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Edward Bell of Newland

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EDWARD Bell is remembered in the Forest of Dean as the founder of the local grammar school. Few facts about his life and background have been published, and since within the next few years Bell's Grammar School at Coleford is likely to be closed on the completion of the proposed Royal Forest of Dean Grammar School, now is perhaps an appropriate time to recall the man before his foundation is forgotten. It is commonly known only that the school was not moved to Coleford until 1875, its original site being at Newland where Bell had founded it three hundred years earlier. The move was justified by the increase of population at Coleford in the 19th century and the decay of the school at Newland.

Although Edward Bell is rightly regarded as the founder of the school which bears his name, it has been claimed that this succeeded a well-recorded chantry school dating from the late Middle Ages.¹ The latter was established in 1445-6 by Joan, widow of Robert Greyndour of Clearwell in Newland, and was probably at the wish of her husband, who had died two years earlier in 1443. Certainly a hundred years later it was believed that the chantry had been founded by Robert Greyndour, 'to th'entent that there shuld be an honeste and discrete preste, being sufficientlie lerned in the arte of gramer to kepe and teache a grammer scoole ther half free for ever'.² The school survived the sale of chantries in 1548, and although its endowments were confiscated the Court of Augmentations continued to pay a schoolmaster, Roger Ford, until 1553-4. It then appears to have become defunct, and there was no provision for grammar education anywhere within the Forest; the Chantry Commissioners' recommendation in 1548 that such a school should be erected at Newent was not carried out,³ while the charity school at Chepstow was not founded

¹ Sir John Maclean, 'Notes on the Greyndour chapel and chantry in the church of Newland . . .', *Trans. BGAS*, vii (1882-3), pp. 117-25; *V.C.H. Gloucestershire*, II (1907), pp. 409-17.

² *V.C.H. Gloucestershire*, II, p. 412.

³ A. Platts and G. H. Hainton, *Education in Gloucestershire* (1954), p. 9.

until 1605,¹ and William Jones's Grammar School at Monmouth until 1615.² It is in this light that the importance of Bell's foundation in the 1570s may be judged.

If his name is well known and still associated with his school, little is known of Edward Bell himself. The histories of the school, of which the most recent and comprehensive was by Thomas Bright in 1954, have been content to describe him, quite correctly, as Edward Bell of Writtle in Essex, and to report that it was largely due to his son Edward, who lived at Newland, that the school was firmly established. The attention paid to the Bell family compared with the Greyndours is reflected in the six pages allotted to the chantry school in the *Victoria County History* with the four line dismissal of Bell's foundation, which has survived to the present. No one has yet explained why this Essex gentleman should establish a school on the remote fringes of the wild Forest of Dean.

In fact, the Bell family had lived at Newland since at least the early 16th century. The school founder was the second son of William Bell of Highmeadow, who occurs in deeds from 1506.³ His grandfather, also named Edward, was a Gloucestershire man too, though not apparently connected with the better known Sandhurst family of the same surname, who also favoured the Christian names of William and Edward.⁴ William Bell of Highmeadow died in or soon after 1517, and left considerable property at Highmeadow and Coleford to his widow Joan (who remarried), daughter of John Matthew, and to his children James, Edward, John, Robert, and Julyn.⁵ All the latter were very young, and John and Robert probably died in childhood as they are not heard of again; Julyn may have survived to marry Thomas Wilbore.

The eldest of the family, James, stayed in the village of his birth at his 'mansion house' at Highmeadow,⁶ and having inherited houses and lands from his parents continued to increase his possessions and improve his position there. Described most often in deeds and his will as a yeoman, his rise in status led him later in life to describe himself as a gentleman. He twice married, but no children from either marriage lived. He himself died in 1580, and in his will he requested burial in the Lady Chapel of Newland church, and left money for the repair of

¹ I. Waters, *About Chepstow* (1952), p. 61.

² W. M. Warlow, *History of the charities of William Jones at Monmouth and Newland* (1899), pp. 42-3.

³ Gloucestershire Records Office (G.R.O.), D1677/307.

⁴ Sir J. Maclean and W. C. Heane, ed., *Visitation of the county of Gloucester . . . 1623* (1885), pp. 17-18.

⁵ G.R.O., D1677/322, 323.

⁶ Somerset House, P.C.C. Wills, 52 Arundell; (G.R.O., Photocopy 429).

the church and poor of the parish. His goods and lands in Newland, English Bicknor and Staunton were left to his widow Joan, with reversion to the children of his younger brother Edward.

The career of the latter, the founder of the grammar school, was markedly different. Although he also inherited a house and land at Newland from his father, he must have decided early in life that he had few prospects as a small yeoman farmer. Born in 1510,¹ he presumably received his schooling at the Greyndour chantry school, where the chaplain and master from 1521 to 1530 was John Bolter or Bolthar, a Bachelor of Arts of Oxford University; his successors were also both Oxford men, David Smith (1530-1) and Roger Wynter (1531-c. 1540).² Since young Edward Bell showed promise of academic ability he also went to Oxford, probably to Brasenose College, and in 1538 graduated. The next year he became a junior fellow of Merton College, a post which required him to be a clerk in holy orders, and in 1542 he proceeded to the degree of Master of Arts.³ There in Oxford he stayed until 1549, for he is described in a deed of 1 July as Edward Bell 'of Oxonia, clerk'.⁴ Very soon afterwards there was a momentous change in his career.

In May of that year Sir William Petre, Secretary of State and a former Henrician monastic visitor, was appointed one of the commissioners to visit and reform Oxford University. And although his biographer states that Petre did not go to Oxford himself during the visitation,⁵ it seems almost certain that it was through this connection that Bell and Petre first met. However the meeting came about, by December Edward Bell had taken up his duties in the service of the leading statesman in the country.

Sir William Petre was himself an Oxford man, admitted Doctor of Civil Law in 1533, and later in life a liberal benefactor to his own two colleges—Exeter, where he earned the title of 'second founder' by his endowments between 1564 and 1566, and All Souls, of which he had been elected a fellow in 1523. He had risen in the service of the government under Thomas Cromwell to become Secretary of State to three successive Tudor sovereigns, Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary; he resigned his office in 1557 but served Elizabeth as acting Secretary for a short time in Cecil's absence, and remained active as a privy

¹ Monumental brass in Writtle church.

² *V.C.H. Gloucestershire*, p. 415.

³ J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses*.

⁴ G.R.O., D1677/409.

⁵ F. G. Emmison, *Tudor Secretary* (1961), p. 72.

councillor and courtier until 1567, five years before his death. In the course of his public career he had acquired an extensive estate of 20,000 acres in mid-Essex, and a similar amount in his native Devon, as well as property in other counties including the manors of Todenham and Sutton-under-Brailes in this county (transferred to Warwickshire in 1844). His Essex estate lay in the well-wooded part of the county west of the assize and county town of Chelmsford, and less than thirty miles from London. Here he built the pleasant brick Tudor mansion of Ingatestone Hall, still owned and occupied by his direct descendant the 17th Lord Petre.

It was here that Edward Bell became house-steward, and the first household account book in his hand runs from December 1549 to November 1550.¹ It may seem strange that Bell should make such an apparently radical change in his career, but he must have undertaken administrative work at Oxford to be acceptable to Petre, and his new post not only gave him a responsible position in the service of one of the most important, if unostentatious, leaders of the state, but also allowed him an opportunity to take up the life of a country gentleman, which he had discarded at Newland. There can be no doubt that his work was not a sinecure. Petre himself was an excessively industrious man, who had been trained in the hard school of Thomas Cromwell, working against time and distance in ceaseless monastic visitations. He took and accepted great responsibilities, and was watchful in the outlay of money. His severe outlook can have brooked no inefficiency among his servants, and demanded the highest standard of service.

Although state affairs prevented Sir William Petre from being at home except for infrequent visits, his household normally consisted of his wife and five children, some of his several wards, and an indoor and outdoor staff of about twenty. As a prominent statesman and country squire he entertained frequently, and while Edward Bell was house-steward the distinguished visitors included Princess (later Queen) Mary in February 1550, Secretary Cecil in July 1552, and numerous friends, relatives and neighbours with their servants; at the bottom of the social scale were itinerant beggars and wandering Welsh harpers. The marriage of Dorothy Petre to Nicholas Wadham (founders of Wadham College, Oxford) in 1555 imposed an additional burden on the hard-worked house-steward, but the climax in hospitality for both master and steward came in July 1561 with the three-day visit of Queen Elizabeth herself, accompanied by a large proportion of the court and their servants.

¹ Emmison, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

All the staff from the kitchen boy to the caterer and other stewards took their orders from Bell.¹ He was solely responsible to his master, who audited his accounts. Some idea of the scope of his duties may be judged from the second of his two account books that have survived. This covers the period from December 1554 to November 1555,² with separate sections for receipts, money spent on clothing (including Dorothy Petre's marriage), spices and fruit, fish, malt, and travelling (including his own two visits to Cambridge on behalf of Petre's wards, Edward Sulyard and Thomas Tyrell, 'to dispatch with their tutor for all manner of things').³ Estate expenditure comprised servants' wages, stable and carters' expenses, gifts, tithes, fuel, hedging and ditching, smiths' work, building costs—240,000 bricks were made on the estate that year—the garden and orchard, some of the farming, and annuities. 'Extraordinary' expenses embraced a host of miscellaneous payments concerning anything from the rich man's sport of falconry to contributions to the parish collection for the poor.

Bell received no salary for all this work. Instead he was allowed an estate farm at Writtle, between Ingatestone and Chelmsford, on lease at a low rent. He seems to have remained in Sir William Petre's service until the latter's death in 1571, when he received a further mark of his master's confidence and favour. Sir William nominated him and John Kyrme, the chief steward, to assist the executors of his will in their duties, for which he was given £10, and in addition bequeathed him an annuity of 5 marks 'for past service to him and future counsel to his wife and son'.⁴

Even if he no longer acted as house-steward after Sir William's death, Bell remained closely connected with the Petre family, for he named his master's son John (later 1st Lord Petre) his 'very worshipful friend' as overseer of his own will, and Sir John Petre later acted as principal feoffee of the lands at Newland for the grammar school. This connection with the Petre family raises the question whether Edward Bell was himself a Roman Catholic. Sir William Petre had been too astute to commit himself throughout his long public career, but his son almost certainly died a Catholic, and he had married a Catholic wife who maintained a priest at Ingatestone Hall. Edward Bell's own upbringing at the Newland chantry school and at Oxford was in the Catholic faith, and he had been ordained before the extreme Protestant reforms of Edward VI's time; perhaps it is significant that

¹ Emmison, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

² Essex Record Office, D/DP A11.

³ Emmison, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

⁴ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 289-90.

he abandoned his clerkly life at Oxford early in Edward's reign. He was a cousin of the Halls of Newland, a well-known Catholic family in the Forest, and it may be noted that in his will he left his soul not only to the Trinity, as was customary, but also to 'oure blessed ladie St Marye the Virgin, and to all the hollye Company of heaven'. On the other hand, in his foundation of the grammar school and bequests to the poor he acted in the normal manner of contemporary Protestant gentlemen. The will was dated 20 November 1576,¹ and eight weeks later on 23 January 1577 he died at his Writtle home of Byrles at the age of sixty-three, being commemorated by a monumental brass in the parish church.

In his twenty-seven years' residence in Essex he had risen to become a gentleman of some estate, with an official post as coroner of the Liberty of Writtle. He had married there, to Margaret daughter of John Bailey of Stapleford Abbots in west Essex, and she survived him with their four children, William, Edward, James and Anne. He employed a number of women servants and at least four men, John Clerke the kitchen boy, Nicholas, William Howell and Richard Yorath. All received bequests, but probably not all of them lived in his household; the familiar Forest surnames of the last two named men suggests that they may have been looking after Bell's interests in Gloucestershire. For the will also reveals the extent of his business enterprise. Debtors included Sir John Petre, and Henry Dowle of Tewkesbury, he owned Cubbes farm at Shute in Devon as well as Byrles in Writtle, and had built up an estate in the Forest of Dean in Newland, Hewelsfield, St Briavels and Staunton, and Dixton near Monmouth.

This shows that he had never lost his interest in the Forest, and particularly after Sir William Petre's death he appears to have taken steps to acquire lands near his birthplace. Possibly he considered returning there himself in his old age, or just intended that his children should be able to maintain the Gloucestershire interests of the family, particularly if the connection with their Essex patrons was likely to be broken. In any case he turned to his home rather than his adopted county. Between 1572 and 1576 he bought lands in Newland and Staunton,² which were later increased by his eldest sons William and Edward. Both settled in Gloucestershire after their father's death, although William returned to London about 1620.³ Edward Bell's

¹ Somerset House, P.C.C. Wills, 8 Daughtry; (G.R.O., Photocopy 429).

² G.R.O., D1677/474 and D34/9/4-9.

³ G.R.O., D1677/655, 1539.

interests extended further than merely the purchase of property, for he left £4 for the repair of the north aisle of Newland church and to the poor of St Briavels, Hewelsfield and Staunton, as well as planning the almshouses and grammar school at Newland.

His motives for the last action are not hard to seek. This was an age of large private benefactions, and he had the example of Sir William Petre, who (apart from his Oxford endowments) founded almshouses at Ingatestone, and was a foundation governor of Chelmsford grammar school, formerly a chantry school. Whereas that part of Essex was well provided with schools, west Gloucestershire was not. His own successful life had started at the Greyndour chantry school, although there seems to be no basis for the tradition that he gained some of the former chantry's lands and 'being smitten with remorse for having appropriated that which belonged to the Church he gave back a portion'.¹ The chantry's property lay in Lydney and Newland, and in 1559 was granted to Edward Baeshe and William Wynter of London; the latter, who was the builder of White Cross House at Lydney and one of the admirals who defeated the Spanish Armada, became sole owner later in the same year.²

The method of foundation is obscure because Bell had not completed it before his death. The scheme had been started and the building begun, for in his will Edward left to his elder brother James Bell of Newland debts of £140 owed by both James himself and Henry Dowle of Tewkesbury, out of which he was to pay a number of small legacies, 'and with the residue thereof to builde upp and fynishe the Schole and Almes Howses by me begonne at Newlande aforesaide, and to furnishe the same accordinge to such platt as is alreadie begonne and as shalbe hereafter by me declared in wrytinge by me to be subscribed'. It is highly unlikely that he supervised the erection of the school and almshouses personally, but probably deputed this task to his brother James, Richard Yorath, his servant, and others; in his will these two, together with his wife's cousin Thomas Pagitt, and brother-in-law, Henry Marsh, were requested to continue the plan. Despite the intention expressed in his will, Bell failed to endow the foundation with lands, whatever instructions he left his friends. Fifty years afterwards his son stated that his father had been thinking in terms of leaving his new school and almshouse an annuity of £20, but it seems that no specific lands were charged with this payment. Probably Edward Bell's sons made payments to the feoffees irregularly according to their consciences and the needs of the school.

¹ *Trans. BGAS*, vi (1881-2), p. 363.

² G.R.O., D421/T32.

Consequently, disputes soon arose. In 1598 Thomas Baynham, on behalf of the inhabitants of Newland, presented a bill of complaint in Chancery against Edward Bell, junior, the second son of the founder (who had been left property in Newland by his father and occurs frequently in deeds from 1595), Richard Yorath and others unnamed. After usual legal delays a decree was obtained on 19 February 1603, ordering 'that one house should be wholly imployed to the use of a scholemaster and schole, and another house for an almshouse accordinge to the direction and trew meaninge of the said Edward Bell deceased', and that henceforth an annuity of 20 marks a year should be paid for their maintenance.¹

The matter was still not settled, however. The annuity was charged upon lands which were former forest assarts, and there was only a doubtful title because 'there is not any deed extante nor any other tie'. The blame for the continued unsatisfactory state of the endowment must lie with Edward Bell, junior, and in 1627 the inhabitants of Newland presented a second Chancery bill of complaint against him. On this occasion he admitted that his father would have left lands for the charity in preference to an annuity if he had lived to complete his foundation, and bearing this in mind (as well as his own advancing age) he offered 'freely and voluntarily' to convey to feoffees nominated by the parishioners lands to the full value of £20 income. Following the court's approval of the proposal² he conveyed the lands to the feoffees on 21 March 1627.³ The land in question, as before, was former assart, and had been part of his father's estate, but William Bell junior had compounded for them and received a Crown grant to himself and William Wynter in 1618, before passing them to his brother the next year. The property lay scattered throughout the large parish of Newland, at Redbrook, Bream, Whitecliff, Millend and Highmeadow, and remained the principal estate of the charity until their sale after the Great War.⁴

It had taken fifty years for Edward Bell's plans for the grammar school and small almshouse for eight poor men and women to develop into soundly established foundations. Within that period a much wealthier school and almshouses were founded in the district under the terms of the will of William Jones in 1615. This rich London merchant left a fortune for building the attractive range of almshouses at Newland and for founding Monmouth Grammar School, as well as lectureships

¹ G.R.O., D34/1/2. This collection comprises all the ancient records of Bell's charity.

² G.R.O., D34/1/4.

³ G.R.O., D34/9/22.

⁴ T. Bright, *Bell's, the Story of a Gloucestershire School* (1954), p. 6.

in both places. The strong Puritan background of Jones's charity is a contrast to Bell's, where the sole surviving feoffee in 1650 was a Roman Catholic, and Jones's school, supported by the power of the Haberdashers' Company, had none of the struggles of Bell's. For despite a further annuity of £10 given by Alderman John Whitson of Bristol (like both Bell and Jones a native of Newland who left his birthplace and flourished elsewhere), Bell's Grammar School remained a weak institution. Before its removal to Coleford it had become almost defunct, and now in the changing educational times today once again apparently lacks the vigour necessary for its survival.