of the bell, which is otherwise quite plain, two bronze loops have been attached, for suspending it by, one of which remains now, much worn as if from long use.

W. H. Scott, Esq., F.S.A. Scot., presented, at the same time, three long bugle-shaped beads of shale, which formed part of a necklace found along with a female skeleton in a stone cist, in the parish of Guthrie, in 1851.



Drawn by D. Wilson L.L.D.

Engraved by W.F. Douglas

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