

## Heteroclital Agitation

by John Eisel

*The steady drip of information about St Michael's, Cornhill, in recent months, and the reference to the movement within the tower when the heavy ring of twelve bells was being rung, leads me to point out that in former times the movement of the tower was far worse, as will appear from the following newspaper extracts, some of which are quoted in extenso to give the full flavour of the language of the time. A detailed history of the bells can be found elsewhere.*

St Michael's, Cornhill, was one of the churches burnt in the Great Fire of London in 1666, and was rebuilt to the designs of Wren, being complete in 1679. However, the mediaeval tower remained until it was rebuilt in the next century to the designs of Nicholas Hawksmoor, being completed in 1722. The next step was to provide a ring of bells, and in 1728 Richard Phelps cast a ring of twelve bells, tenor about two tons. At that time Thomas Lester was the foreman and manager of the foundry, under Phelps. This new ring was rung for the first time on 4th December 1728 and was hung much higher in the tower than the level at which they were subsequently hung; the leverage caused (a tower acting as a loaded cantilever, the force depends on the fourth power of the length of the cantilever) must have caused a phenomenal amount of movement. Despite this, there was competition to ring peals on the bells, with the College Youths ringing a peal of Grandsire Cinques on 7th November 1729, and the London Scholars achieving 6204 Grandsire Cinques on 24th November 1729, although 15 men were needed for this. This number was exceeded by the College Youths on 14th February 1732, when a peal of 7018 Grandsire Cinques was rung, this time by 14 men; such was the sense of achievement that this was celebrated by a dinner at the Fleece Tavern in Cornhill. This record lasted for just over two years, until the City Scholars rang 7040 Grandsire Cinques on 21st February 1734, merely one lead longer. The final peal in the 1730s was one of Plain Bob Maximus rung by the London Scholars on 29th November 1736.

After this, the tower drops out of the peal records for quite a number of years, although there was evidently a band of ringers at St Michael's, as that band opened a new ring of bells at Bedford in April 1745. But the bells at Cornhill were evidently not conducive to peal ringing, except as an extreme physical exercise, and shortly after this the position was made even worse. In March 1748 there was a severe fire in Cornhill, with a number of properties being destroyed. While the fire itself does not seem to have been reported in the press, its after effects certainly were, with



*The tower of St Michael's, Cornhill 'perfect in its proportions' (Photo by F. E. Dawe)*

the usual curiosities, such as the report in the *General Evening Post* of Thursday, 31st March – Saturday, 2nd April 1748 (covering this period and published on the latter day), which told its readers that '... in clearing the Rubbish and Ruins of the late dreadful Fire in Cornhill, a Woman was found in a Vault, unhurt by the Flames but almost starved to Death.' Many years later it was stated that the flames from this disastrous fire had entered the belfry and damaged the frame, causing the bells to be even more difficult to be rung, although nothing of this was reported at the time, and no bells seem to have been damaged and recast as a result, although the two trebles had been recast by Thomas Lester two years before.

It was not until 1783 that another peal was rung on the bells, and such was the pride felt in this achievement that the following news item was inserted in *Parker's General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer* of Monday 20th January 1783:

'Saturday last being the Anniversary of her Majesty's Nativity, the Society of College Youths, in honor to the auspicious occasion, rang, at the Parish Church of St Michael's Cornhill, a compleat peal of 5,170 Grandsire Cinques, in four hours and fifteen minutes, with *thirteen* men only, being the first peal which has been rang at that church for these 40 years; about which time a most tremendous fire happened in Cornhill, and communicating to the steeple, consumed part of the frame which contains the bells, and otherwise so much damaged the whole, as to render it almost impracticable ever since to ring them for such a length of time. The novelty of this achievement, the extraordinary weight of

those bells, the heteroclital agitation which they continually incur, and the Herculean fortitude and perseverance requisite to conduct them through such an Augean exploit, render the performance truly meritorious.'

In this report the phrase 'heteroclital agitation' is very telling, and the adjective 'heteroclital', in common usage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is used in the sense of 'irregular', giving a feeling of the irregular lurching of the tower. The reference to the fifth labour of Hercules, the cleansing of the Augean stables, was used metaphorically to indicate a task that was almost humanly impossible, rather than in a physical sense!

Little, if anything, seems to have been done to the installation for almost 30 years, apart from the recasting and rehanging of the fifth and tenor bells in 1795, until repair work was done on the frame and supporting timbers in 1809-10 by Thomas Mears and Son, at a cost of £439. This was evidently money that was not well spent, and did nothing to alleviate the problems of movement in the tower. The extent of the movement at Cornhill was mentioned in correspondence and news items in the *Times* in 1826, stimulated by a ban on ringing Bow bells after a piece of masonry had fallen from the steeple there. The following was part of an article that appeared on 7th September 1826;

'The vibration of the steeple of St James's, Clerkenwell, and of the lofty and noble tower of St Michael's, Cornhill, is also very great, and a person standing in the upper part will be rocked to and fro.'

Then, on 19th September 1826, a further article contained the following section:

'A similar attempt to silence the bells of St Michael's, Cornhill, was made a few years ago, when some of the parishioners were fearful that the noble tower, which is so much obscured, would fall, and the bells for some time ceased to be rung; but after numerous meetings, their joyous sounds were ordered to be continued, and on the day appointed, the churchwardens, and several of the inhabitants, met in the church; but so impressed were they of an impending calamity, that when the bells struck out, many of them rushed to the doors, and others were following, when a well-timed rebuke from the churchwardens on the folly of their conduct, seeing that twelve persons were in the belfry, stopped their flight, and the peal being rung out with safety, the bells have ever since, on the usual occasions, been rung, although the vibration is considerably greater than that of Bow-steeple, so much so, indeed, that every moveable article in the house adjoining is shaken from its place.'

The fact that there was enough movement in the lower part of the tower to severely shake the adjoining house gives an indication of how much movement there must have been at the level of the bells. However, twelve years later the problem was reduced when Cornhill bells were rehanged lower in the tower,

the work being reported in the *Morning Chronicle* of Saturday 8th June 1838:

‘ST. MICHAEL’S TOWER AND BELLS.— [From a Correspondent.]—In consequence of the great vibration of the lofty and handsome Gothic tower of St Michael’s church, Cornhill, caused by the ringing of the bells, it was deemed necessary to lower and re-hang the whole peal, which has lately been effected. The bells are twelve in number, and with the exception of those at St Saviour’s, Southwark, and St Peter Mancroft, at Norwich, are said to be the finest toned peal of twelve bells in England. The tenor, which was recast about forty years ago, weighs 41 cwt., within 3 cwt. of the tenor of Christchurch, Spitalfields, before the fire which unfortunately destroyed the interior of the steeple and grand peal of bells, three years since. The bells of Spitalfields are now reduced to a noisy peal of eight, cast from the metal of the old ones. The rocking of St Michael’s tower before the bells were lowered was fearful, but no apprehensions of its safety were entertained, and campanologists pursued the intricate and amusing art of change-ringing without fear. The rocking of the tower, however, increased the labours of the ringers, for the bells always “went hard,” and a good “back stroke” and “fire [*sic*] stroke” pull was required, while the tenor was seldom rung “up on end” or swung, consequently much of the sonorous tone of this great bell as lost. All this has been obviated by lowering the bells about 45 feet, but they are still far above the house tops. It is a disgrace to the city of London that the lofty tower, so noble in its proportions, and so creditable to the taste and skill of the architect, should be so long concealed. This beautiful edifice is shut up among the houses, a few feet only from the main street, Cornhill. Instead of pulling down the fine old church of St Bartholomew, next the Exchange, which has actually been proposed, and may be shortly carried into effect, unless public opinion is very strongly expressed, how much better would a few thousands be expended on throwing open the noble gothic tower and church of St Michael! The tower has not its equal for height and beauty in London: the top of it can only be seen from a distance.’

That this work was successful is without doubt, and the following year a peal was rung, reported in the *Bury and Norwich Post* on Wednesday 1st May 1839:

‘CHANGE RINGING.—The beautiful peal of twelve bells, in St Michael’s Tower, Cornhill, London, having for many years being out of order, the parishioners have, at great expence, had them put in repair; and on Thursday, the 11th of April inst [*sic*], the Society of Cumberlands (after two ineffectual attempts made by the Junior Society of college youths, who obtained access to the steeple in an unmanly way) rang a complete peal of grandsire cinques, consisting of 5015 changes in four hours and two minutes. The bells were brought round in a skilfull manner, to the

satisfaction of every admirer of change-ringing. The above peal is the only one that has been rung on those bells for upwards of one hundred years, and the first ever rung upon them by twelve men.

The report goes on to give the names of the ringers, and states that it was called by Mr. W. H. Burwash, a leading member of the society at that period. Clearly the report was copied from elsewhere (but the source has not so far been identified), and overlooks the peal that had been rung by the College Youths in 1783. It also makes one wonder what was the ‘unmanly way’ in which the Junior Society of College Youths obtained the bells for their two unsuccessful attempts!

It took exactly fourteen years for the next peal to be rung on the bells (Kent T.B. Maximus by the College Youths on 11st April 1853) and then eight years later, on 27th April 1861 the College Youths rang the famous peal of 8,580 Stedman Cinques; the latter would have been extremely unlikely to have been rung before the bells were lowered in the tower. From then the rate of peal ringing increased to such an extent that there have now been over 200 rung in the tower, and no doubt, with a new, lighter, ring of bells the rate will increase again!

#### Sources

*Order and Disorder in the Eighteenth Century* Felstead database

Extracts, as quoted, from *Parker’s General Advertiser and Morning Intelligencer*, *Times*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Bury and Norwich Post*

*Love’s Guide to London Bells* website



## All change at the top

The AGM of the Worcestershire & Districts Change Ringing Association took place on Monday, 25th April and a fine day was enjoyed in the Vale of Evesham. The Southern Branch hosted the 128th Annual Meeting at Overbury, a picturesque village. Two ringing routes were arranged, one starting at Bidford on Avon in the north, the other starting at Stoulton; also during the morning a representative band from the 3 branches rang a quarter peal of Grandsire Cinques at Evesham to mark the centenary of the formation of the branches. Paul Marshall composed a 1911 of Stedman Cinques but this proved a little difficult and the band revised its plan and rang a 1253 of Grandsire composed by the late David Franklin; all those involved felt this was a fitting tribute, it is hoped to re-arrange the 1911 during this centenary year.

The service at Overbury was well attended and the ancient church rang to strains of some good singing of Easter hymns and the, inevitable, bell ringers’ hymn; the small, but surprisingly loud, organ was played by Robin Walker, Western Branch Chairman. Afterwards the sumptuous tea was served in the village hall.

The business meeting commenced at 17:30 and was attended by 62 Members and 4 Visitors.

The main items of the business meeting were the acceptance of the annual report (copies are available to non-members for £3 inc. p&p) and election of officers.

Neither the Master, Secretary nor the Assistant Secretary were seeking re-election and as there were two nominations for Master a paper ballot ensued; the resultant winner was Mrs Alison Regan; the new Secretary is Mark Wilson; the Assistant Secretary is currently vacant.

The retiring Master, Alan Roberts was thanked for his 3 years in office (which included the Central Council visit in 2009), David Andrews for his 10 years as Secretary and Nicola Beaumont for her almost 10 years as Assistant Secretary. The other new appointee was Revd Christopher Stuart, Priest-in-Charge at St John in Bedwardine, Worcester as Association Chaplain. Chris is a ringer and is expecting the bells at St John’s to be ringing again by the middle of this year. All other officers were re-elected and full details can be found on the association website [www.wdcra.org.uk](http://www.wdcra.org.uk).

The usual votes of thanks were given and the formal meeting closed.

After the close of the meeting the number club was drawn and the raffle taken, proceeds from the raffle and tea amounted to in excess of £300 a most excellent sum!

Further use was made of the bells until 20:30.

MARK WILSON  
Association Secretary

**Evesham, Worcs.** (The Belltower) 25 Apr, 1253 Grandsire Cinques: Paul J Marshall 1, Stuart D Piper 2, Sarah D Franklin 3, Ronald K Russ 4, Paul R Smith 5, Andrew D Evans 6, Alan Roberts 7, Andrew R Gray 8, Robin J Walker (C) 9, Mark A Wilson 10, Alison K Regan 11, Christopher M Povey 12. For the centenary of the formation of the branches of the Worcestershire & Districts Association. Rung on Association AGM day. Remembering David G Franklin, the composer of this quarter.

### Association Announcement

**LADIES GUILD OF CHANGE RINGERS.** Kent Branch. The Kent Branch of the Ladies Guild of change ringers held their ADM at Bexley on Saturday 12th March 2011. All the officers were re-elected en bloc at the meeting, which followed ringing on the 8 bells and a delicious tea provided very kindly by Mary Andrews. The following dates for meetings were agreed: Saturday 21st May 2011 – all day outing. Saturday 9th July – afternoon meeting and pub meal. Saturday 10th March 2012 – ADM. Sadly Sue Fisher was stuck in hospital and a good wishes card was signed by all those present. Isobel M Pearce. 2126