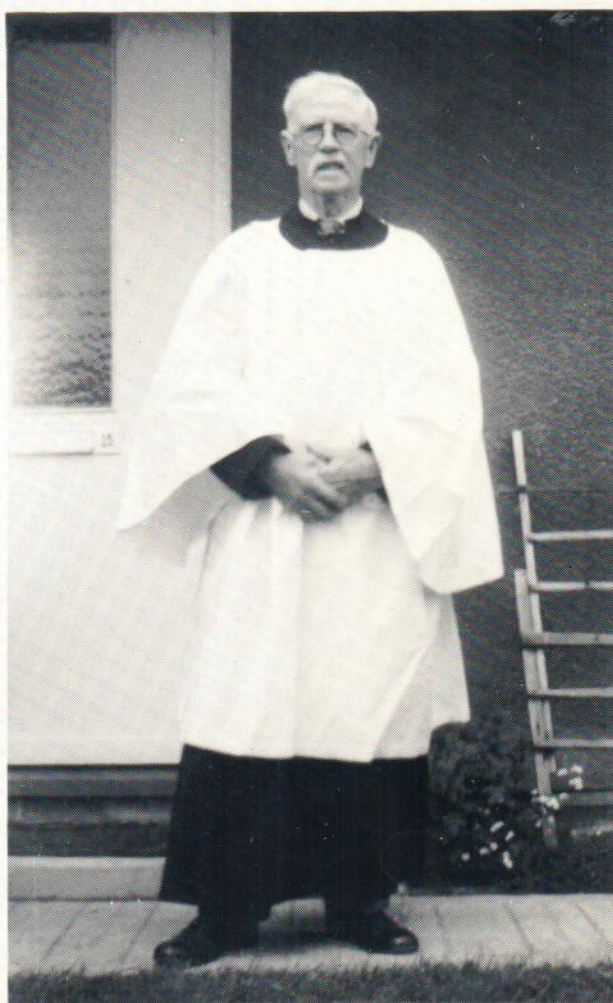


MEMOIRS OF A COUNTRYMAN

BY

JOHN T. GASCOIGNE



Mr John Thomas Gascoigne lives at Balderton,
where he takes a lively interest in the life
of the community. His story is not spectacular
but it is full of interest, indicative of an
observant eye and typical of the robust lives
led by that race of country craftsmen who
have done so much to make our nation great.

H.R.C.

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In addition I have "rung in the Twentieth Century" and fifty-seven New Years afterwards. All told, I have rung in the New Year, sixty times.

WORKING LIFE

1897

In this year I went to work at Walton's Joinery Works.

Mr E C Walton came to North Muskham in 1887 to learn farming. He made a beehive to hold a swarm of bees he removed from a tree – and that was how the Walton Beehive Works started. By 1898 it was the largest Beehive Works in the country, making three or four hundred hives a week in 1900 and fitting them out complete for 10/6 each.

Concerning Bees

Italian bees become very wild when anyone approaches their Hive, but they give a lot of honey. There are two kinds of honey – and clover honey taken from the white clover is the finest there is. A bee will travel as far as three miles to collect pollen. It is better for one person only to look after a group of hives because the bees learn to recognise him. There is an old superstition that one should always tell the bees when there has been a death in the family.

When I was in Lincolnshire, I went to repair two hives; I remember it was in July at about five o'clock in the afternoon and very hot. There was an old gentleman of eighty-two there, the owner, and he told me that if he talked to his bees while I was working, I should not be stung. He was right, too – for while I was working on those hives, I did not get a single sting! I was there for about fifteen minutes and for my wages, I received – two jars of honey.

In 1901/2, the "Isle of Wight Disease" attacked the bees and killed millions of them; and after 1905, we stopped making hives altogether. It was an interesting job, fitting them up, and altogether, I spent about three Summers at this work.

After this, we began to make dog kennels, poultry houses, stables, coach houses, studios and so on. At one time, we made a bungalow with sixteen rooms for Lord and Lady Glascoe. This was in 1902 at Fairlie and Largs, Kilburn Estate, Scotland. I remember it cost £700! Later in 1920 we erected one of the same pattern at Tilton-on-Hill, Leicestershire and this cost £1,700.

I worked on improvements to the dog kennels, making them easier to lift and clean out. I remember. I did this for Lady Decie, who was a great "dog fancier", really. I made a great many dog kennels of all sizes during this time.

About the year 1899, another lad and myself during the Summer, went to South Muskham Bridge spanning the River Trent and there we saw a cave which would hold about fifty soldiers. It was said that Oliver Cromwell may have put his men there, with the idea of blowing up Newark Castle. The water is sometimes very low there and when King John stayed at the castle, it was said that to get to the water, it was necessary to walk along a very narrow ledge.

The church itself goes back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The War Memorial was made of ship's wood; and the Rev: Colley's sisters gave the stained glass window in the Chancel in memory of their brother.

After the last War, the choir attendance dwindled and eventually, there was only one lad and myself left. In 1962, I came to live in Balderton and joined the choir there, where I am still a member.

Altogether I have enjoyed singing in choirs for seventy years.

BELL RINGING

In November 1897, when I arrived at the church early one Sunday morning, the Clerk and the Sexton were laying the Communion Table and they asked me to help. (Mr S Thomson had been clerk for sixty-five years having been born at Ferry Newcastle Arms, North Muskham. The stained glass window over the font is in memory of him). After setting the table, Mr Thomson said "Now let's go and ring the bell!". Out of the four bells, two were cracked, so we rang one only for about ten minutes. This was how I started bell ringing. I used to go and sit with Mr Thomson for two or three nights a week and listen to him talking about the past. We read books, some of which were two hundred years old.

In 1898, we had the two broken bells re-cast. There was an "Opening Day" and eight ringers for the four bells; we had a practice night once a week until 1923. Then in 1923, Mr Gardner the Vicar's warden, gave a treble bell. On this is inscribed "In 1923, Mr Gardner gave me" my own father's name is on one of the bells that had been re-cast; this brought the total up to five bells.

Mr Woodward was the Captain when I started – until 1928; he was a schoolmaster as well as the organist. After he had passed away, I was voted to be the Captain as I was the youngest ringer – and I held this post for thirty-four years. During this time I had several teams.

In 1931, a young lady came to ask me if she could ring, but I could not give permission until I had asked the Vicar whether he thought it would be alright. The five bells were put on ball bearings and had a pin on each side and this made them twice as hard to ring, the Vicar allowed the lady to help.

A Vicar's daughter had rung a time or two at a church near Boston where her father had been a Canon. When he died, the family came to live at North Muskham. This lady got nine or ten others to come along and learn the art of bell ringing. But we only had five bells, lacking a Tenor bell. She asked the Vicar if we could buy one and he agreed, provided we could raise three quarters of the cost of the bell (£170). This lady approached Mr Ederley of North Muskham and asked whether she could borrow some hand bells. Being successful, she took them to her home at the Old Vicarage and started practices with them. (This was in about October, 1932). We learned how to play carols and all the Nursery Rhymes as well as table change until in March 1933, we were able to hold a concert in the school for two and a half hours non-stop, with half the programme consisting of hand bell ringing.

CHURCH LIFE

I was born at Beaconsfield in 1883. When I was five years old, we moved to Buckingham and stayed there until I was eleven. After this, we moved to Somerton near Oxford where the schoolmaster was the organist – and he put me in the choir in October, 1894.

Although the church was three and a half miles away from my home, I attended every practice and walked twice every Sunday and never missed for the whole of that year. This earned me a medal. With the walking to Church and the Saturday shopping, I covered forty miles of ground each week.

In March of 1897, we came to North Muskham and I went into the choir there; it was in the gallery at the back of the church. Oliver Cromwell had destroyed part of the inside of the church.

The Vicar was the Rev: Hall, about eighty years old, and he passed away in 1902. Then we had a curate from Newark – Mr Colley, a Sheffield man who stayed with us for two and a half years. Before he died, he had ordered a firm to restore the church as he had plenty of money, he said he would pay for it; but the Contract was broken when a new Vicar came, the Rev: Williams, and we had to find the money ourselves. We held Whist Drives and Dances every month in the School and a two-day Bazaar each Summer for two years – 1905 and 1906 – and we raised the necessary sum! The Contract was for £1,200 but out of that, the Lay Erectors had to bear the cost of restoring the Chancel. Squire Edge and the Duke of Newcastle put a new roof on the Chancel. This was finished in 1907 and in 1911, a new organ was fixed where the Gallery had previously stood. Not only was the gallery removed, but the high pews were replaced by chairs.

After the organ had been put in, the "Gospel Screen" was repaired – a beautifully carved screen which owed its name to the fact that in the olden times the Gospel was read from it. A Vicar's warden gave the font cover and also a large cross. I carried this for fifty-two years and on several occasions, we took it down the village street at Rogation time.

We had a very good choir. The Vicar had a splendid voice and he trained us well, singing several solos himself at Festival times. In 1930, we started going to Choir Festivals in Nottingham and Mansfield and we became affiliated to the Choirs of England Church Music Society, going to Southwell Cathedral. In 1934, we attended a large Festival with over a thousand voices; choirs in the Deanery came to practice at our church every night for a week; Dr Nicholson and his choir of boys came for two nights and showed us how to sing, and this was broadcast on the Wireless. During the 1930's we had choral festivals in many of the villages.

In 1919 the Rev: Williams was made a Canon and South Muskham was added to his living in that year. For thirty-two years until he retired in 1938, he officiated at North and South Muskham. After the First World War, Canon Williams gave the screen gates, while the Lady Chapel was erected during the 1920's.

The organ cost £220 and half of this sum was given by one donor.

GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS 1972

LONGEST SERVING CHOIRISTER

Mr J T Gascoigne – Born 1883 – of Newark, Notts
has been in his local church choir since 1894.

He rung the century in, in 1900, and has completed
73 years as a bell ringer

All in the same Church

NORTH MUSKHAM