

The earliest Churchwardens' Book dates from 1734. It contains 112 pages of unruled paper and measures 11.5 inches by 7 inches. The book lists the accounts from 1734 to 1844 apart from the years 1801 to 1804 which are missing. The accounts are statements of annual church expenditure which have been examined, approved and signed by the curate or his deputy and a number of rate-paying parishioners who met specifically for the purpose. The accounts were signed-off usually between June and August.

Traditionally the churchwardens were chosen on Easter Tuesday by the joint consent of the curate, those on the church electoral roll and residents in the parish who were entitled to be local government electors. Great Ayton elected two churchwardens but larger parishes often had three or four elected churchwardens who would represent different townships within the parish. Within Great Ayton parish there were the townships of Nunthorpe, Little Ayton and Tunstall and representatives from two of these townships collected the 'assessments' in their respective areas and were paid for their services. They were occasionally referred to by name but more often referred to as the Nunthorpe and Little Ayton 'side men' or 'sidesmen.'

From 1827 the accounts are interspersed with 'Vestry Minutes'. These minutes are usually brief with no more than two or three items on the agenda, the main item usually being the setting of the parish rate for the coming year. The insertion of these minutes into the account book coincided with the arrival of an energetic newly-appointed clergyman, the Rev Joseph Ibbetson, in 1827. The vestry minutes have been transcribed and appear under a separate heading.

Not everyone was literate in the 18C and so initially the schoolmaster, who was a 'literate person' was paid to write the accounts. From 1747 to 1794 the handwriting appears to be that of Anthony Hastwell, the curate, who was paid a fee of 1s for writing the accounts. It would appear that Mr Hastwell was not ordained priest until November 1761 even though he had served the parish as its incumbent and had administered the sacrament since 1756. This laxity possibly reflects the neglect and isolation of the clergy in the rural parishes which was prevalent during the Hanoverian period.

Spelling presented a problem, as standardised spelling had not yet become the rule. Local dialect also confused the issue as can be seen in the variations in the words 'choosing' and 'churchwardens'.

Between 1806 and 1817 the following variations appeared, some in the same hand:

1806	'To chousand Church Warding	1s	10d'
1808	'To choosin Church Wardins	2s	0d'
1811	'Spent when chosing church wardens	2s	0d'
1813	'To chousing church wardins	2s	6d'
1814	'Spent when chusing Church Wardins	2s	6d'
1816	'Spent at choosing Churchwards	3s	0d'
1817	'Chusing Churchwardens	5s	0d'

The Visitation

The entry 'Expences at Visitation' appears in most accounts, usually in June or July, and refers to the annual visit of the Archdeacon of the diocese. The purpose of the visit is to assess the spiritual wellbeing of the parishioners and clergy, to hold an ecclesiastical court and to deal with matters relating to the fabric of the church. It would appear that occasionally the Bishop took the place of the Archdeacon but the visits were in the neighbourhood rather than to the parish.

1743	'Court Charges att Bishops Visitation and our own Charges	£1	0s	8d'
	'To meat and Drinke for Horses and Selves at Thirske		4s	0d'
	'Answering to correction Court	£1	0s	0d'
	'To Wm Coatham Self and Horse going to do.		3s	0d'
1771	'Court Fees at Visitation at Stockesley		5s	0d'

More detail regarding the type of expenses incurred at the visitation is given on one occasion. Bracketed together are the following four entries.

1782

'June 15 th Court Fees at Visitation	7s 6d'
'Expences at Visitation for 6 Mens Dinner at 18d	9s 6d'
'Do 4Quarts Rum at 4s p Quart	16s 0d'
'Do Sugar and Lemons	4s 0d'
'for Ale etc	3s 6d'

There is no evidence in the records that any of the Bishops of the time ever visited Great Ayton during the whole of this period confirming the lack of diocesan oversight and the isolation of the rural clergy.

The Court

The entry 'To Court Fees' appears in conjunction with entries on the visitation of the Archdeacon, the court referred to being an ecclesiastical court. Its primary concerns were the maintenance of church discipline and the correction of the behaviour of parishioners. The courts had few powers of punishment as individuals could not be physically harmed or fined but public humiliation and penance were the main deterrents.

Disciplinary charges could be levelled at the clergy and these included : preaching without a licence, lack of spiritual care of parishioners, gaming and drunkenness. However the list of charges which could be brought against parishioners was much more extensive and included: non-attendance at church, failure to attend communion, failure to be 'churched' after baptism, failure to have a child baptised, scolding, recusancy, brawling in a church or churchyard, laying violent hands on a clergyman, disputes over pews, clandestine marriages, fornication, adultery, incest, maladministration of wills, perjury and the final unusual charge of 'untimely ringing of bells'.

The bulk of the court's business was taken up with cases of immorality. Charges were not only brought to reinforce Christian teaching, but because the church was responsible for poor relief, it was important to control bastardy in order to keep the poor rate low. Overfamiliarity between men and women gave rise to suspicions of illicit relationships and fornication, adultery and pre-nuptial pregnancy were eagerly reported. Recantation in public was the usual penance and sometimes the local custom was that penance took place in the market place as well as church.

Churches in the past were far from serene, quiet places, even during service. Dissatisfaction with a clergyman's performance could lead to personality clashes, social tensions or religious differences and dissenters often hurled insults at unsatisfactory clerics. Church seating was often the cause of disagreements over 'rights of sitting'. The fitting of locks on pew doors and intrusion into pews might lead to fisticuffs or the use of pins on a Sunday.

Disciplinary offences might also be levelled at parish officers and professional individuals. It was an offence for curates, schoolmasters, midwives and surgeons to be unlicensed. Improperly sworn churchwardens could be charged as could parish clerks over irregular election processes.

The role of parish officers and professional people was to support the teachings of the church. Midwives duties in particular included important legal aspects. The midwife was entitled to baptise infants that were not expected to live and had the responsibility to ensure that the child was 'fathered' in cases where the mother was unmarried. The fathers name was demanded 'at the extremity of labour' whilst the mother held the bible. Midwives were also sworn to help the poor as well as the rich. The ground rules that applied to surgeons were such that they conformed to the established church and all schoolmasters had to be licensed by the bishop.

Structural Alterations to the Fabric of All Saints

Apart from the disciplining of the clergy, parish officers and parishioners the court dealt also with parish administration , such as the collection of church levies and the granting of 'faculty'. The faculties, sanctioned by the bishop or archdeacon, permitted structural alterations to the church which included the introduction of new seating or galleries. Any alterations had to be agreed by the parish in order to avoid later disputes. The document listing the alterations had to be read in church to allow discussion before it was presented to the consistory court. The faculty was a charge on the parish as instanced by the following two entries:

1760	'For a Faculty at York	£7 1s 7d'
1788	'By cash paid for a Faculty for pulling down and building steeple	£4 7s 6d'

Many structural alterations were carried out during the 18C with three major projects being undertaken in 1743, 1760 and 1788-89 and faculties for each of these were obtained from York. There were however many smaller repairs and refurbishments, some dictated by fashion or taste, but many others out of sheer necessity. Examples of these latter would include: replacing tiles, nailing down the lead, replacing glass blown out by the wind, pointing and repairs to the churchyard wall and stile.

In 1735 there were several bills paid for 'work at the church' but no specific job was indicated. A substantial quantity of timber, mainly pine boards of standard size was transported from Newport to Ayton.

1735 'Paid for 60 Twelve foot Deals at 15d per piece £3 15s 0d'

'And two Pieces of Timber 24foot at 9d per foot 18s 2d'

It was noted in the account book in 1739 that several of the deals were 'lent' to Mr Scottowe and Mr Maisterman.

It would appear that in 1743 the north gallery of the nave was erected. The faculty reads: 'Whereas at the promotion of Thomas Scottowe esq. Lord of the Manor of Great Ayton... we have issued a citation...why an order or licence to erect or build a Loft or Gallery to adjoin up on the North wall of the Parish Church...upon the Isle or Alley of the said church...to contain in length 8foot and in breadth 7foot 9inches...and to erect steps against and break a Door through the said North Wall...should not be granted to the said Thomas Scottowe for the use of himself and his Family to sit, kneel, pray and hear Divine Service and Sermons.'

The gallery was entered from the outside, as is indicated by the disturbance to the masonry of the north nave wall. The steps and the gallery have since been removed and the entrance blocked. The sawn-off bases of the wooden pillars which supported the gallery may still be seen.

Work was also done on the porch and the pitch of the roof was altered at this time necessitating the use of a crane:

1742-43 'Aug ye 4th To James Beadnell for his Crane £0 5s 0d'

'To Wm Barker for Leading Riggins Stones for Porch £0 1s 0d'

'Spent when Porch was done £0 2s 6d'

Substantial quantities of building materials were required including 2000 bricks, 300 latts, sand, slaked lime, wood, lead, slates, nails, spouting and hair, this latter being used to incorporate into the plaster. Lime was used for whitening the interior. Twelve workmen submitted bills for work done on the porch and bills for day labourers were submitted for 30 days. Expenditure for 1742-43 was £69 1s 0d.

More work was done to the interior of the church in 1743-44.

'To 4 Bush of Lime and Costs when ye Church was Whitened £0 4s 3d.'

'To Milk for Whitening £0 0s 3d.'

'To 200 Plastering Latts £0 2s 8d.'

'To 600 Latt Nails at 3d p Hundred £0 1s 6d.'

Also in 1743-44 the Ten Commandments, the Lords Prayer and the Creed were painted on deal boards and mounted on the church wall so that they could be seen by the whole congregation. The bill for painting the boards was £2 0s 0d. A sundial, obtained from Stokesley, was mounted in 1744.

'To Costs Spent at putting up and painting of dial £0 1s 6d'

'To Church Dial to and from Stoxley £0 0s 4d'

Details of the rebuilding of the churchyard wall are presented under a separate heading in 1749 and a special assessment had to be levied to meet the total cost of £12 9s 6d.

'An account of ye Expence of Building ye Churchyard Wall'

'Spent when we bargained with Robt. Wood, Tho. Coatham and Wm. Barker.'

The three most expensive items of expenditure were:

'paid to ye Neighbours for leading Stones £2 19s 0d'

'to Wm barker for Sledging Stones £1 4s 6d'

'pd to Robt Wood and T Coatham for Building ye Wall £5 16s 6d'

Two cart loads of lime were required for the mortar and this required slaking before use.

'for Sleeking ye lime and bearing water £0 1s 0d'

The following three entries in 1758 were an indication that more work on the church was being planned:

'Expences for Workmen Viewing the Church	£0 5s 6d'
'Expences at chusing new officers and taking in plans	£0 3s 0d'
'Paid Jn Danby for drafts and Estimations for Gallery Bill	£011s 6d'

A faculty was obtained in 1759 for work on the interior of the church:

'For a faculty at York	£7 1s 7d
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The faculty reads:

Whereas...Anthony Hastwell clerk Curate of the parish church of Ayton...Augustine Scottowe and Joseph Lawrence the present churchwardens...to remove the Loft or Gallery at the west end...

from its present situation and to raise the same from the ground in the front part thereof 7 feet or thereabouts in order to make Room for the erection of Seats, Stalls or pews on a certain vacant place or piece of ground before the same for which there is not convenient Room by the present position of the said Loft...for use of such of the parishioners and Inhabitants of the said parish of Ayton as are not provided with convenient Seats, Stalls or pews in the said parish church and will contribute to the expense attending the obtaining of such Licence or Faculty, removing of the said Loft or Gallery, and the cost of the said Seats, Stalls or pews.

30th July 1759

The cost of the installation of the new pews was defrayed by the sale of the old pews which raised a considerable sum.

1760 'By Pews Sould	£54 5s 0d'
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It is probable that in 1760 the floor space was re-levelled in order to accommodate the new pews

'for leading Flaggs	£0 4s 0d'
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The whole floor space of both the chancel and nave was covered by the new pews which were irregular in shape and had high backs and doors. Some of these pews were subsequently removed and the sense of congestion caused by the 1759-60 installation has been lost.

The 'three-decker', with pulpit and sounding board and places for both curate and parish clerk is a makeshift affair and is originally unlikely to have stood in its present obscure position.

In 1760-61 the final touches were added to the pews:

'paid Thos Brown for Numbering pews	£0 3s 2d'
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In 1765 a new sundial for the church was bought:

'To Wm Ableson for Sun Dial for Church	£1 11s 6d'
'Spent when put up	£0 1s 0d'

Further unspecified work was done in the summer of 1768. It possibly involved plastering judging by the amount of hair purchased.

'To Thos Weatheril for fetching Lead from and to Stockesley and leading Sand	£0 3s 0d'
'To Cuthbert Brodericks Bill for Work done at Church	£3 1s 9d'
'Jas Lawrences Bill for Sunderies	£0 7s 1d'
'To Jno Holms Bill Work at Church and Wood	£1 10s 9d'
'Wm Burdons Bill for Work done at Church	£0 10s 6d'
'Jas Hunters Bill for Work done at Church	£1 17s 6d'
'For Four Stone of Hair for Church at 1s 6d	£0 6s 0d'

Between 1773 and 1775 a considerable amount of work was done to the windows with the windows of the nave being rebuilt and the south chancel window being reconstructed. It is possible that these 18C windows replaced 15C windows.

The following entries give some indication of the work done:

1773-74

'October 17 Expences when Windows was put in the Church	£0 3s 0d'
'October 30 To Francis Steward for Glazning the Windows etc	£0 19s 4d'
'To Lime and Bricks	£0 9s 6d'
'Novbr 9 th To Robt Wood for work in the Church	£0 2s 6d'
'Decbr 10 th To Jno Richardson for 4 ½ foot of Wood etc	£0 4s 11d'

'Jany 7 th	Thos Riggs Bill for making Window Frames etc	£2 18s 0 ½'
'March 19 th	To Cuthbert Broderick for work done at Church	£4 1s 9d'
1775		
'October 18 th	Mason Work at Ayton Church for Putting in a Window behind the Porch by Thos Rigg	£0 17s 5d'
	' For a New Window by Thos Rigg	£1 10s 0d'
	'Window Glazing by Francis Stewart	£1 12s 8d'
	'To Jas Hunter for Plaistering Do. Do.	£0 3s 8d'

In 1788 a serious fault with the old tower resulted in a major building project being undertaken with the dismantling of the old tower and the building of an entirely new one. (In the accounts the tower is referred to as the 'steeple'.)

1788		
'May 19 th	by cash paid Expences for pulling down old Steeple	£1 10s 4d'
	'By cash paid for Fackulty for pulling down and building Steeple	£4 7s 6d'

The final cost of the whole project was £190 8s 2d which included re-roofing the church in Westmorland slate. The normal annual assessment could not meet such a huge bill but the cost was defrayed by stripping the old lead of the church roof and selling it which provided the bulk of the money required.

1788		
'July 5 th	By Cash recd for 7ton 15cwt of Lead at £19 5s p ton	£149 3s 9d'

The medieval timbered roof was completely hidden from view by a low plaster ceiling . It was not until 1933 that this ceiling was removed revealing the old roof . In November 1788 the work on the ceiling began with the cutting down of the 'Great Beam' and the 'West End Beam', the sawn-off ends of which are still visible.

1788		
'Novbr 27 th	By Cash paid for Ale for Men when great Beam was cut down	£0 5s 9d'
'Decbr 4 th	By Cash paid for Ale for Men when West End Beam was cut down	£0 3s 9d'

The following entries indicate some of the major expenditure on the project:

1788		
'May 19 th	By Cash pd Mr Robert Bowes for Slate laying on and pointing	£42 11s 6d'
	'By Cash pd Thomas Fawsett for Mason Work at Church etc	£35 8s 1d'
	'By Cash pd Wm King for leading Stones, Lime, Sand etc	£7 17s 9d'
	'By Cash pd Jno Nichols for leading Stones, Lime, Sand etc	£6 10s 3d'
	' By Cash pd Robert Atkinson for Leading Stones etc	£2 12s 9d'
	'By Cash pd Jno Kilvington for Wood and Work for Steeple etc	£20 0s 0d'
	'By Cash pd Chr Dennison for Glass and Work etc	£16 12s 0d'

It was planned down to the last detail as the following entry indicates:

'By Cash pd for a Fane	£0 15s 0d'
'By Cash pd for Ale when Fane was put up	£0 1s 5d'

This would be a weathervane or weathercock and at some later date it was gilded:

'By Cash pd for Gold for Fane	£0 4s 0d'
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As well as lead from the old roof many other items from the old tower were sold off, including; old slate, boards, hair, iron and glass. Old rope was also sold, showing that even in the 18C, it was possible to get 'money for old rope'!

'By Cash recd for Ropes sold	£0 12s 4d'
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Considerable expense was incurred by creating the new ceiling in the church:

1788		
'Decbr 23 rd	By Cash pd Jno Kilvington for Wood and Work for underdrawing Church	£6 5s 0d'
	'By Cash pd Thos Wilson for 4000 Lath Nails	£0 10s 0d'
	'By Cash pd Ralph Watson fot 400 Lath Nails	£0 10s 0d'
	'By Cash pd Thos Williamson for Bolts, Nails for underdrawing	£1 4s 0d'

1789		
'Feby 18 th	By Cash pd Mr Hutchinson for 3000 Plastering Laths	£1 12s 0d'
'March 11 th	By Cash pd Wm Hunter for Plastering Church	£3 7s 0d'

'By Cash pd for Carriage of Plastering Laths from Stockton £0 3s 0d'

Finishing touches to the interior of the church continued to be applied during 1789:

'By Cash pd Wm Hunter for Whitewashing Church	£1 2s 9d'
'By Cash pd Mr Williams the Painter	£3 19s 0d'
'By Cash pd Jno Hollins for Seven Days Painting	£0 14s 0d'
'By Cash pd for Paint 15s 10 ½d for Umber 1s 2d	£0 17s 0 ½d'
'By Cash pd for Spanish White 0 ½ d Oaker 7d	£0 0s 7 ½ d'
'By Cash pd for Oil 11s 3d Brushes 1s 1d Screws 2 ½ d	£0 12s 6 ½ d'
'By Cash pd for Nails, Sprigs and Stubs	£0 9s 0d'

The new tower, which was 30 feet high, stood for barely one hundred years before it was demolished in 1880, quite needlessly according to the Rev Kettlewell, in order to make additional space for burials.

Although there were further numerous entries for minor repairs and refurbishments of the church fabric in this series of accounts up to 1844, the rebuilding of the tower was the last major structural alteration to be undertaken.

Payment for Vermin

One of the most unusual entries which appears with great regularity in the churchwardens accounts is;

'for a foulmart's head..... 4d'

Not only did 'foulmarts' bring a bounty but foxes, otters, 'weasles' and 'moulds' did also.

Between 1734 and 1844 the accounts list payments for 296 foulmarts, 49 foxes, 6 otters, 2 weasles, one polecat and an unspecified number of 'moulds'. The foulmart was in fact the polecat or foul-marten, so called because of its disagreeable smell. Four pence was the price on a polecat's head, foxes and otters were worth a shilling and weasels 3d, all quite substantial sums for the 18C. In 1827 one shilling was paid 'for catching moulds' (moles). The largest number of polecats paid for at any one time was in 1785 when 13 were presented for payment and in 1836 10 foxes were presented in a single batch.

How was it that the guardians of the church finances in Great Ayton were paying money to parishioners for bringing them the heads of these animals? The answer lies in Tudor legislation passed to protect crops. The Preservation of Grain Act of 1532, passed in Henry VIII's reign and strengthened in Elizabeth I's reign made it compulsory for every man, woman and child to kill as many small mammals and birds as possible that appeared on an official list of vermin. The Act was introduced to counter food shortages and to prevent the spread of disease caused by a series of bad harvests. Ostensibly aimed at protecting crops, the Act not only condemned animals that were considered harmful, but it also condemned animals that were disliked for erroneous or superstitious reasons. All parishes had to raise a levy to pay for the 'vermin' killed and communities which did not fulfill their quota were fined.

The result was the systematic slaughter of hundreds of thousands of mammals and birds. The list of 'vermin' included badgers, foxes, otters, wild cats, pine-marten, polecats, hedgehogs, water voles, rats, mice and moles. Hedgehogs were particularly targetted because it was wrongly thought that they took milk from cows when the cows were lying down at night. The polecat survived in central and western Wales in spite of the centuries of persecution which nearly led to its extinction. Since the 1950s the numbers have increased and several counties have colonies of polecat-ferrets due to interbreeding.

Birds on the list of vermin included the kite, raven, shag, woodpecker, chough, kingfisher and dipper. It would appear that this Tudor legislation was at least partly responsible for reducing the numbers of many native species to critically endangered levels.

There are two puzzling features of the Great Ayton accounts in that, between 1734 and 1760, no bounties were paid for polecats but there were payments for foxes and otters. Also, although the Tudor Act was repealed in the mid-18C, payments were still being made for vermin well into the 19C.

The Churchwarden's Accounts and War

On three occasions in 1759 Great Ayton's church bells rang out, not to summon parishioners to church, but to

celebrate events that had happened far away. Around this time Horace Walpole, the historian, complained that 'the church bells (of England) were worn threadbare with ringing for victories'. These celebratory peals in Ayton were recorded in the churchwarden's accounts, not for any jingoistic reasons but inevitably because the sexton had to be paid for his services.

In the accounts between August 12th and October 18th, 1759 there is an undated entry:

'Ringing on Account of Good News' --- 1s.

The good news being celebrated was General James Wolfe's defeat of the French and the capture of Quebec in September 1759. It may be significant that the next entry in the accounts is:

'for Mending Bellropes' --- 6d!

There was a local connection with the events in Canada with which the bellringers of Great Ayton would not have been aware. James Cook, then 30 years old, was present at the Quebec engagement. He was the recently appointed Master of the 'Pembroke', a 24 gun, 1250 ton Royal Navy ship (not to be confused with the 'Earl of Pembroke', the Whitby ship whose name was later changed to 'Endeavour'). Cook in a small boat, under cover of darkness, surveyed and charted the St Lawrence Traverse so that naval ships could sail closer to Quebec for the attack. Cook took the soundings on several successive nights at great personal danger. The charts he produced were as accurate and complete as if they had been made in daylight. The attack took place and Cook recorded in his log: 'the English Army commanded by Genl. Wolfe attacked the French in the field of Abraham behind Quebec and totally defeated them'.

The second undated entry in the churchwarden's accounts, coming between October 1759 and February 1760, reads:

'for Ringing on Account of Admiral Hawkes Success'.--- 1s

This is a specific reference to Admiral Edward Hawke's destruction of the French fleet at Quiberon Bay in November 1759 which eliminated the threat of invasion and gave Britain complete command of the seas.

A further entry between October 22nd and November 3rd 1759 reads:

'Ringing on account of taking Montreal'. --- 6d

This refers to Field Marshall Amherst's success at Montreal on the 8th of September 1759 which resulted in the whole of Canada being surrendered by the French.

There is also a local connection with Field Marshall Amherst, commander in chief of the British Army in North America. His widow Lady Elizabeth Amherst inherited the manors of Rudby and Skutterskelfe in 1800. She took a close interest in her Cleveland estates and although Rudby Hall had fallen into decay she was determined to keep her Skutterskelfe mansion house, Leven Grove, with its lands and pleasure grounds in good condition and particularly 'to keep up and preserve the Banks of the River Leven'. The gardens of Leven Grove are said to have been laid out by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Lady Amherst died at the venerable age of 92 on May 22nd 1830. She was childless and her Cleveland estates passed to her young relative the 10th Viscount Falkland.

Lord Amherst is associated with an unsavoury episode in the conquest of Canada. There was hostility between the British and Native American Indians after an uprising in 1763. This led to one of the first attempts at biological warfare. Amherst and a subordinate discussed the possibility of infecting the Indians with smallpox through gifts of blankets infected with the disease. It is not known whether or not it was successful.

The three military and naval successes recorded in the churchwarden's accounts took place during the Seven Years War which began in 1756 and ended in 1763. Churchill described this war as the first 'World War' as it was the first war to be fought around the globe, although most of the combatants were European nations or their colonies. Britain and her ally Prussia had declared war on France, Austria and Russia. Their eventual victory in Europe greatly increased the power and prestige of both countries.

British troops faced both Indian and French forces on the sub-continent. The French were decisively beaten in southern India in 1760 and the 'jewel in the Imperial crown' was secured. The war ended France's position as a major colonial power in the Americas when the whole of Canada was surrendered in 1760 along with many of her West Indies possessions. All of the British gains were secured at the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and Great Britain emerged as the dominant colonial power.

It might have been expected that the bellringers of Great Ayton would have been called upon once again during the Napoleonic Wars to celebrate some outstanding victories but examination of the accounts for 1805 and 1815 do not

reveal any entries for celebratory ringing.

References: TO BE ADDED