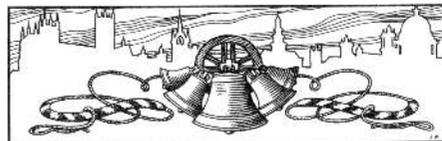


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Mrs. Bird and the College Youths

by Mark Regan

This is a story about London ringers during the 1850s and 1860s. The world in which they lived is as significant to this story as the events that were to take place at St. Mary le Bow. London was the largest city in the world; its population had grown from under three million in 1850 to four and a half million in 1900. Of the 24 million inhabitants of Great Britain 75% belonged to the 'manual working class' and Trade Unions would not be recognised until the 1870s. Cyclical unemployment was high: when you lost your job all the security you had was your savings, credit with the local shopkeeper or the pawn shop. The Poor Law was the nearest thing at that time to social security. The 1870 Act which made elementary education compulsory for all was still a long way away and might not even affect the children of some College Youths who rang at Bow. Horrific epidemics led to sanitary reform in the 1850s and smogs often covered London. The underground and tram networks were still to be built and fish and chip shops would not start to appear in London until 1870. By and large Victorian London in the 1850s was a horrific place to live.

On 7 November 1854 the following ten members of the College Youths were appointed by the Vestry of St. Mary le Bow to be their ringers of the ten bells for the following year:

James Mash, Hatter,
13 Essex Street, Southwark.
Edward Landsell, Hop Foreman,
5 Salisbury Row, Old Kent Road.
George Mendery, Chairmaker,
70 Snowfields, Bermondsey.

Samuel Austin (Secretary), Clerk,
Printers Place, Bermondsey.
Charles Balle, Engraver,
35 Ludgate Street, Ludgate Hill.
John Bradley, Hatter,
12 Green Walk, Blackfriars.
Matthew Wood, Hop Porter,
11 Church Row, Bethnal Green.
Robert Jameson, Wiremaker,
9 Silver Street, Barbican.
James Dwight, Wheelwright,
15 Mercers Place, Shadwell Road.
John Mayhew, Porter,
21 Bevendon Street, Hoxton.

Significantly, the minutes record the ringers' addresses and what they did for a living. All but two of these ten ringers were appointed annually to ring at Bow over the next ten years.

The last College Youths peal at Bow had been in 1787 and it was soon after this that the College Youths divided into various factions. After the bells had been silent for some years and after they were rehung in 1835 the Cumberland Youths were appointed to ring the bells. This association did not last very long and the College Youths were reappointed to ring again at Bow in 1850. Charles Balle represented the Society at a Vestry Meeting some time that year and was informed that the bells were to be rung on Queen Victoria's birthday, the anniversary of her Coronation, Christmas Day and New Year's Day. They were to be paid 21 shillings for New Year's Day and two Guineas for the other days. Ringing for Lord Mayor's Day in November was paid for by the Corporation of London. There was no mention of any practice ringing.



Matthew A. Wood, Master of the College Youths in 1856 and 1859. Date unknown.

Photo courtesy of Jim Phillips, Honorary Librarian, Ancient Society of College Youths.

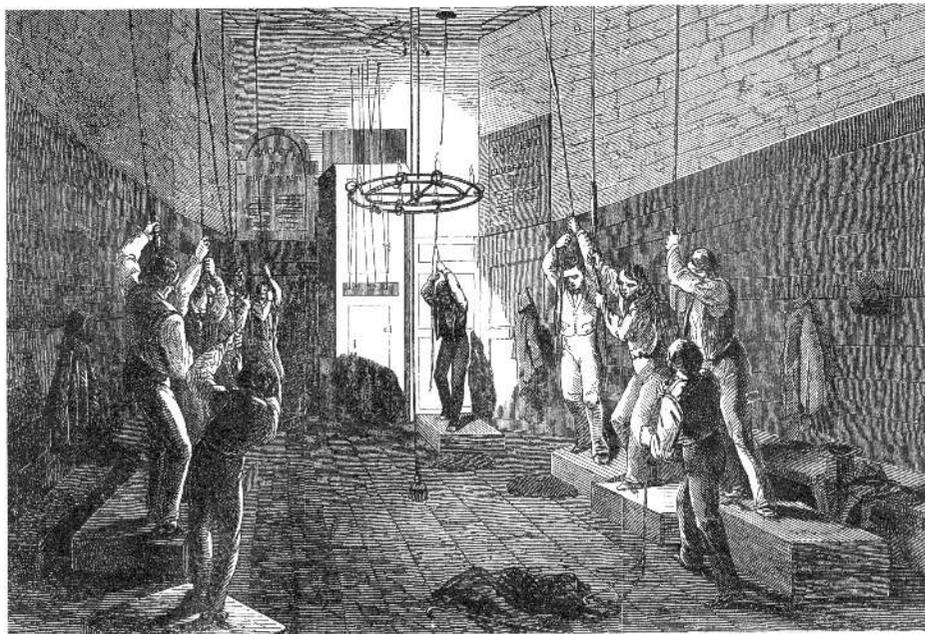
Mrs. Elizabeth Bird and her family lived at 109 Cheapside. She came from Leeds and her husband Henry was a jeweller and silversmith. They had two daughters, Mary Ann and Charlotte. In 1851 both daughters lived at home and were unmarried. The eccentric behaviour of Mrs. Bird was to have a profound effect on the College Youths who rang at Bow. Interestingly number 109 is still directly opposite the tower on the north side of Cheapside.

It was during this period that the College Youths became a prominent London ringing society again. The Cumberlands too were active at this time and the old rivalry between the two societies was in full swing. By the turn of the eighteenth century ringing ceased to be the sport of gentlemen and comments by Osborne and Ellacombe imply that working class men were now the core of London ringing societies, especially the College Youths.

The jobs of the College Youths who rang at Bow illustrate this. All except Samuel Austin were skilled or semi-skilled manual workers. We don't know whether all of them could read or write. Their jobs would not have been all that secure; for example we know that Matthew Wood had been a weaver in Spitalfields and that Henry Landsell had got him a job as a hop porter. Their wages would not have been much and paid ringing from Bow would have been an important supplement to their income. Average wages are estimated to have been about 10-12 shillings a week; only 15% or so of working men earned £2 a week.

This is why Mrs. Bird enters the story. On 26 March 1858 the Vestry of St. Mary le Bow received a letter from Samuel Austin saying that

(continued overleaf)



Illustrated London News sketch: 'Bow Bells Christmas Peal', (December 1850).

MRS. BIRD – continued

they had been prevented from ringing on Christmas Day and New Year's Day by an ill resident but they should still be paid. The ill resident was Mrs Bird. The Vestry queried the dates; Charles Balle had the ringing dates but was away from London for some time owing to his job. After corresponding with Samuel Austin the Vestry found out that the College Youths had rung for Christmas Day but had been informed by the Churchwardens that they were not to ring on New Year's Day. The Churchwardens also stated that the bells could not be rung without their permission in future and the ringers were only paid for Christmas Day 1857. The bells were not rung again until November 1859. The same ten College Youths were re-elected at the Easter Vestry meetings in 1858 and 1859 as the church's ringers but the Churchwardens had silenced the bells because of Mrs. Bird's illness.

On 7 July 1859 Miss Bird (one of the daughters) was seen by Marshall Vine the Rector. He expressed the "great dissatisfaction of the residents that the bells were not being rung and that she had stated to him that such was the state of her Mother's health that she feared for her death if the bells be rung again".

Although concerned about the matter the Rector and Churchwardens took no further action. This was too much for the College Youths and on 4 November 1859 the Vestry received this memorial from them:

"That during the past two years the ringing of the Bells of the said church had been totally suspended occasioned by the illness of Mrs. Bird whereby the said band of the Society have sustained a loss of upward of Fifty Guineas.

That the Society have been informed that Mrs. Bird has for some months been in the frequent habit of sitting at her room window during the day and that notwithstanding the great and incessant noise occasioned by the immense traffic through Cheapside and also the clock and quarters, the chiming of the bells and the ringing of the 34 cwt bell for Church Services the Lady has experienced no ill effects therefrom.

That the Vestry Gentlemen will permit the bells to be rung on the ensuing Lord Mayor's Day, such ringing need only occupy twenty to thirty minutes whilst the Procession is passing the Church and the same whilst it is returning to Westminster."

Samuel Austin was called to a special meeting of the Vestry and:

"That whilst the Vestry deeply regrets the protracted illness of Mrs. Bird which had occasioned the suspension for two years past of the ringing of the bells, they feel called upon to express their opinion that such suspension now be removed and do give directions accordingly."

After the College Youths started ringing again at Bow in 1859 Mrs. Bird survived a few more years at least. She was a widow aged 70 living with her elder daughter and two servants during the 1861 census!

This incident shows the complex nature of ringing in London at that time and how trends were quickly changing. These ringers had taken the trouble to investigate or perhaps even spy on Mrs. Bird's house at 109 Cheapside to protect their paid ringing. They were a cohesive group who were concentrating on developing their art and strong enough to protest to a church's authorities. Although they were protecting an important source of income these men did not ring for money alone. An article in the *Illustrated London News* in 1850 mentions that the College Youths were 'anxious to augment the peal to twelve as they considered the present



The tower and steeple of St. Mary le Bow, Cheapside in 1865.

peal incomplete'. From 1861 they were allowed to have fortnightly practices at Bow. Of these men five had been or were to become Master of the Society and nearly all of them were taking part in the increasing number of peals rung after 1850.

However, in looking back at their actions we should remember that most of these ringers were working class men living in Victorian London. All lived in what was to be called the 'East End'. Commentators of the time said that there was a complete separation of the classes in the community between the West and East Ends of London. One even stated that in 1865 that the East End was as vast and unexplored as Timbuctoo!

Although these men were to advance ringing in London and change the fortunes of the College Youths, paid ringing was still to still play an important part in their lives and their successors until after the turn of the century. The Vestries of the City churches were powerful bodies in Victorian London and employed a large workforce. Ringers were seen as part of this. Bow Vestry finally stopped paying the College Youths for special ringing in 1914. Despite all that has been said about the Belfry Reform Movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of church work being a voluntary service was not to come for at least another 50 years. The Oxbridge-educated clerics who led this movement came from a very different social class from the majority of ringers in London.

Sources:

Vestry Minutes of St. Mary le Bow and United Parishes 1854 to 1920; Census 1851, 1861 and 1871; some papers relating to the bells of Bow Church 1835; *Illustrated London News*, December 1850.

Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Pelican, 1968); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (Pelican, 1968); W. T. Cook, *The Society of College Youths* (Ancient Society of College Youths, 1987); Geoffrey Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (Fontana 1979); and Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Penguin edition, 1988, first published 1854).

* * *

(On visiting a Buddhist Temple near Tokyo)

"One other feature, outside in the compound, was a massive bell made of bronze, which hung inside its own little open-walled wooden shelter on a high stone platform. Opposite one side of the bell and parallel to the ground a heavy log of wood was slung from the roof with ropes. By hauling on the ropes you could swing the log backwards and forwards until it gathered maximum momentum and crashed into the bell with a massive hollow reverberating boom. The children loved it. We were there one day taking it in turns to beat the bell and no doubt disturbing everyone for miles around, when a man came out of the temple, scurried down the steps and hurried eagerly towards us with a friendly smile of welcome on his face."

"Paper Doors" by Angus Waycott. Pub. Andre Deutsch Ltd. 1994. ISBN 0233 988 866 Page 46. (Sent to us by Mrs Shirley Broad).