

THE BLETSOE CASE  
or  
THE TALE OF GREAT GRANSDEN TENOR

by Chris Pickford.

By way of preface, it should perhaps be explained that the following article results from a series of chance discoveries rather than from intentional research on the origins of the tenor at Great Gransden. It thus seems appropriate to recount the way in which the evidence came to light alongside the fascinating tale which gradually unfolded as the pieces of the jig-saw fell into place.

It must have been back in 1979 that I first looked through the Churchwardens' accounts for the Bedfordshire village of Bletsoe, for at the time I was attempting to compile a list of the bells cast by the Taylor family at St. Neots, Oxford, and Buckland Brewer. As is well known, the original ring of five at Bletsoe - now the back five of a ring of six - was cast on 4th April 1786, and it was the first ring cast by Robert Taylor of St. Neots in his own name. I was curious to see whether the accounts provided any further information on the job. There was little of interest in the accounts for 1786-7 beyond a record of the cost of the new bells and a payment for beer given to the Bletsoe and Thurleigh ringers when the bells were first rung, but before the volume was put away I had a quick look through the earlier accounts to see if there were any other items of interest, and my attention was caught by a transaction which took place in 1767.

The accounts for 1767 referred to the recasting of a bell by Islip Edmunds of London, a little known founder on whom I had previously done a little genealogical research since he was born at Melchbourne, a Bedfordshire village some six miles from Bletsoe. Islip Edmunds was born in 1737 and apparently worked for Joseph Eayre at the St. Neots foundry for some years before leaving to seek his fortune as an independent founder in London. His surviving bells are all similar in shape and tonal characteristics to those cast by Joseph Eayre, although it is clear from their inscriptions that they were cast in London. The examples of his work known hitherto are as follows:

		7 cwt. 2 qr. 15 lbs
1764	Melchbourne, Beds. Treble of four. $33\frac{1}{2}$ inches diameter, weight/	
1764	Wellingborough, Northants. Sixth of eight (originally fourth of six). $44\frac{1}{2}$ inch diameter, weight 16 cwt. 3 qrs. 17 lbs.	
1765	Milton Ernest, Beds. Fourth of six (originally third of five). 32 inches diameter, weight 6 cwt. 0 qr. 4 lbs.	

On each of these bells appears the inscription "I" or "ISLIP EDMUNDS LONDON FECIT", and the Bletsoe accounts for 1767 also describe the founder as "of London", full details of the expenditure being as follows:

1767	June 26	pd Turner when the New Bell was hung up	2s.
		Paid Mr. Islip Edmunds his Bill	£39 13s. 0d.
	Sept. 31.	Paid for Stoppage of the Note gone to	
		Mr. Islip Edmonds London	2s. 6d.
	Oct. 20.	Concerning the Bell	1s. 7d.

Why the parish felt it necessary to stop their payment to the founder remains a mystery, but the difficulties were evidently resolved since as we shall see the bell dated 1767 remained intact until the old ring was taken down in 1786. The man "Turner" who was paid two shillings when the new bell was hung was probably not Robert Turner, the well-known bellhanger of the period, but Turner Adams, the Parish Clerk, whose name appears regularly in the accounts in connection with ringing and other church duties.

Rather pleased with my 'find', I added details of this previously unknown bell to my notes on Bletsoe and I also made a suitably vague addition to my list of bells by Islip Edmunds. I could do no more, since the accounts gave no indication as to the position of the bell in the ring or of its size, and on the available evidence it could not be assumed that the date of casting was 1767 or even that Edmunds was necessarily the founder. Clarification of these points seemed unlikely to emerge, and I thought no more of it until another chance discovery in 1981 re-awakened my interest.

At the Manuscripts Department of the British Library may be seen a number of volumes of notes on Bedfordshire history compiled by two clergymen, Oliver St. John Cooper and Thomas Orlebar Marsh. These notes were assembled in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth centuries, and they form an invaluable if diffuse source on a wide variety of topics. I made a special journey to see them in the hope that they might yield some fresh information on Bedfordshire bells, though I had no specific questions in mind. From them I obtained some interesting quotation, the names of the ringers at Harrold active in 1734 complete with a transcript of the old ringers' rules formerly painted on the walls of the tower, and a few notes on bell inscriptions. For the most part the bell inscriptions were those of bells still in existence, but to my great surprise and delight they included details of the former bells at Souldrop and Bletsoe.

The compilers of the manuscripts noted that Bletsoe church possessed "...5 Bells new cast by Robert Taylor of St. Neots 1786, weight of Tenor 12 Cwt. in G new Concert." On another page, however, they gave the inscriptions not only of the new ring but also of four old bells. Unfortunately there is no confirmatory evidence as to the number of bells at Bletsoe before 1786, and deletions in the manuscript make it unclear whether or not an inscription of a further bell was omitted. It seems likely, however, that the following inscriptions refer in order to the Treble, second, third, and Tenor bells of a ring of four. It is noted that the inscription of the first bell was "in old English Characters" (i.e. Gothic capitals and/or

Black-letter) and those of the remainder were in "Roman cap<sup>s</sup>". Full details are as follows:

1. Sit nomen domini benedictum
2. God save our King 1628
3. Non clamor sed amor cantat in aure
4. I. Edmunds London fecit : Tho<sup>s</sup> Walker Rector  
Job Neale John Makeham Church Wardens 1767

This invaluable record thus indicates that the old treble was Mediaeval. The second dated 1628 was probably cast by James Keene of Woodstock, "GOD SAVE OVR KING" being an inscription which occurs on many of his Bedfordshire bells of the period. Similarly, the inscription of the old third bell was one particularly favoured by the Norris family of Stamford, active as bellfounders from 1607 to 1698, but unfortunately the version given above is incomplete and the date of the bell was omitted. Details of the old tenor, of course, are of particular relevance to this article, and I was delighted to find confirmation of its date and proof that the bell had been cast by Islip Edmunds.

A little background research quickly confirmed the accuracy of the inscription as recorded and provided further proof that the bell was cast specifically for Bletsoe, since it is fortunate that three local men were named in the inscription. Thomas Walker was Rector of the parish from 1729 until his death, aged 74, on 25th September 1770, and the two Churchwardens who signed the Bishop's Transcripts for 1767 were none other than Job Neale and John Makeham. Thus all these names, and also that of the bellfounder, were correctly given in the inscription of the 1767 bell.

To find a record of a bell by a rare founder and to discover its inscription was luck enough, but in time yet more information was to come my way quite by chance. Before turning to the next stage of the story, however, we ought perhaps to pause for a while to examine the career of Islip Edmunds, the bellfounder, since this has some bearing on the events which I am about to recount.

Edmunds has proved to be an elusive figure, and to date I have been unable to prove to my satisfaction many of the biographical details recorded in print. It is known that he was born at Melchbourne in 1737. He was the eleventh and youngest child of William and Alice (nee Islip) Edmunds, and he was baptised on 27th November 1737. The Edmunds family had been settled at Melchbourne since the early Seventeenth century, and William Edmunds held a farm in the parish, dying there in 1761. At least three of Islip's brothers and sisters (including another child named Islip born in 1734 and buried on 2nd January 1734/5) died in infancy, but his elder brothers William (1721-1768), Timothy (1725-1797) and Thomas (1727-1771) grew up to be yeoman farmers at Melchbourne. All served parish office in turn, and it was when William and Thomas were Churchwardens in 1764 that Islip Edmunds recast the treble

bell of the ring of four at Melchbourne and rehung the others. He also provided new headstocks for two of the bells and cleaned the clock, the total cost of the work amounting to over £35.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the family farm was unable to support such a large family as the children grew to maturity, and it is generally held that young Islip Edmunds was apprenticed to Joseph Eayre of St. Neots. No proof of this has as yet come to light, but the circumstantial evidence is strong. Eayre was no stranger either to the village or to the Edmunds family. An advertisement in the Northampton Mercury of 24th November 1755 concerning a lost watch reveals that William Edmunds had hitherto owned a silver watch made by Joseph Eayre, and it was during one of Edmunds' terms of office as Churchwarden that Eayre repaired the church clock at Melchbourne in 1733. Other work by Eayre mentioned in the Churchwardens' accounts includes making a new clapper for the tenor bell in 1738, cleaning the clock in 1746 (for which he was eventually paid in 1751 !) and repainting the clock dial in 1756 when William Edmunds the younger was Churchwarden. It thus seems likely that Islip's father was sufficiently well acquainted with Joseph Eayre for the bellfounder to have willingly taken the farmer's youngest son as an apprentice.

Further information on Edmunds' life is scanty. As we have seen, his surviving bells indicate that he worked in London as an independent founder between 1764 and 1767, and Dr. Raven suggested in his Church Bells of Cambridgeshire (2nd. ed., 1882) that Edmunds later returned to St. Neots as foreman to Edward Arnold. The latter took over the foundry in 1772 on the death of Joseph Eayre and ran it until he moved to Leicester in 1784, eventually handing over the St. Neots foundry to Robert Taylor in 1786. Raven states that Arnold knew little about bellfounding and that he depended on the skill of his foremen, Thomas Osborn being succeeded in that capacity by Islip Edmunds, and it is also suggested by the same author that Edmunds subsequently worked at Hertford as foreman to John Briant.

Research to date has failed to produce evidence either to confirm or to refute Raven's assertions, although a clause in the will of Islip's elder brother shows that he was still living away from home in 1771. Thomas Edmunds of Melchbourne, yeoman, made his will on 31st May 1771, dying just three days later at the early age of 43. In the will, Thomas made a bequest of £50 to his brother Islip "...provided he leaves his present habitation and goes and resides at St. Neots ... within Twelve Months next after my decease". In this we may perhaps see an attempt at reconciliation between Edmunds and Eayre, for a disagreement between the two men might have been the cause of Edmunds' departure for London in the early 1760's, but Joseph Eayre died in July 1772 and there is nothing to indicate that by this date Islip Edmunds had returned to St. Neots in order to claim his legacy.

Thus several important questions remain unanswered. When did Islip Edmunds return to St. Neots? Did he move to Leicester with Edward Arnold in 1784, or did he remain at St. Neots in the employ of Robert Taylor? Did he later work for John Briant,

and if so, when did he move to Hertford? and when and where did he die? For the purposes of this article it would be interesting to know whether Edmunds was still working at the St. Neots foundry in 1786-7, but the only evidence <sup>an irritating</sup> is / statement in the V.C.H. that Edmunds was "of St. Neots 1783-1787" for which no sources are cited. These problems and many others concerning the family and business relationships between Joseph Eayre, Edward Arnold, Thomas Osborn and Robert Taylor need to be solved before the history of the St. Neots, Leicester and Downham Market foundries in the period 1770 to 1790 can be written with accuracy. Such considerations are far beyond the scope of this article, but my researches have led me to believe that much of what has been written by Dr. Raven and others does not stand up to close scrutiny.

But to return to the story of Bletsoe tenor. It was while I was looking at the Huntingdonshire Victoria County History in December last year in search of information on Everton church that a footnote in the article on Great Gransden caught my attention. Great Gransden bells are described in the Rev. T.M.N. Owen's Church Bells of Huntingdonshire (1899), and they were also the subject of a front cover article in the Ringling World of 28th July 1978. I had been puzzled by the available information on the tenor there when compiling my Taylor list back in 1979, since an old inscription had been erased and the words "R.TAYLOR.FECIT" were incised in the inscription band. Owen gave its date as 1787, but he also recorded a tradition that the bell was said "to have come in 1791, and to have been cast for another church", adding that this statement did not accord with the other information which he had unearthed. The Ringling World article recorded part of the old inscription as being "Thomas W ..... 1767", and the footnote in the V.C.H. reminded me of the unsolved mystery regarding the date and origins of the bell.

The V.C.H. quoted the church terrier of 1841 in which the inscriptions of the six bells at Great Gransden were given, this being of interest since three of them had been subsequently recast. The terrier described the tenor as "...evidently broached down one side and mended, and an inscription has been defaced, it was apparently - John Makeham and John Walle, Churchwardens, 1767. John Edmonds fecit, and R. Taylor fecit has been put on afresh". From this the compilers of the V.C.H. drew the rather strange inference that "the date is 1787 and the founder evidently Islip Edmunds, who was of St. Neots 1783-1787". I had other ideas, and a quick check in my notes confirmed my suspicions that the inscription given in the terrier looked like an inaccurate version of that which had been on the old tenor at Bletsoe.

Once I had realised that the Great Gransden bell might well be the Edmunds bell from Bletsoe, I was eager to complete my research. First I went to the County Record Office at Huntingdon to check the wording of the 1841 terrier and to make a search in the parish records, and then I visited the church to examine the bell itself. I reasoned that if the remains of the inscription was legible in 1841 then it should still be so today, and that the Churchwardens' accounts (if any existed) should reveal the date when the bell was installed at Great Gransden.



At Huntingdon I found the transcription of the 1841 terrier entry to be accurate, and discovered that there existed an unbroken series of Churchwardens' accounts beginning in 1664. This starting date, incidentally, is six years too late to give details of the installation of the complete ring cast by Bryan Eldridge of Chertsey in 1658, but other entries in the accounts indicate that these bells were installed as a ring of six (complete with the wooden frame which is almost certainly contemporary with the bells) and not as a minor five as has been suggested. A hasty check through the earlier accounts yielded several items of interest about the bells, clock, and chimes. I found that the churchwardens in 1767 were James Elwood and Daniel Glover, the accounts for that year making no mention of the casting or hanging of a new bell, and eventually I came to the transaction for which I was looking, duly recorded in the accounts for 1786-7. The relevant entries are as follows:

1786	Pd. Tho:Wright for carrying the G <sup>t</sup> Bell to St.Neots to have her new Run, & bringing her back	16s.
	Ap <sup>l</sup> 27th 86. pd Taylor pt for Runing the Great Bell	£8
1787	1 May 87. pd Taylor the residue for Running Gt. Bell	£11 19s.

To these should be added the entry in the Overseers' accounts at Michaelmas 1787 (quoted by Owen) which refers to a payment of two guineas "in part for running the great bell" although it is not specified whether the recipient was the bellfounder or the Churchwarden. The accounts thus confirmed the date, apparently indicating that the "recast" bell was returned to the parish in April 1786. This is probably significant, since the new bells for Bletsoe were cast at St.Neots in the same month, and the old tenor might well have been transferred to Great Gransden at this time since it seems that the bells from both parishes were being dealt with at the foundry simultaneously.

But the accounts also introduce a minor complication by referring consistently to "running" (i.e. casting) the bell, implying that when the work was carried out the parishioners of Great Gransden were under the impression that their tenor had been recast and not exchanged either for a new one or for a suitable old bell which happened to be in the foundry at the time. It is impossible to give an entirely satisfactory explanation for this discrepancy, but there are some indications that Robert Taylor managed to substitute an old bell without the knowledge of the parishioners and that he charged them in full for recasting. The cost of recasting a bell of 14½ cwt. at the prevailing rate of 28 shillings per Cwt. would have been £20 6s., plus or minus the amount charged or allowed for weight difference between the old bell and the new, and as we have seen the actual cost to the parish was £19 19s. or £22 1s. if the sum paid by the Overseers is included in the total. Contemporary examples suggest that an exchange agreed in advance between all parties might have been considerably less expensive, and perhaps at as little as half the cost of recasting. If Taylor did charge in full then the misconception in the parish can be easily understood!

In my usual disorganised way, I left making any arrangements to see the bells until the last possible moment, but finding myself free on New Year's day I contacted Phillip George, the tower captain, who kindly agreed to meet me at the church an hour later. His own interest in the history of the bells helped to make my visit an enjoyable one, and we discussed a variety of topics as I examined the clock and chimes, the fine Seventeenth century bell frame set diagonally in the tower, and each of the individual bells in turn until at length I came to the tenor.

Examination of the bell revealed that the mended cracks mentioned in the 1841 terrier were no more than superficial casting flaws, but it became clear that a fairly thorough job had been done in erasing the old inscription. Using a torch shone from different angles, however, it was possible to make out some of the words and figures which had been removed. I quickly abandoned my attempt to read the inscription unaided since my reading was bound to be influenced by what I wanted to see, but with a copy of the Bletsoe inscription in hand I was able to check it word for word against the remaining traces on the bell. I should feel happier about this if a more scientific examination could be made, but my rather superficial inspection left me in little doubt that the Bletsoe inscription (already verified as regards names, spellings and date) had been erased from the inscription band. For the record, my attempted rendering of the incised and erased inscriptions on Great Gransden tenor is as follows:

I EDMUNDS LONDON FECIT : THO<sup>S</sup> W ... (incised inscription R.TAYLOR.  
FECIT obscuring former wording ...ALKER RECTOR JOB NE ...) ...ALE  
JOHN MAKEHAM CHURCH WARDENS 1767

The major discrepancies between this and the version in the 1841 terrier are first that the founder's name clearly appears as "I EDMUNDS" and not as "John Edmonds", and secondly that the name of the churchwarden, given in 1841 as John Walle rather than Job Neale, was imperfectly read since it was partly obscured by the incised inscription. The complete omission of the Rector's name may be accounted for in the same way, although it is difficult to understand why the names of the two churchwardens were given in reverse order.

Two further details of the bell are necessary to complete the story. The bell is  $43\frac{1}{4}$  inches in diameter, complete with canons, and its weight is thus about  $14\frac{1}{2}$  cwt. Perhaps rather more interesting is the fact that the bell does not seem to have been tuned either by skirting at the lip or by chip tuning inside the soundbow, and this suggests that the Bletsoe bell fitted in the ring at Great Gransden without being retuned.

Is the case proven? Well, that is for the reader to judge. I certainly feel that all the facts fit together and show that the tenor at Great Gransden came from Bletsoe, but in conclusion I ought perhaps to add a tentative explanation of how the transaction came to take place.

The tenor of the ring of four at Bletsoe was recast by Islip Edmunds of London in 1767, the new bell being  $43\frac{1}{4}$  inches in diameter and weighing about  $14\frac{1}{2}$  Cwt. Nineteen years later, the parishioners decided to scrap their old bells and they engaged Robert Taylor of St. Neots to provide a slightly lighter ring of five. The new bells were cast in April 1786 and the tenor was  $41\frac{3}{4}$  inches in diameter, weighing about 12 Cwt. The old bells, including the tenor dated 1767, were removed to the foundry, and at about the same time the tenor of the ring of six at Great Gransden was also brought in to be recast. If Edmunds was working for Taylor at the time, he might well have had a hand in saving his handiwork from the furnace, but by a great stroke of good fortune for the founders it transpired that the Bletsoe bell was of the right size and note to be substituted for the tenor at Great Gransden. It did not even need to be retuned. Taylor had presumably quoted for recasting the bell and assured of his money he saw no need to vary the contract. Seeing an opportunity to make an easy profit, he had the inscription and date of the Bletsoe bell carefully removed, and after adding his own name as maker by incising the words "R. Taylor fecit" in the inscription band, he sent it out as new and charged the parish for it accordingly. The parishioners took delivery of the bell at the end of April 1786, paying the balance of Taylor's bill twelve months later. Well satisfied with its tone, they had no reason to suppose that their bell had not been recast, but some time afterwards the bell became an object of curiosity when it was realised that it had been cast for another parish. In 1841 an attempt was made to decipher its inscription, and various explanations of its origins became current in the parish, but the truth remained a mystery.

So, almost two hundred years after it was first hung in its present home, the bell has yielded the secret of its origins. That this interesting tale could have been discovered by patient research is undeniable, yet ironically the information has surfaced almost of its own accord. Research, though often tough and painstaking does occasionally produce unexpected rewards.

C. J. P.

(12 January 1985)

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