

Early ringing history

By Norman Chaddock 1955

PEAL BOARDS AND PERSONALITIES

In the ringing rooms hangs a handsome series of peal boards recording important peals since 1812, and another old peal boards on which is recorded a half peal rung in 1752. This consisted of 720 each College Trebles, Oxford Trebles and College Pleasure, and 360 Crown Bob, the latter being produced by ringing a lead of each of the first three methods, repeated to produce a 360; perhaps one of the earliest attempts at spliced ringing. About this time Samuel Walker (father of the iron trade), who came to Rotherham in 1746, was busy making the first iron bridge and iron canon. His firm made Southwark Bridge at a cost of £800,000 and made the iron plates for one of the first iron ships - the Great Western.

A study of the peal boards introduces us to some of the ringing personalities connected with Rotherham Parish Church. For instance, there is Mr James Taylor, whose peal ringing activities extended over more than 40 years from 1821 onwards. It appears that two men were required to ring the tenor to a peal at this time, but Mr Taylor rang it single-handed. He lived from 1798 to 1879 and was presented with a silver medal on completing 50 years as a ringer and rang over 70 peals. In 1823 he rang the ninth to 7199 Grandsire Caters, then a record length for the county of York. Other peals rung at Rotherham during his lifetime were 5120 Union Treble Bob Major in 1812, and the first peal of Stedman Triples in Yorkshire, in January 1844.

For centuries ringers have been requisitioned to celebrate events of national and local importance. In 1704 the great bell was fractured and there are numerous charges in the churchwardens' accounts, in all £50 12s 11d for a great new bell, which seems to have been a bibulous affair —'Ale when we discoursed about hanging ye bell'; 'taking down ye bell'; 'when writings was sealed'; 'agreeing to carry ye bell'; 'at loading ye bell'; 'at hanging ye bell'; 'first time ye great bell was rung'; every meeting and movements seems to have required the assistance of what we will supposed to be 'jolly bold ale and good.

GREAT BELL FRACTURED

At a meeting of the inhabitants of Rotherham on August 31st 1820, it was unanimously resolved: (1) That from the fracture of the great bell, the worn out state of the others, and as the cost of putting up one bell was nearly as much as that for hanging a whole peal, and to ensure concord in sound, the purchase of an entire new peal of bells be recommended to the Parishioners. (2) That since the churchwardens have appropriated £100 from the Parochial Funds to procure a new bell, the remainder of the expense be defrayed by public subscription among the Parishioners or by donations from gentlemen having property in the Parish.

The injury to the tenor bell, referred to above, was that the clapper knocked out a piece of metal, and for the ringing of the bell the clapper had been shortened. This bell was believed to have been cast by Hilton at Wath in 1752, and to have been a very bad bell.

In an address appealing for funds for new bells appears the following: -

Though the precise period when bells were first made use of for calling Christians to public worship may not be ascertained - yet their Utility and Advantage is generally felt and acknowledged and there is a propriety if not a necessity to include their repair in the "Annual Estimate of the Churchwardens, and in contemplating them among the FABRIC of the church." At periods of Rejoicing and in those of

deep distress the Bells communicate the public feeling. When Mighty fall and the Great are laid low, when the country mourns over a Departed Hero, dull is the note and solemn the sound. When the shouts of Victory, won by the sons of Freedom are wafted to our shores - the Merry Peal proclaims the Epochs of our Freedom, and the Glorious Events of our History are held in commemoration by the Musical Numbers of our bells.

So favourable was this appeal that sufficient money was quickly forthcoming for a new ring of ten bells, and on February 19th, 1821 a farewell peal to the old bells was rung in 3 hours and 20 minutes. It consisted of 5040 changes of Bob Major, conducted from the tenor by the noted James Taylor.

The new ring of bells was cast by Mr Mears and was a maiden ring being cast in perfect tune, no tuning being required after casting. The gross cost of their installation was £1,241 and the net cost after deducting value of old bells at 12 pence per pound (96cwt) was £701. Their weights varied from 7½ cwt. to the tenor in C sharp weighing 32cwt.

THE OPENING RING

At a meeting of the Church Bell Committee on April 19th, 1821, the following resolutions were passed for regulating the proceedings on the opening of the new ring of bells. 'First Rotherham ringers were to start ringing at 7am on the following Easter Monday and cease before Divine Service that day. Twelve bell ringers to have priority and to ballot for entrance to ring first. Next ten bell ringers to have the same conditions. Next 8 - bell ringers to have the same conditions.

No set of ringers to ring more than 5040 changes on the first day. Any set of ringers betting out before they have rung ten minutes to be allowed one more start. The bells not to be rung after 9pm.

The opening continued over Tuesday and during the two days the town was thronged with visitors from all parts, the 'Sheffield Iris,' a weekly newspaper, commenting on the great number of visitors which the opening attracted.

The first peal on the 10 bells (Grandsire Caters) was rung on December 20th, 1821 in 3hrs and 20 minutes. James Taylor rang the ninth.

These bells served until 1924, when repairs to the bell frame and tower became necessary. The old ten bells were recast and rehung on ball bearings in a steel frame by Messrs. John Taylor and Co. of Loughborough. The cost was borne by the family of Robert Dyson, M.P. an eminent churchman. The old inscriptions were preserved with the following addition: -

'This peal was recast in 1925 in memory of Robert Dyson'

The late Robert Dyson was associated with Messrs. Owen and Dyson's of Rotherham, famous for the manufacture of wagon wheels for railways all over the world.

The new ring of ten bells, opened on March 18th, 1925, is a fine melodious ring, and ringing conditions in the belfry are ideal. The weights of the bells range from 6½ cwt. (treble) to 34¾ cwt. (tenor) in C sharp and the total weight is 138cwt. The first peal rung on these bells was 5148 Grandsire Caters on December 29th, 1925, and since then many peals have been rung on them.

The bells are well appreciated by the townspeople and figure prominently in the civic life of the town, the most recent occasion being the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. to the town last year.