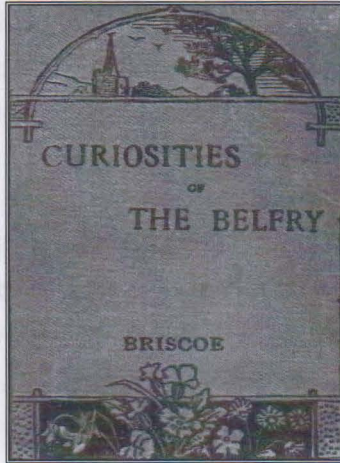




*John Egerton 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Bridgewater.*

## BRAVE SIR JOHN

by William Willans



"Curiosities of the Belfry" is an engaging compilation, the work of John Potter Briscoe and published in 1883. Strictly for the general reader – and none the worse for that – much of the content is from local knowledge and tradition, but for one item, "Brave Sir John: a Belfry Song", the source is given in detail: *"On the back of leaf 91 in the Harleian MS., 1221, in a hand of about A.D. 1625, are the following five verses. "Brave Sir John" is written in a later hand on the side, and is the burden of the song:*

*Set wide the bellfry doore  
bring oyle and tallow store  
set ale and wine on score  
weele neere be sad no more*

*Wellcome to the bellfry  
thou man of dignity!  
Though I a cobbler be  
Ile pull a rope with thee*

*Let preachers talke of popes  
and Schollers of their Tropes  
weele sticke unto our ropes  
for thereby hang our hopes.*

*His father settles land  
takes forfeiture from band  
while he on tiptoe stand  
galding his noble hand*

*Let him in brasse be cast  
and in the bellfry placest  
that men may speak at last  
of thinges wh have bynne past."*





## **"AN INDEFATIGABLE RINGER"**

Who was "brave Sir John? There is a clue in the fourth verse - *"His father settles land / takes forfeiture from band (sic)"*; a person of high standing in the law, almost certainly in Chancery. Even so, the trail would be difficult to follow, were it not for John Aubrey, who in his life of Sir Thomas Egerton identified the father and the son:

*"Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Chancellor, was the natural sonne of Sir Richard Egerton, of Cheshire. This information I had from Sir John Egerton, of Egerton in Cheshire, baronet, the chiefe of his family. He was on Lincoln's-Inne, and I have heard Sir John Danvers say that he was so hard a student, that in three or four years he was hardly out of the house. He had good parts and early came into good practice. He was a great patron to Ben Johnson, as appears by severall epistles to him. His son and heire, since earle of Bridgewater, was an indefatigable ringer – vide the ballad."*

And, the "burden" in full is quoted by Aubrey in correspondence, although he seems to have been unsuccessful in obtaining the ballad itself; writing to Anthony Wood on 27 March 1680, he asked for a

transcript of various ballads, and one of them was "*The Ballad of the Lord Chancellor Egerton's son, the Bellringer, the Burden is "Brave Sir John Egerton / Our wise Lord Chancellor's son"*". Wood did not reply, and Aubrey wrote again in August, for the ballad on "the Ringer"; but again, there was no response.

## THE FATHER AND THE SON

Sir Thomas Egerton, Baron Ellesmere, later first Viscount Brackley, was indeed Lord Chancellor. His rise in public life had begun when Queen Elizabeth appointed him Solicitor General after hearing of his handling a case against the crown; the story goes, she had observed "*by my troth, he shall never plead against me again*". Popular and respected at first, although regarded by one contemporary as "*an arrant hypocrite and deep dissembler*" – possibly with reason, since he modified his beliefs to become a prosecutor of Roman Catholics after having been raised in that faith himself - his reputation declined. There certainly is evidence that his ambition was not equalled by his capacity; it was said, eight thousand cases in Chancery remained unheard at his death. Also, he had the misfortune, after being twice widowed, to take as his third wife Alice Spencer whose beauty was only equalled by her furious



temper: *"I thank God I never desired long life, nor ever had less cause to desire it since this, my last marriage, for before I was never acquainted with such tempests and storms".*

Sir John was born in 1579. He came early to his "dignitie"; he was with the Earl of Essex in Ireland, where he was knighted by the Earl – and where his brother was killed, in August 1599, which led to him becoming, by inheritance, deputy baron of the exchequer court of the county palatine of Chester at the age of twenty. He suffered a serious illness in 1603, which left him lame. At the death of his father he succeeded as second Viscount of Brackley, and later that year was raised to earldom, that of Bridgewater – a favour promised to his father by King James, for which Sir John himself may or may not have had to pay the Duke of Buckingham, James's favourite, the colossal sum of £20,000. "Generous to a fault", his biographer observes, he personally contributed to all the poor-boxes in his domain; his patronage was equally generous, again according to his biographer, especially in literature, and many works were dedicated to him. Milton's "Comus" was written for the occasion of his taking up residence at Ludlow Castle as Lord President of the Council in the Marches of Wales, of which he had

been a member since his raising to the earldom, The story is that Milton's involvement came through his contact with Henry Lawes, the composer, who occupied a position in the Egerton household.

A Royalist, he nevertheless distanced himself from the more extreme opinions of King Charles and his ministers; and there is no evidence of any active involvement on his part in the civil wars. Instead, he concentrated on local issues, to keep his lands, family and community intact. The verdict of the biographer is that he was "an efficient officer"; even so, his fortunes declined in the "distracted times", and at the time of his death he was thousands of pounds in debt.

### **"AN INDEFATIGABLE RINGER"**

As for his ringing – if there is any evidence of Sir John's activity, it has yet to be discovered. But he may have had influence, during his lifetime and later: as Dr Eisel has observed, "*Ludlow appears to have been in the forefront of developments in bellhanging, more than would have been perhaps expected. However, at that period Ludlow was a rather more important place than now. From late mediaeval times onwards Ludlow Castle was the residence of the Lord President of the Council*



*for the Marches of Wales which had judicial and administrative functions over the thirteen Welsh counties and four English border counties of the Marches...*" The six bells were fitted with three-quarter wheels in 1624. The first certain record of stays is at Ludlow, in 1655. It may be coincidence that a member of the Council, later President, had been "an indefatigable ringer". The fact remains.

There is certainly no suggestion that Sir John had anything to do with the newly-discovered "changes".

His ringing is more likely to have been raising, round-ringing and falling, dead-rope; possibly with a strong element of competition, hinted at in the well-known remarks on ringing in London by Frederick Gerschow, in the retinue of the Duke of Stettin-Pomerania in England in 1602: "*We are informed that the young people do that for the sake of exercise and amusement and sometimes they pay considerable sums as a wager who will pull a bell the longest and ring it in the most approved fashion*". That being the case, stamina in a ringer was important, and since Aubrey chose his words with care, the inference is that the "indefatigable" Sir John had plenty of it.



## “LET PREACHERS TALK OF POPES ...”

And there is the historical context to be considered. The old Queen was not that long dead, and those who had known her reign continually looked back to it as a golden age, with foreboding for the future: *“I desire not to live in this corrupt age. I foresaw and foretold the late changes, and now easily foresee what will follow after. Alas! O’ God’s will! It was not so in Queen Elizabeth’s day...”* Although one terrible crisis had been averted with the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot, there was social, political and religious tension: the wily King James was keeping it under control, but under his successor there would be the horrors of civil war, and all that followed.

Small wonder, then, that the “cobler” and his band sought comfort in ringing:

*“Let preachers talke of popes  
and Schollers of their Tropes  
weele sticke unto our ropes  
for thereby hang our hopes”*

It was an attitude which later would be deprecated; for instance, by the anonymous author of

"The Gentleman's Recreation" (1684) in "Advice to a Ringers" - "*Secondly, nor let the bells be made thy lullaby, to drown some dissatisfaction, and so make thee repair to the belfree (like the nurse to her whistle-bells) to quiet thy disturbed mind*" - a passage quoted with relish by Ellacombe, with the addition of a characteristic phrase on "idle drunken habits", in "Practical Remarks".

John Potter Briscoe had no such comment to make. A librarian by profession, who played a leading part in the development of public libraries, he was the author of several works besides the "Curiosities", with titles such as "Nottinghamshire Facts and Fictions" and "Gleanings from Gods Acre – Being a Collection of Epitaphs". If the content seems familiar now, it is because so much has been recycled by later authors; some, but by no means all, acknowledging the source.

At any rate, he preserved this ballad – which even Aubrey failed to locate – and presented it without any Belfry Reform cant, simply as a record "*of thynges which have bynne past*"; an achievement for which he, too, deserves to be remembered.

Will Willans 2020



Thanks to the London Library, I have been able to make use of *“Brief Lives with An Apparatus for the Lives of our English Mathematical Writers”* (Vols I and II) edited by Kate Bennett: but I first located the Egerton entry in Anthony Powell’s *“Brief Lives and other assorted writings by John Aubrey”* (1949).

*“Father and Son”*: all biographical details are from the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

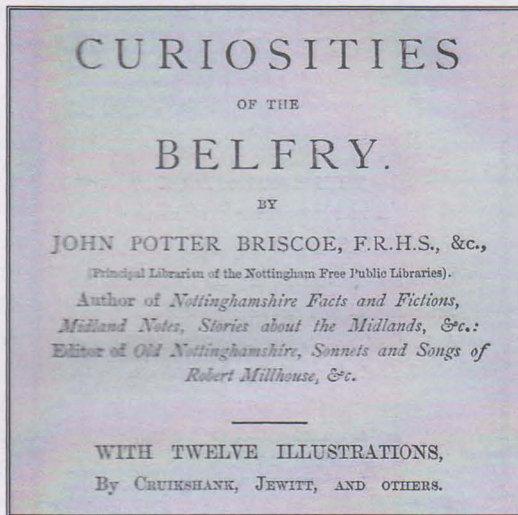
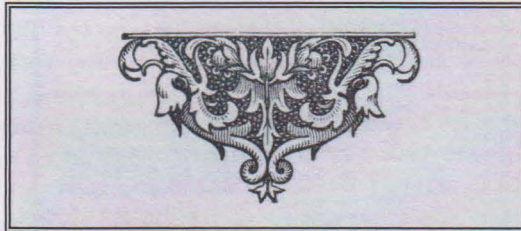
Details and quotes on bell-hanging at Ludlow are from *“Developments in Bell Hanging”* and *“The Development of Change Ringing in the Seventeenth Century”*, by John C Eisel, in *“Change ringing: the History of an English Art”* Vol I (CCCBR, 1987).

I also have to thank John for his very encouraging response, long ago, to my first try at the identity of *“Brave Sir John”*.

*“It was not so in Queen Elizabeth’s day”*; this is Aubrey quoting Thomas Tyndale, *“an old gentleman that remembers Queene Elizabeth’s raigne and court”* - from the Powell edition.


“Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers”: this passage is from the online copy available at the Whiting Society website.

And – what are “whistle-bells”?



Overleaf are the verses as they appear in ‘Curiosities in the Belfry’





BRAVE SIR JOHN:  
A BELFRY SONG.

—†o†—

“Set wide the bellfry doore,  
bring oyle and tallow store,  
set ale and wine on score,  
weele neere be sad no more,  
[brave Sr John.]

Wellcome to the bellfry,  
thou man of dignity!  
though I a cobbler be,  
He pull a rope wth thee,  
[Brave Sr John.]

Let preachers talke of popes,  
and Schollers of their Tropes,  
weele sticke unto our ropes,  
for thereby hang our hopes,  
[Brave Sr John.]

His father setles land,  
take forfeitures from band,  
whilst he on tiptoe stond,  
galding his noble land,  
[Brave Sr John.]

lett him in brasse be cast,  
and in the bellfry placest,  
that men may speak at last,  
of thinges wh have bynne past,  
[Brave Sr John.]



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*continued overleaf*