

THE LOST BELLS OF LONDON

By W. T. COOK

I.—ST. BRIDE'S, FLEET STREET

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In the peal of Grandsire Cinques of January, 1725, Benjamin Annable rang the second and the peal was called by Matthew East, but it was not long before Annable became the leading conductor and heavy-bell ringer of the College Youths. On April 26th, 1725, the first recorded peal of Plain Bob Major was rung on the back eight of St. Bride's. Annable composed this peal (C.C. Collection 1904, No. 70) and called it from the tenor. This was soon followed in the same tower by Bob Royal (November 22nd, 1725—first peal of Royal ever rung), and Bob Maximus (February 26th, 1726—first peal of Maximus). Again, Annable was the tenor ringer and conductor. As J. A. Trollope said: "Thus in 13 months the band had scored the first peals of Royal, Cinques and Maximus ever rung in any method. . . . Peal ringing, which had hitherto been a remote possibility, was henceforth an ordinary incident in a ringer's career." (R.W., May 24th, 1940.)

Osborn, the man who early in the 19th century did more perhaps than anyone else to collect and preserve early records and reports of ringing in London, had the following to say about the peal of Maximus in 1726: "It was very currently reported that everyone who rang in the peal left the church in his own carriage—how far the truth of this statement extends, I cannot pretend to determine, but I have often heard it remarked that when St. Bride's bells were first put up, and for some years afterwards, Fleet Street was thronged with carriages and gentry who came to hear them ring. Report says that St. Bride's bells were formerly considered one of the greatest novelties of the day." Research has shown that the majority of the band were ordinary tradesmen who could not possibly have possessed carriages of their own; to interpret it in present-day terms, they would have hesitated to pay for a taxi to reach the church. That "gentry" may have come to hear the bells is more possible.

Annable and his band were particularly enterprising; having "conquered" Plain Bob they turned their attention to Double Bob, which in the first half of the 18th century enjoyed a considerable vogue. They rang a peal of Double Bob Major at St. Dunstan's in the West, Fleet Street, in 1727, but did not score a peal of Royal until February 28, 1734, at St. Bride's. Meanwhile, however, the band had, among many notable performances in various towers, rung at St. Bride's the first peal of St. Simon's Triples (on the front eight, April 12th, 1732) and the first peal of Double Grandsire Caters (March 21st, 1733). On January 24th, 1737, they rang the first 5,040 of College Bob Major, on the back eight; on December 28th, 1737, the first of Morning Exercise Major (which was, however, false); and on November 29th, 1738, the first of Double Grandsire Cinques. All these peals except the last were called by Annable; John Cundell called the Double Grandsire Cinques.

It was over 20 years before the College Youths rang another peal at St. Bride's, although the tower continued to be the one at which they practised most often, and the "Junior" College Youths after them until 1788. Other 18th century peals here were one by the Eastern Scholars on Boxing Day, 1749, a 6,072 of Bob Maximus (for which they erected a peal board which stated that "The Company never before attempted this Peal, and Completed it the first Tryal, in 4 hours & 45 minutes"); and two by the Union Scholars, Bob Major in 1750 and Grandsire Cinques in the following year.

Benjamin Annable died on February 1st, 1756, aged 53, and was buried "under the tower of St. Bride's". It is a matter for regret that there is not, and apparently never has been, any memorial in the church to him who was certainly one of the greatest ringers of all time, and perhaps the most influential of all on the Exercise as a whole.

Shortly after Annable's death there occurred the rift in the Society of College Youths which led to the more "conservative" element moving over to St. Martin's in the Fields, leaving the bells of St. Bride's to the use of the younger members, who eventually became identified as the "Junior" Society, and who also took over the Headquarters at the nearby "Barley Mow". The "Juniors" rang their first peal of Grandsire Cinques at St. Bride's on October 19th, 1761 (however, they had already rung peals of Maximus); but five weeks later, the "Ancients" returned to St. Bride's and rang a then record length of 6,050 Grandsire Cinques, conducted by Francis Roberts. The following year, on March 21st, the Juniors rang on these bells what still remains the longest peal of Double Grandsire Cinques, 6,072 changes.

Nearly 15 years elapsed before the next peal on the bells, a 5,232 of Oxford Treble Bob Maximus (February 9th, 1777), also by the Junior Society, conducted by Charles Purser. Other peals in this century rung at St. Bride's were in 1785 (5,280 Bob Maximus) and 1798 (5,040 Oxford Treble Bob Maximus). Of special interest is the first ever peal of "Real" Double Bob Maximus, scored by the Junior Society here in 1784.

In 1788 the "Ancient" Society of College Youths ceased to function as such; most of its members joined the Junior Society, and the combined band practised at St. Martin's

in the Fields. From this time St. Bride's ceased to play an important part in ringing history, and as far as I know, only ten peals were rung there after 1798, six by the Cumberland Youths, two by the College Youths and two, which were presumably the last on the bells, by the Middlesex County Association in 1903. Of the two College Youths' peals (both Stedman Cinques), the first, in 1891, was rung by 12 bachelors; the second, in 1893, was a wedding compliment to the then Master, F. E. Dawe.

In the mid-19th century John Cox was appointed steeplekeeper, a post which he held for many years. He was originally a College Youth, but became a Cumberland soon after 1850. His salary of £40 per annum (which was almost enough to live on in those days), and the proposal, which was defeated, to reduce it to £35 per annum in 1882, has recently been mentioned in the columns of "The Ringing World". Of course, while he was steeplekeeper, the bells of St. Bride's fell under the influence of the Cumberland Youths.

In the early part of this century, and perhaps even before, objections to the ringing of St. Bride's bells were raised, principally by the neighbouring newspaper offices, and the bells were scarcely ever rung, even for church services. The church was burnt out during the great fire raid of the night of December 29th, 1940, which brought the bells crashing to the ground. In the "Ringing World" for the following week, J. A. Trollope describes how he had seen the tenor bell lying among the ruins in three pieces.

The fragments of bell metal were stored in a room at the south-east corner of the church, where for many years they lay forgotten and hidden behind pieces of stone and rubble, until their discovery on New Year's Eve, 1951. The church has been magnificently restored and once again plays an active part in the life of the City of London; but it was decided to replace the bells with an electric carillon, whose bizarre sound on a Sunday makes melancholy hearing to the ringer who is conscious of the glorious past of the bells of St. Bride's. One bell, a Curfew Bell, was cast out of some of the metal of the old bells by Whitechapel. A few fragments of the old bells can be seen on display in the crypt.

W. T. COOK

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