

Home thoughts on Cornhill

by George Pipe

ANCIENT SOCIETY OF COLLEGE YOUTHS

CITY OF LONDON,
 St Michael, Cornhill
 Sat Jan 29 2011 3h34 (42)
5100 Cambridge S Maximus
 Comp. R I Allton (No.1810)
 1 Antony R Kench
 2 George W Pipe
 3 David J Dearnley
 4 Martin J Cansdale
 5 David P Hilling
 6 Simon J L Linford
 7 Paul N Mounsey
 8 David E House
 9 Phillip R Goodyer
 10 J Alan Ainsworth
 11 Stephen A Coaker
 12 John N Hughes-D'Aeth (C)
 On the centenary of the first
 peal of Surprise Maximus in
 London.
 Last peal on the bells prior to
 their removal for a new ring.



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 'Scroof' 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 HORREX	Treble.	WILLIAM H. PASMORE ... 7.
CHALLIS F. WINNEY	2.	FREDERICK DENCH 8.
HARRY R. PASMORE	3.	RICHARD F. DEAL 9.
THOMAS H. TAFFENDER	4.	ALFRED B. PECK... .. 10.
HERBERT LANGDON	5.	JOHN W. GOLDING 11.
HENRY R. NEWTON	6.	WILLIAM T. COCKERILL <i>Tenor.</i>

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 little 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 Grandsire 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.

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	HENRY PRING	7
RAYMOND JOHN WILKINS	2	WILLIAM KNIGHT	8
HENRY BROWNJOHN	3	GEORGE CONDICK, JUNR... ..	9
ALBERT STOWELL	4	WILLIAM STOWELL	10
RICHARD CLARK	5	JOHN A. BURFORD	11
ALFRED E. REEVES	6	WILLIAM A. CAVE	<i>Tenor</i>

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	FRANK BENNETT... ..	7
GEORGE R. PYE	2	REUBEN SANDERS	8
BERTRAM PREWETT	3	JAMES E. DAVIS	9
JOHN H. CHEESMAN	4	ALFRED W. GRIMES	10
ISAAC G. SHADE... ..	5	ERNEST PYE	11
CHARLES T. COLES	6	WILLIAM PYE	<i>Tenor</i>

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	* JOHN S. GOLDSMITH	7
GEORGE R. PYE	2	REUBEN SANDERS	8
BERTRAM PREWETT	3	* KEITH HART	9
JOHN H. CHEESMAN	4	ALFRED W. GRIMES	10
ISAAC G. SHADE... ..	5	ERNEST PYE	11
CHARLES T. COLES	6	WILLIAM PYE	<i>Tenor</i>

Composed and conducted by WILLIAM PYE.

*First peal of Cambridge Maximus. First peal of Cambridge Maximus in the county. Rung for the silver wedding of the Master of Trinity College. J. S. Goldsmith's 250th peal.

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. So 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 everybody giving it two-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 any 12-bell tower and one does feel sorry for the authorities there. But it begs the question which in my lifetime has never been satisfactorily answered. Why the obsession almost, for a two-ton tenor high up in such a tower?

Ringing isn't just about peals; towers are such a fascinating adjunct to our Art. The City of London, despite the devastation of the Blitz and, of course, before that 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 Antholin (both gone) – all fifty-two of them, lift the spirit.

Then comes Nicholas Hawksmoor; his towers exude sheer power, almost outrageousness; Spitalfields, Limehouse, St Luke Old Street, Horsleydown (gone), St George in the East and Bloomsbury and, restrained by comparison, the western towers of Westminster Abbey and St Michael on Cornhill.

All these towers with James Gibbs and others, too, have one thing in common; they are to all intents and purposes all unbuttressed. And, to aggravate the situation from a ringer's point of view, although towers distinctly meant to have bells, those that did had rings of colossal weight. It was even worse before the War!

Consider Spitalfields, originally a 44cwt twelve, Bow 53cwt, Aldgate, Jewry and St

George-in-the-East and St Magnus all around 22 to 30cwt to name but a few. Star (Stour) Street Paddington, Matfelon Whitechapel, Horsleydown, Bishopsgate, St Dunstan-in-the-East; other heavy rings often right at the top of the towers.

And that has been Cornhill's problem; wonderful Wren – Hawksmoor tower that it is, no buttresses, huge Gothic/Classical arches all the way up and, as with others whether over Greek porticos or not, basically standing on four legs (*vide* St Magnus and Bow). I love them all, every one a gem, but it has to be said and people seem afraid or reluctant to say it, there is hardly a ring in London that is supremely comfortable. Why won't people say it? Ringers in the past would have served the churches and ringing better had they quietly advised a lighter ring at some of these towers.

These, I realise, are subjective thoughts and perhaps controversial, but meant to be helpful. They in no way lessen my love of ringing in the City where as a country (tractor) boy I have always had a super welcome.

When next in town, those readers who haven't seen St Michael's properly, go round to the south side and view it from George Court (where else) and you will see what I mean.

As a tailpiece, it is an interesting speculation, but Nicholas Hawksmoor designed a fine campanile for King's College Chapel, Cambridge around the time of his brilliant twin towers at All Souls' College, Oxford. It was never built and the design apparently inspired the bell tower at the Royal Hospital School at Holbrook in Suffolk. One wonders if the Cambridge City and University Fathers might have been tempted to put a 55cwt ten in there!

Thus a chapter closes on one of the most historic venues for peal ringing in one of the great churches of London. As with stonework, wood, glass, organs and furnishings, things move on.

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 Youths and especially at St Michael's and other City churches.

P.S. – 1. Thanks to David Dearnley and Chris Pickford for access to some very interesting papers on Cornhill bells and to John Eisel for scans of the six pre-1914 peals mentioned above from the *Bell News*.

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.

Peal corrections and amendments (116)

Ringing World 2009

p382 Surrey Assoc: 4 Christopher R McLean
p707 Hereford D.G.: 7 David J Mattingley

Ringing World 2010

p68 Sussex C.A. at Lower Beeding: 4 Martin J Turner
p220 Hereford D.G. at Stoke Prior: 16m/148v. Extent (32) St Simon's, St Martin's, St Osmund, Eynesbury
p367 Truro D.G.: 7 David Ralls
p499 Yorkshire Assn at Leeds: 7 Graham Bloom
p545 Derby D.A.: 4 Philip J H Hudson
p545 Ely D.A. at Cambridge: Rung Non-Association
p547 Yorkshire Assn at Leeds: 6 Graham Bloom
p569 G. Devonshire Ringers at Thorverton: Schiehallion D Royal
p595 Yorkshire Assn at Leeds: 6 Graham Bloom
p665 Glos & Bristol D.A.: Comp. S Chandler
p689 Hereford D.G. at St Briavels: Comp. Richard B Pullin
p841 Dorset C.A.: 1 Frederick J Sage
p890 Oxford Soc: 10 Edgar T Skipsey
p941 Glos & Bristol D.A. Comp. C W Roberts
p942 Guild of Railway Ringers: 7 Matthew E Rayner
p1013 Hereford D.G. at Whitney-on-Wye: 10m/148v. Extent (39) Lyminster, Reverse Canterbury Pleasure
p1040 ASCY at Darley Dale: 7 Richard L Taylor
p1110 Non Assoc at Tunstall: Rung for Kent C.A.
p1134 Lichfield & Walsall Arch Soc at Horsley: First method Alnwick
p1165 Amersham Guild: 1 Edgar T Skipsey
p1184 ASCY at Poplar: Comp D F Morrison No.1532
p1231 Glos & Bristol D.A.: 4 Katherine E Young
p1257 Derby D.A.: Footnote: different
p1258 Hereford D.G. at King's Pyon: 3m/34v. Extents (15,16) Winchendon (26, 27) Huntley (33, 34, 41, 42) Reverse Canterbury
p1258 North American Guild: Last two lines of footnote: First peal for the NAGCR:3, 10th peal: 4

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p10 Ely D.A. at Meldreth: Meldreth, Cambs, Holy Trinity heading to move from Column two to top of Column three
p10 Essex Assoc at Inworth: 2 Marian H Wood
p12 Hereford D.G.: 10m/142v. Extents (21, 22) St Simon's, St Martin's, Eynesbury, St Osmund
p33 Ely D.A. at Meldreth 19/11/10: 5024 Cambridge Surprise Major
p57 Bath & Wells D.A. at Priddy: Delete peal. Duplicate of peal on p9
p60 Sussex C.A. at Findon: Also rung for the 125th Anniversary of the Association
p60 Glos & Bristol D.A.: 17m
p86 Guildford D.G. at Birmingham: Add footnote: First peal on 16 bells for the Guild and by all except 2,3,13
p110 Sussex C.A. at Withyham: Delete footnote First blows in the method: 3
p134 Non-Assoc: Rung for Southwell & Nottingham D.G.
p134 Peterborough D.G.: Add footnote: In memoriam Ted Althorpe, a ringer at this church
p135 Yorkshire Assoc: Knottingley details from column three should appear as heading to peal of Grandsire Caters in column two.
p135 Yorkshire Assoc at Tuxford: 3 Paul T Young, 4 Adrian M Moreton

Handbells at a wedding

Concluded from previous page

where to stand, with a spotter giving a signal at the end of the service, and discovering that the sound carried inside if we stood in the right place. The Vicar and the wedding party were pleased with the result and the four of us felt we had done enough to lift the moment and also to reprise the idea of handbell ringing for a wedding ceremony.