

THE LOST BELLS OF LONDON (8)

ST. JOHN'S, HORSLEYDOWN

By W. T. COOK

In the year 1711, during the reign of Queen Anne, an Act of Parliament was passed which authorised the expenditure of £350,000 on building 50 new churches in London. To raise this sum, an extra duty had to be paid on coal entering the port of London. Queen Anne herself displayed much interest in the project, which was undertaken partly as a thanksgiving for the Duke of Marlborough's victories over the French.

Among the new churches to be built as part of this scheme was St. John-the-Evangelist, Horsleydown, on a site just to the south-west of the later Tower Bridge. It was opened in 1733. The name of the architect does not appear to be known. The tower was very small, surmounted by way of spire by a tapered Ionic column. As to the name of the locality, the late R. F. Deal had this to say (R.W., February 6, 1942): "In an old book I found a quaint yarn concerning the name of the parish. A King of England, while riding there, suffered inconvenience and loss of dignity through his horse suddenly assuming a recumbent position from which it refused to budge — hence "Horse-lay-down." It is more likely that the name was derived from "Horse-down," a public grazing place for horses."

I have no record of any bells being placed there until 1783, when a ring of ten bells (tenor 19 cwt.) was cast by Chapman and Mears, and hung in the tower. The size of the tower indicates that some ingenuity must have been used to fit ten bells into it! The official opening took place on Monday, January 19, 1784. As had happened when the bells of St. Botolph's, Bishopsgate, were opened a year previously, the leading London Societies were invited to attempt peals. The result at St. Botolph's had been three peals—5120 Oxford Treble Bob by the "Junior" College Youths, Grandsire Triples by the Cumberland Youths, and 5126 Oxford Treble Bob by the "Ancient" College Youths.

It is not absolutely clear whether the "Ancient" branch of the College Youths were invited to ring for the opening of St. John's, Horsleydown, but we have records of a peal of 5339 Grandsire Caters rung on that day by the Cumberlands, followed by a 5040 Oxford Treble Bob Royal by the "Junior" College Youths. In those days the rivalry between the various Societies, especially between the Junior College Youths and the Cumberlands, was very keen, and apparently far from friendly. The following account from a contemporary newspaper has been preserved. It appears to be a considerably biased report, but it gives us some idea of what the opening of a ring of bells was like in those days—a purely secular occasion.

"Monday being kept as the Anniversary of Her Majesty's nativity, a grand opening of the new Peal of ten bells erected at the parish Church of St. John, Horsleydown,

took place, when a Society of gentlemen, who are lovers of the art of ringing, in honour of the occasion gave ten gold laced hats and a dinner to be rung for by different ringers. About ten o'clock a set of **young gentlemen** ascended the steeple, in order to gratify a number of impatient hearers (who were by that time assembled) with a specimen of their **unparalleled** abilities in that art, and so proved in the end; for before they had reached 4,000 changes, all those so lately described platoons, divisions, sub-divisions, grand divisions, &c were again repeated with large additions, and greater energy than ever, so that they were obliged to quit the steeple through private doors in order to avoid that loud reception which was prepared for them by the auditors, and which they so justly deserved! After this the Society of Cumberland Youths ascended the steeple and amidst the acclamations of upwards of 10,000 spectators rang the first peal complete consisting of 5399 Grandsire Caters in 3 hours and 58 minutes; but notwithstanding they had won the hats by a great majority of changes and fineness of striking, the before-mentioned **young gentlemen**, contrary to all order, were admitted to a second trial, with a view, as it is supposed, to retrieve their lost honour and transmit to posterity a striking testimony of their superior abilities and indefatigable perseverance, but how great was the disappointment when this second attempt proved far inferior to the first and became the object of contempt and ridicule! And although they had been worsted by a considerable odds, yet fortunately for them they had chosen for their umpire a squinting oyster man who, being so much infatuated with the glory of his post as to lose his best sense, viz., that of thinking and judging right, and who it was believed was b—d for the occasion gave it in favour of the **select performers**, because they rang **College Hornbrook**; and the gentlemen who gave the hats confiding in the **superiority** of his judgement, the supposed victors were, contrary to equity and good conscience, crowned with the laurels they had so egregiously lost and admitted to partake of the dinners provided for the occasion."

It would seem charitable to assume that the writer of this piece was merely reporting what the Cumberlands had told him. It is quite possible that the band which rang the first time and failed consisted of members of the "Ancient" Society of College Youths—but the whole account seems so prejudiced, and in many ways exaggerated, that it is a little difficult to know quite what did happen at the opening of these bells apart from the testimony of the two Societies' peal books.

Next year the "Junior" College Youths rang two peals here—Bob Royal and Grandsire Caters. But it is for the peal rung here by the "Ancient" Society of College Youths on May 28, 1787, that the bells are chiefly famous, for this was a peal

of 5076 Stedman Caters, and was almost certainly the first true peal of Stedman to be rung on any number of bells. The conductor and composer was John Reeves, one of the authors of the "Clavis Campanologia." A peal board was put up in the tower, which read: "In Honour to a Most Noble Performance, by the Ancient Society of College Youths, who on Monday, May 28th, 1787, Did ring in an excellent manner, the first complete peal of 5,076 Caters on Stedman's Principal in 3 hours & 27 minutes. May this panel transmit their names to posterity, with that of the Ingenious Mr. W. Jones, on whose abilities his Inimitable commentaries so happily concludes with 'Here the Cynic and the Panegyrist stop,' and join in eulogiums to such distinguished merit." There followed the names of the performers. William Jones, mentioned on the board, was a co-author with Reeves and Blakemore of the "Clavis," and was at that time also a member of the Ancient Society.

The only other peals on these bells of which I have any note are one of Grandsire Caters by the College Youths in 1798, and one, also of Grandsire Caters, by the Junior Society of College Youths in 1823. In the Central Council Survey published in Bell News, September 5, 1903, we read that the bells did not go well, clocking was permitted, repairs had been estimated for but there were no funds, the ropes were bad, and there was no half-pull or Sunday ringing or regular practice. The bells were destroyed when the church was bombed during the war, leaving only a shell—walls and the lower part of the tower. Quite recently these too have been demolished.

Lancashire Association

VERY WELL ATTENDED

Despite the fact that there were three A.G.M.s on January 20th, all within easy distance of Manchester, the Manchester Branch A.G.M. at the Town Hall was very well attended and visitors came from Staffordshire, Cheshire, Bedfordshire and Devon. Afternoon ringing catered for all tastes and the business meeting at 6 p.m. was opened by the Branch Chairman (Roland F. Eccles) who extended a warm welcome to all. Eight new members were elected, the Chairman wishing them a long and happy membership.

Neil Bennett (branch ringing master) reported on the activities and said much useful work had been done, but there were still too few ringers and too many silent towers; 23 peals were rung for the Association.

Mr. Bennett did not seek re-election and the chairman thanked him for his hard work. The branch secretary (Betty Ormrod) reported 25 new members during 1972 and 19 proficiency certificates awarded.

Others elected were Chairman, Roland Eccles; Ringing Master, Alan Ward; Deputy Ringing Master, John Booth; Committee, Peter Bellamy Knights. It was decided to donate £10 from branch funds to the Association Bell Restoration Fund.

Evening ringing continued until 9 p.m.