

Cowbells - a request**Jeremy Montagu**

I have become interested in folded iron cow and other animal bells, and while this isn't a subject that is likely to have interested many other FoMRHI members, I'm writing this in the hope that there might be one or two.

Nobody to my knowledge has produced anything on the typology of these instruments and yet there is much to be done and much to be learned. The main problem is finding examples from definite locations rather than, as with most of my examples, 'probably English' so that one can use them to establish the locations of others by comparison.

What has spurred this Comm is the recent acquisition of a number of Catalan examples, ie with definite location, and the realisation that there are very different design and construction techniques involved in different localities.

There seem to be three basic techniques.

One is fairly simple (I have examples from Kenya and the African double bell is made in a similar way). Two pieces of iron are laid one on top of the other and joined on three edges, the top and the two sides, either with a flux of some sort (brazing or welding) or more commonly by getting them really hot and hammering them until the metal merges, a technique known as hammer-welding.

The second is to make a curved dome by hammering one piece of metal, and then joining that to the upper end of a conical, cylindrical, or)(shape tube that has been made by bending another sheet of metal round into a circle with a single seamed edge. I have examples of this type from India, Korea, South Africa and unlocated.

The third, and at the moment the one that interests me the most, is made by taking a rectangular metal sheet, bending it in the middle into an inverted U shape and then folding the vertical sides so that they meet each other on each, making a long, usually fairly narrow, box with an open bottom and a seam on each side.

The technology of the bending and folding is rather more complex than it reads above, with almost always a small V-shape pleat at the shoulder. With the 'probably English' (and

some certainly English) and American bells that I've got, that shoulder pleat has its point aiming downwards, folded down over the side seam on each side. The Catalan ones all have the point aiming upwards and it acts as an anchor for the crown or hasp through which the collar goes; the hasp is a flat piece of sheet metal, whereas on English and American bells it's usually an iron rod which pierces the top.

The joint on the side seam differs, too, both in its shape or pattern and in the way in which it is joined.

So does the shape of the crown or hasp as well as its material and method of fixing which are mentioned above. Some hasps are a simple curve, some are sharp cornered; others are M-shape.

With one exception, the crowns, on all the bells I have, go from side to side, ie from and to the sides that have the seam. This is sensible as it means, from the way that the bell naturally swings, that the clapper normally strikes the front and back which don't have a seam and thus are stronger. One bell has two hasps side by side, and they go from front to back so that the clapper strikes most frequently on the seams. It should be possible to locate it by this pattern...

Most English bells are square or rectangular in section; they are as wide from side to side and front to back at the top as at the bottom. All Catalan bells, and many others, are conical in one aspect, wider from front to back at the bottom (the mouth) than at the top and rectangular in plan (leaving aside the semi-globular pattern, the *truc*). Some bells, including the only American ones I have, are conical in both aspects, front to back and side to side, while also remaining rectangular in plan.

Many of these features must be characteristic of certain locations. Thus if it were possible to build up a descriptive typology of bells from known locations, it should eventually become possible to establish the locations of other bells from this.

If anyone were interested in this as a project, either with me or by themselves, I'd be very interested to hear from them. I can provide details of about fifty bells of these three types.

I'd also be interested to hear of any descriptive publications of such bells. The only one that comes to mind is Fivos Anoyanakis's book on Greek instruments which was published

by the National Bank and that isnt as informative on methods of construction as it looks at first glance.

Finally, just in case you think that this doesnt seem to fit under MRHI of FoMRHI, the early English and Celtic saints' bells, such as that attributed to St Patrick in the National Museum of Ireland, were made in exactly the same way as the third method above. The technology for casting bells seems to have been lost in Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, and anyway all the surviving Roman bells were pretty small; OK for the dinner table but not much else. Until the revival of casting somewhere in the 9th or 10th century, folding iron was the only way to make a bell.

A FoMRHI Comm from 2010

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