

The Bell-Founders of Worcester [1200 – 1640]

On the east side of the cloister are displayed some of the medieval bells of the Cathedral of Worcester which were decommissioned in the second half of the 1800s as part of the major Victorian restoration. Usually the bells of a church are out of sight and most people never consider them so they are rarely researched. Yet the bells can be some of the oldest artefacts in a church. Bells held great importance throughout the medieval era, they were not only a way of summoning the faithful to prayer they also ordered the monks' day. However, what do we actually know about them and the people who made them?

This paper is the first stage of on-going research to attempt to rectify that and will trace a family of medieval bell-founders in Worcester. [This will probably come out as research will be finished]

To begin with a small explanation of the surnames that are going to occur. Medieval surnames had a far more important meaning attached to them than perhaps they do now when we effectively inherit our surname; however in the middle ages many people derived their surnames from their occupation or profession. The use of surnames became widespread in England by the thirteenth century when they became more common in urban situations, here identification was required to differentiate between the many residents. Many defined people by their place or origin, or, possibly as an early form of marketing, defined their profession. The majority of the population had acquired hereditary surnames by 1400¹.

The Norman-French name for a bell-founder was 'Saintier', leading to the English version of Seinter, Ceinter or Seynter.

The other name used for bell-founders was Belleyster, Belyeter, Belezeter – 'bell' is obvious and yeter is from 'geotan', Anglo-Saxon meaning to found or make with molten metal.

Seynter and Belyeter became increasingly interchangeable through the thirteenth century in the documents used in this paper and the spellings are certainly erratic! For the purposes of this paper, in the text, the spellings have been standardised as 'Seynter' and

¹ George Redmonds, Turi King, David Hey. Surnames, DNA, and Family History, Oxford University Press, 2011, Oxford

'Belyeter', in the footnotes or transcriptions they are left as found.

Although documentary sources generally remain scarce for the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries two sizeable bodies of work survive for Worcestershire in the medieval period which allow us to piece together the history of a family of bell-founders for this period.

The first, is a group of documents held at the National Archives called the Justices in Eyre, of Assize, of Oyer and Terminer, and of the Peace²³. The Eyre⁴ from 1275 for Worcestershire has been transcribed and translated by Jens Rohrkaston for the Worcester Historical Society and has been consulted for this paper as well as the originals for this and other years .

The second are the medieval muniments held in the archives of Worcester Cathedral Library. The originals have been consulted for this paper.

It is in the muniments of Worcester Cathedral Library and with the name Seynter that we pick up the first bell-founder in thirteenth century Worcester. As with most documents from the thirteenth century it is undated. Although not the donor or recipient in these documents a Simon le Seynter's holding is used to pin-point where the the property is situated. In the first it tells us that a Simon le Seynter is holding land outside the Sidbury Gate⁵. While documentary evidence for Worcester's medieval city defences is fragmentary, it is generally accepted that the wall and ditch in the Sidbury area was complete by the first quarter of the thirteenth century, during King John's reign, 1166 – 1216.

The second is a deed of gift⁶ from Thomas the Sacrist to Robert of Upton, given with consent of Walter de Cantolupe Bishop of Worcester, and gives an indication of the date of the document⁷. He was elected bishop in 1236 and died in 1266, therefore this document must date to post-1236.

The phraseology of the two documents does suggest that there are two different properties

² This is a group of justices who were sent from the central courts at Westminster to the counties of England to hear cases - the courts themselves, were known as Eyres.

³ NA/Just/1

⁴ Röhrkasten, Jens, ed. The Worcester Eyre of 1275. Vol. 22. Worcestershire Historical Society, 2008.

⁵ WCM B1539 [33]..... also land outside the gate [of Sidbury] in the suburbs of Worcester, with messuages and other appurtenances lying between the land of Thomas Piment, the chaplain, and that of Simon le Seynter.

⁶ Deed of gift is the transfer of real property in medieval times; the term was used even if no money changed hands

⁷ WCM B1683 [289] Gift with consent of Walter de Cantolupus, Bishop of Worcester, for fealty and service, of a certain messuage with appurtenances in the city of Worcester, near the land of Simon le Seynter on the north.....

involved, one inside the wall and one outside. This does seem logical, as although bells, due to their size would often have been cast on site, there would have been a limited demand for bells and a bell-founder would have been primarily a generalised founder making a variety of metal objects like pots, agricultural implements and small, cheap items of jewellery items such as buckles. For this he would need a furnace. In 1202 a fire had devastated Worcester and fire was a constant hazard as most buildings were made of wood with thatched roofs so it is also sensible that his place of work, which would include a furnace, would be outside the walls because of this danger. However, times were still unsettled and he would probably have preferred to have lived inside the walls for safety.

To add confirmation of this is a rental from the accounts of the Almoner⁸:

In the Parish of St. Peter.
[Sidbury is in the Parish of St Peter]

From Simon Seyntere, 19d.
From a furnace, ½ mark.

Although undated the names correspond to a similar rental which is part of the Registrum Prioratus⁹ and is dated to circa.1240. The Almoner's rental contains the same names and rental sums as in the Registrum but with an additional sum appended over the amounts.
[attempt to date this]

We can discern a lot more about Simon le Seynter from these and the other documents he appears in. Importantly he is witnessing many land grants and other documents¹⁰. To be a witness he would have to be literate, well thought of and trusted. This points to his having a position of good standing in the medieval society of Worcester, part of the new emerging 'urban elite' made up of the wealthier tradesmen. We also know that he held two properties in Sidbury which suggests he is relatively prosperous.

To put some flesh on the bones we need to look at a group of documents held at the National Archives called the Justices in Eyre, of Assize, of Oyer and Terminer, and of the Peace¹¹¹². Though fragmentary, they survive for Worcestershire from 1221 to 1419.

⁸ WCM A9

⁹ WCM A2 The book is not strictly speaking a register but a rental of the Priory

¹⁰ WCM B985, WCM B991[26], WCM B1458, WCM B1546, WCM B1590, WCM B1592 [312x], WCM B1666, WCM B1683 [289]

¹¹ This is a group of justices who were sent from the central courts at Westminster to the counties of England to hear cases - the courts themselves, were known as Eyres.

¹² NA/Just/1

Although there is no evidence of Simon le Seynter from any date earlier than 1272 in these Eyres many of the early rolls are in a damaged condition.

It is from the Eyres of 1275¹³ that most information can be garnered and the majority of that information on Simon's family comes from two cases contained in just two of them¹⁴. The first thing that becomes clear is that Simon le Seynter is dead by this date, most likely quite recently which gives a probable explanation of why there are all the cases involving the Seynters in this particular year. It is also at this period that the name 'Belyeter' starts to be seen and appears to be interchangeable with Seynter.

The first case¹⁵ from 1275 supplies us with the most knowledge on the family, It furnishes the name of Simon's wife, which is Agnes, who her parents were and the name of one of their daughters but also shows that Simon is dead. The case involves a Lucy, wife of Simon Gurney who is claiming that Agnes has appropriated a messuage that should have been hers as an inheritance from her grandmother, Mabel, wife of Gilbert the Archer and Agnes's mother. It seems that it is a lost cause as Agnes claims that Mabel gave the land to Simon long before her death. She also states that Simon bequeathed the messuage to Agnes on his death-bed.

The second case¹⁶ also from 1275, supplies us with the name of another daughter and of a son. It is brought by a daughter who is named Isabel and who is claiming her dower against Henry, son of Simon le Seynter. This also suggests that the property holdings of Simon have passed to Henry, intimating that he is the oldest son. The legal system known as primogeniture was usually observed in medieval England. In order to keep estates together, so that a family could retain its status over a period of more than a single generation, the oldest surviving son would inherit the lands. Provision was often made for other members of the family and widows generally received some sort of revenue from the estate generally for their lifetime, or until they remarried. As can be seen from this case, daughters may be provided with a dowry at the time of their marriage and this can be reclaimed by the woman should the husband die.

There is a further case¹⁷ in 1275 involving a claim of land and in this Agnes asks the court that two of her sons act for her thus giving us the names of two more sons, Thomas and

¹³ NA/JUST1/1023, 1024, 1025, 1026, 1027, 1028, 1222, 1230A, 1230B, 1232

¹⁴ NA/JUST1/1027 and NA /1/1027b

¹⁵ NA/JUST1/1027/M25d & M27d.

¹⁶ NA/J1/1027 M26d. Isabella who was the wife of Robert of Upton claims a messuage in Worcester against Henry son of Simon le Seynter as her dower.

¹⁷ NA/JUST1/1027 M32. Agnes who was the wife of Simon le Belyeter attorns[to represent or act on another's behalf] her son Thomas or Robert her son against Simon of Henwick on a plea of land.

Robert. This document also demonstrates the alternative name of le Belyeter.

The final case evolves over several of the courts held under different Justices and involves a further son, Simon¹⁸. This case is worth expanding on here to show the mechanisms of law and order in Worcester in the thirteenth century. It begins when Simon, son of Simon le Seynter struck Siremon le Messenger on the head with a staff so that he instantly died. Simon immediately fled to the church of the Franciscans [Greyfriars in Worcester] but then escaped from there before he could be apprehended. For this the town of Worcester was fined for letting him escape and because he was the suspect in this crime his chattels amounting to the value of 3s were seized by the bailiffs. A Hue [not 'hue and cry' so one must presume this is the quieter version] was raised in the wards of Saints Peter and Paul but he wasn't found. Finally the last entry for Simon says that he later appeared and was fined 1 mark for Trespass!

No other references to the daughters and Simon jnr., apart from this Eyre have been found. Whether they died or moved on with their own lives we will probably never know, but Simon Snr. appears to have settled properties on his sons.

Robert is found to be leasing land in Foregate from the Priory of Worcester. A definitive date cannot be ascertained but an analysis of the the witnesses date it to circa 1300. This plot is outside the gate on Foregate and must have been of a substantial size as it extends from the street to Pitchcroft Meadow^{19 20}.

Thomas is found to be holding property in Sidbury²¹ and again the document is undated but the witness analysis puts the date at circa 1300.

Even though Simon Snr is dead by 1275 the business was carried on by Agnes and Henry, initially with Agnes in charge. In the Lay Subsidy of 1280, Henry, although he is listed in Battenhall as a bell-founder, surprisingly for this period when consulting the St Peter entry it is his mother Agnes that is listed as the bell-founder and Henry as just her son²².

BATHENHALE²³.

De Henrico le Ceynter vijj. vjd.

¹⁸ NA/J1/1028 M19d, NA/J1/1025 M20, NA/J1/1028 M19d

¹⁹ WCM B1135. ".....extending from the royal road outside Forezate which leads from Worcester towards Cereburne to the field of the Bishop of Worcester called Prychcroft."

²⁰ WCM A22/f7

²¹ MS. Ch. Worcs. a.1/16

²² Bund, John William Willis, and John Amphlett, eds. Lay subsidy roll for the County of Worcester, circ. 1280. Worcestershire Historical Society, 1893.

²³ Op cit p. 40

WARDA SANCTI PETRI²⁴

De Agnete la Ceintere xxs

De Henrico filio ejus . xld.

Only three other female bell-founders are known of, Christina the bell-founder from Gloucester, Johanna Hill and Johanna Sturdy from London, all are thought to have carried on their husbands' bell-founding businesses after their death.

Henry appears to have 'retired' from the bell-founding business, possibly due to ill health as he purchases a corrody²⁵ from the Priory in 1327. This corrody is recorded in the Liber Albus²⁶ Henry is pledging his foundry and furnace in Sidbury to pay for this corrody. Having the corrody recorded in writing was a smart move on Henry's part as it had not been unknown for a future Prior or Bishop to refuse to recognise the existence of a corrody at a later date unless it could be proved in writing²⁷. The Sidbury property stayed with the Seynters as can be seen from the following document. Two possible explanations are possible. One that Henry died before the corrody could take effect or most likely that once the Priory had received the property and its foundry they immediately leased it back to Seynter family as the people most likely to want, or to be able to use it.

Only one other document²⁸ naming Henry le Seynter seems to have survived, but luckily for for this research it is a very important one and it leads on to the next generation of the family.

This document is held in the Bodleian, again it is undated but the above information points to it being c.1327 as Henry signed his corrody in 1327. In this charter it states that Richard le Seinter , son and heir of Henry le Seynter, remits and quit-claims to St. Wolstan's all right in 2s. of annual rent from a certain house in the way of Sodebury, also another 2s. annual rent from a house without Sodebury gate.

So we have a document that names a Richard, son and heir of Henry le Seynter, with land in Sidbury both inside and outside the gate. This document not only supplies us with the name of the next generation and that informs us that Henry is dead but also that while Richard le Seynter still holds the properties in Sidbury, he has now moved his home to

²⁴ Op cit p. 3

²⁵ A corrody was a stipend granted to an individual (a corrodian) that was fulfilled by a religious institution. A full corrody included food, drink, and lodging and could in some cases also include a regular allowance in cash. Lesser corrodies provided only food and drink

²⁶ WCM A5

²⁷ For a fuller explanation of corrodies see Harvey, Barbara. *Living and Dying in England 1100-1540: The Monastic Experience: The Monastic Experience*. Oxford University Press, 1993. pp. 179-209

²⁸ MS. Ch. Worcs. a.1/38

somewhere else, The fact that he is remitting the rent of the property inside the gate of Sidbury to the Hospital of St. Wolstan is evidence of this.

This son, Richard le Seynter, also known as Richard le Belyeter, appears to be a prominent bell-founder in Herefordshire and Worcestershire where some 15-20 bells are presently attributed to him, though whether they are actually his or not is open to question at this point in time.

Richard not only appears as a witness on many documents, but he also held the office of Bailiff in Worcester four times in 1301, and in 1310, 1311 and 1312 so, like his grandfather Simon, he is prosperous and a man of standing within the community. This prosperity is inferred by the fact that office holders like bailiffs had to be men who had a considerable amount of time to spend in the performance of their duties and also suggests his income was derived from employing other people, so leaving him free to attend to this public business. Indeed, the bell-founding business must have been doing well because Richard is soon building up quite a property empire. Along with the property earlier referenced in Batenhall and the two in Sidbury the many documents he is cited in reveal to us that he had many other properties. There is one in Huckster Street, now part of Deansway²⁹, one in Needler Street, now Pump Street³⁰, two other plots in the city that are being held of Earl Beauchamp³¹ and yet another in the High Street³². As, obviously, he can't be living or working in all of these properties he is most likely dividing and sub-letting the individual divisions. He must have been earning a considerable amount of money from these properties so although still calling himself a bell-founder it seems unlikely he himself was a working bell-founder but had people working for him who did the actual work.

If there is any lingering doubts as to whether the Richard and the 'le Seynters' were bell founders or not then the final document,³³ dispel those doubts. It is an agreement in which one Richard le Mercer is agreeing to pay where Richard le Belyeter and his heirs rent and hay from lands in Timberdine. There is affixed to this document an exquisite specimen of his seal, a wide-mouthed bell, with the legend "Sigillum Ricardi le Belyeter". It is one of only a handful of bell-founder seals surviving in the country and is the most complete.

Richard le Belyeter most likely dies around 1345 as that is the last date he is found witnessing or is cited in any documents, instead they are witnessed by a John le Belyeter.

²⁹ WCM B1275

³⁰ WCM B1303

³¹ Bund, John William Willis, ed. *The Inquisitiones Post Mortem for the County of Worcester: From their commencement in 1242 to the end of the 13th century.* Vol. 1. Printed for the Worcestershire Historical Society by J. Parker, 1894. p.73

³² Bloom, James Harvey, ed. *Liber Eleemosinarii: The Almoner's Book of the Priory of Worcester.* Preserved by the Dean and Chapter of Worcester in the Cathedral Library. Society, 1911.p.12

³³ WCM B1441b

This John is also holding two properties in Sidbury³⁴ and one in Baker Street³⁵, the same locations as Richard so was in all probability his son.

The first impression of John le Belyeter is that he was not only following in his father's footsteps but moving even higher up the social scale as in 1334 he was elected as a Member of Parliament for Worcester³⁶. However this may not have been the case, or he was mixing with the wrong crowd, as only two years later in 1336 there is a warrant sent out to arrest him, and others 'notoriously suspected' and have them brought to the Tower of London³⁷. Unfortunately there is no definitive list of prisoners for the Tower of London and there is no roll for General Gaol Deliveries surviving for Worcestershire that year so for now we don't know if it happened or not, but in October he is released on 'bail' by the surety of a Peter de Pirie³⁸, and he is still witnessing documents in 1345³⁹.

The last records found⁴⁰ for John Belyeter are from 1354 when on April the 6th the Abbott of Evesham claims that John Belyeter along with others 'arrested his animals' in Worcester. John was most likely acting as a bailiff to do this, so is still in a position of authority and a lease, which although dated 1464 quotes a grant⁴¹ from 1358/9 in which a message in Sidbury is 'formerly' held by John le Beleyeter.

The first known case of plague in England was in June 1348, and by the summer of 1349 it had reached Worcester. From the evidence of the previous documents John obviously survived the first outbreak of plague of 1348/9 in Worcester but in 1361/62 the plague returned to Worcester. Although we have no evidence of his having a wife and children it would have been unusual for him not to have. That the family name dies out soon after this date perhaps suggests his having lost all his family to one of these plagues before succumbing to death himself.

³⁴ WCM B1571

³⁵ WCM B949a

³⁶ Williams, William Retlaw. The parliamentary history of the county of Worcester. Bibliolife, 1897. Priv. print. for the author by Jakeman and Carver, Hereford. p.81 the MP for Worcester in 1334 is John le 'Belleyetere'.

³⁷ Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward III: A.D. 1364-1367, Volume 13 Great Britain. Public Record Office, England. Membrane 29d

³⁸ 'Close Rolls, Edward III: December 1333', Calendar of Close Rolls, Edward III: volume 3: 1333-1337 (1898), pp. 162. URL: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=97874> Date accessed: 08 January 2014. To the sheriff of Worcester. Order to supersede the taking of Master Peter de Pirye, as the king lately ordered the bailiffs of Worcester to make Peter come before him on the quinzaine of Michaelmas last, as Peter was taken and imprisoned by the king's order for various causes, to do and receive what should there be ordained by the council upon the premises ; and Peter found in chancery the following mainpersons, to wit : Richard de Hopton, William Roculf and John le Belietere of that county, who undertook that he would conduct himself well towards the king and his people, and to stand to right upon the premises and all things touching them in the king's court, and to do other things when the king wishes to speak against him. John le Belietere of Worcester has a like writ by the mainprise of Peter de Pirye and of the said Richard and William.

³⁹ WCM B949a

⁴⁰ Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward III: A.D. 1364-1367, Volume 13 Great Britain. Public Record Office, England. Membrane 10d

⁴¹ WCM A6v1f38

The next confirmed account of their being a bell-founder in Worcester is from the 1519 when another dynasty of bell-founders begin and continued through to the mid-seventeenth century, the Grene. The first Grene, one Nicholas, appears when Prior More in his Journal states that he is hiring Nicholas the bell-caster "in renewyng of my dishes"⁴² We find out his surname later on as money is 'payd to Nicholas grene for ye changyng of olde pewter disshes to ye lords kychion'⁴³. Nicolas dies sometime close to February 1541 and his will states 'I Nicholas Grene of the p'yshe of Saynt Nicholas in Wurces. Bellfounder, beyng sicke of my body and in perfect mynde make this my testament and last wyll ' He leaves his bell-founding business to his son Henry⁴⁴.

Although no record of Henry has been found Henry's son is probably a John Grene who 'signs' a bell at Grimley church. The 4th bell is inscribed 'God Be Of Good Spede William Wogan - IG 1599'. This is also possibly the same Green who is in the Churchwardens' Accounts of Ludlow for the year 1623-24⁴⁵ where there is the entry, "It'm paied to Greene the Bellfounder towards his Charges by the appoyntm' of Mr. Bayliefts iijs iiijd". There is also in St Peter's church at Lugwardine, near Hereford, a bell which bears the inscription: 'He That Doth B Hovlde And C John G Of Wostar Meda Me - 1651'⁴⁶ This is also attributed to John Green.

The final Grene of this dynasty is a further John who appears in the Register of St. Helen's, Worcester, which states that a John Grene was baptised there in 1650-1.

⁴² Prior More's Journal [ref] p83

⁴³ *ibid* p.110

⁴⁴ WRO 'Itm I gyve and bequeathe unto Henry my Sonne all my bell moldes and all my brasse pott moldes and to occupye them wt his mother during her lyfe and all my pewter moldes of brasse what so ever they be.'

⁴⁵ Some Notes on Worcestershire Bell-Founders in *The Archaeological Journal*, Volume 63, Royal Archaeological Institute, 1906 pp.187-193

⁴⁶ *ibid*