Home thoughts on Cornhill
by George Pipe

The Hawksmoor tower of St Michael,
Cornhill viewed from the small yard at the rear of the church (photo by the Editor)

The peal at St Michael’s, Cornhill on January 29th was significant for two reasons. First, it marked the centenary of the first peal of Surprise Maximus in London on January 29th 1911. It was only the third peal of Cambridge 12 – the earlier two at Ipswich in 1908 and 1910 and no doubt a matter of pride for the St Paul’s band.

The record of that peal is worth seeing and after 4 hours and 14 minutes the “Scrool” earned their beer with such a fine performance:

The ANcient SOciety of COLLeGE YOUTHS
On Saturday, January 28, 1911 in Four Hours and Fourteen Minutes, At the Church of St. Michael, Cornhill, A PEAL OF CAMBRIDGE SURPRISE MAXIMUS, 5280 CHANGES. Tenor 41 cwt.

EDWIN H. HOPPE, Treble
CHALLIS F. WINNEY, 2nd
HARRY R. PASMORE, 3rd
THOMAS W. TAPPEN, 4th
HERBERT LONDON, 5th
HENRY R. NEWTON, 6th

Composed by FREDERICK DENCH, and Conducted by HARRY R. PASMORE.

This composition was published in “The Bell News” of December 10th, page 533, No. 1 peal, and has been in the conductor’s possession and other members of the band for some months.

The only blemish was the odd and rather unnecessary second part of the footnote. It is worth tabulating, too, some details of the remaining five peals of Cambridge Maximus up to the outbreak of World War I because these were ground-breaking days, moving on from Treble Twelve and Granstone Cinques.

After the January 1911 peal the same band rang it at Southwark in 4 hours and 15 minutes on March 23rd 1912 with Alf Peck on the box and Tom Taffender replacing Dick Deal.

Again Southwark on January 4th 1913 (4h15m) with Peck and Bill Cockerill on 11-12; obviously a comfortable speed for them both.

In this peal Frederick J. Hardy stood in place of Bert Langdon.

Then came William A. Cave’s great performance at Redcliffe two weeks later in 4h17m, first of course by all the band.

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BRISTOL
THE GLOUCESTER AND BRISTOL DIOCESAN ASSOCIATION
On Saturday, January 18, 1913 in Four Hours and Seventeen Minutes, At the Church of St. Mary Redcliffe, A PEAL OF CAMBRIDGE SURPRISE MAXIMUS, 5280 CHANGES.

Tenor 50 cwt. 2 qr. 21 lbs.

HENRY PORCH, Treble
RAYMOND JOHN WILKINS, 2nd
HENRY BROWNJOHN, 3rd
ALBERT STOWELL, 4th
RICHARD CLARK, 5th
ALFRED E. REEVET, 6th

Composed by the REV. H. LAW JAMES, and Conducted by WILLIAM A. CAVE.

When I was a lad, I met Percy Cave, Bill’s son at St Nicholas’, Liverpool and he told me how proud his father was of that peal – and rightly so.

Meanwhile, William Pye was building up his fine band – ‘Old Bill’, with his brother George (Bob) and Bert Prewett had been in the 1908 St Mary le Tower peal. Cripplegate was their venue – again, note the time; steady she goes!

LONDON
THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY ASSOCIATION AND LONDON DIOCESAN GUILD
On Saturday, April 5, 1913 in Four Hours and Eight Minutes, At the Church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, A PEAL OF CAMBRIDGE SURPRISE MAXIMUS, 5280 CHANGES.

Tenor 36½ cwt.

WILLIAM J. Nudds, Treble
GEORGE R. PYE, 2nd
BERTRAM PREWETT, 3rd
JOHN H. CHEESMAN, 4th
ISAAC G. SHADE, 5th
CHARLES T. COLES, 6th

Composed and conducted by WILLIAM PYE.

First peal of Cambridge Maximus by all except the ringers of the 2nd, 3rd and tenor.

The last peal of Surprise Maximus before WWI took place at Great St Mary’s on August 4th 1913 in 3h 57m. Almost the same band as Cripplegate and apparently Keith Hart’s first changes in Surprise Maximus. By happy chance too, the first Editor of the new Ringing World, John S. Goldsmith, is in the band. These two stood in for Frank Bennett and Jim Davis. With the RW Centenary year upon us, Jack Goldsmith would have been doubly proud of his inclusion.

CAMBRIDGE
THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY ASSOCIATION AND LONDON DIOCESAN GUILD
On Monday, August 4, 1913 in Three Hours and Fifty-seven Minutes, At the Church of St. Mary the Great, A PEAL OF CAMBRIDGE SURPRISE MAXIMUS, 5280 CHANGES.

Tenor 28 cwt.

WILLIAM J. Nudds, Treble
GEORGE R. PYE, 2nd
BERTRAM PREWETT, 3rd
JOHN H. CHEESMAN, 4th
ISAAC G. SHADE, 5th
CHARLES T. COLES, 6th


Understandably, it took, a little while for Surprise Maximus to resume after the War. The first came at Ipswich in March 1921, with
Chelmsford, St Martin’s, Birmingham, Waltham Abbey and Wolverhampton in the same year.

The second reason for our January 29th peal was to ring the last peal on the bells before their being dismantled later this month. It was to be the 202nd in the tower since 1729. There is always a tinge of sadness saying “goodbye”, even when conditions have been difficult. There was a sense of privilege, too, for all of us invited. Happily, we rang a top class peal, certainly the best Maximus I have heard there, with every hundredth had rings of hundred percent. A neat composition and an excellent ‘compass’ by John on the tenor; a peal worthy of the occasion.

Cornhill were a tough proposition, not for the faint-hearted. They have probably always been so. George Symonds, who was ringing in London from 1895 to 1899 used to tell me what a handful they were. My father, who rang there in the twenties and thirties and who was very fond of “the old twelve” told me of the difficulty: “no freewheeling son.” When one considers the tower and the weight, it is not surprising.

The ring had a chequered history too – a look at the chronological sequence of events from the beginning shows how many recasts, especially of the tenor there were; four before the present Wren-designed tower of 1715, all over 30cwt even then. Since that time from Phelps’ new twelve in 1728, seven visits were necessary, perhaps more, for recasting and other work to various bells, including the tenor three more times. This is probably as unenviable a record of times. This is probably as unenviable a record of such a fascinating adjunct to our Art. The City of London, despite the devastation of the Blitz and, of course, before the Great Fire of 1666 exhibits one of the great treasures of churches in the World. Wren, in particular, and Hawksmoor his disciple – just look at their work. Christopher Wren had the master’s touch, even when confronted with miniscule City/ parish sites; the towers all grace and symmetry, the interiors temples of light, space and devotion. Just to see Jewry, Bow, Garlickhythe, St Magnus, St Bride’s, Cole Abbey, Ludgate, Walbrook, St Vedast, St Mary Somerset, St Michael Crooked Lane and St Anthonil (both gone) – all fifty-two of them, lift the spirit.

P.S. – 1. Thanks to David Dearnley and Chris Pickford for access to some very interesting papers on Cornhill bells and to Chris Pickford for access to some very interesting papers on Cornhill bells and to Michael Crooked Lane and St Antholin (both Walbrook, St Vedast, St Mary Somerset, St Stephen Walbrook). All fifty-two of them, lift the spirit.

I hope the new twelve will be worthy of this fine church and its choral tradition. No doubt due thought has been given and advice taken in respect of weight and location in the tower. We certainly acknowledge the generosity of Martin Faulkes and other donors in providing the new ring. The January 29th peal was also an opportunity to remember some of the great names of the past who rang at Cornhill. On a personal note, I pay tribute to my friend of 65 years standing, Philip Chalk and for his contribution to the Ancient Society of College Schools.

2. For the church architecture enthusiast amongst many excellent books on the City churches I recommend The Old Churches of London by Gerald Cobb – Batsford 1941. In it there is a double-page spread with line drawings of the towers and steeples of all 52 churches in Wren’s commission (surely the greatest ever given to one architect) as well as in-depth treatment of Hawksmoor, Inigo Jones, James Gibbs and others.

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