

## Chapter 14

### Women within the Ring

Although a handful of woman may have rung church bells in the past it was predominantly a male preserve until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This may in part be because of the difficulty of ringing bells on old fittings, especially plain bearings, but also because of the social standing of women in society in those days. But by the end of the century and following the First World War which saw many local bands depleted of its male ringers, women started to be encouraged to learn and accepted into ringing.



Bell Ringing for Girls from *The Girl's Own Paper*, 5 October 1895, Volume 17, Issue 824, pages 24 to 27

*The Girls Own Paper* carried a four page article entitled *Bell Ringing for Girls* in 1885. This was published by *The Religious Tract Society* which was a sister publication to the *Boy's Own Paper* and the lesser known *Sunday at Home*. It encouraged girls to advance themselves and aspire to a measure of independence and adventure, to justify female participation in a male dominated activity. Although health and safety concerns were less prevalent then, it was still deemed important to highlight potential dangers with bell ringing. The original article was set in context in a *Ringling World* (7 May 2010, pages 470 to 472) by Steve Coleman.



Bell Ringing for Girls - *The Girl's Own Paper*, 5 October 1895, Volume 17, Issue 824, pages 24 to 27

An early account of female involvement in ringing is provide by a talk given by the Revd H T Ellacombe at the Athenaeum in Exeter in 1869. To illustrate his talk he invited the Trelawney family, Colonel Trelawney together with his wife, son and three daughters, to ring hand bells at the event. They are reported to have rung a course of Grandsire Cinques:

Eleanor Trelawney (aged 12)	1-2
Edith Trelawney (aged 13)	3-4
Beatrice Trelawney (aged 14)	5-6
Mrs Trelawney	7-8
Colonel Trelawney	9-10
Harry Trelawney (aged 10)	11-12

The records of the Ancient Society of College Youths also include an account of a visit to Plymouth in June 1874, when Beatrice Trelawney by then aged about 19, again ringing a course of Grandsire Cinques on hand bells '*without a mistake before thirty or forty persons.*'

An article in *The Bell News and Ringers' Record* (23 August 1884, page 246) highlights that the daughters of Sir Percival Heywood (1849 to 1916), 3<sup>rd</sup> baronet who is best known today as the innovator of the fifteen inch minimum gauge railway for estate use and was a leading ringing activist who was to go on to found the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, were also ringers able to ring Grandsire Triples.

In 1876 Martha Williams is reported to have rung a hand bell peal. A further report in *The Bell News and Ringers' Record* gives details of hand bell peal by Mrs George Williams, who rang 1-2 to Grandsire Triples on 24 March 1892 in Brighton. The footnote claims this to be the first peal in which a married couple had taken part. She went on to repeat the performance by ringing two peals in March and April 1897.



An unknown lady standing inside a raised bell at Hagbourne, Berkshire in 1909 – a very dangerous thing to do!

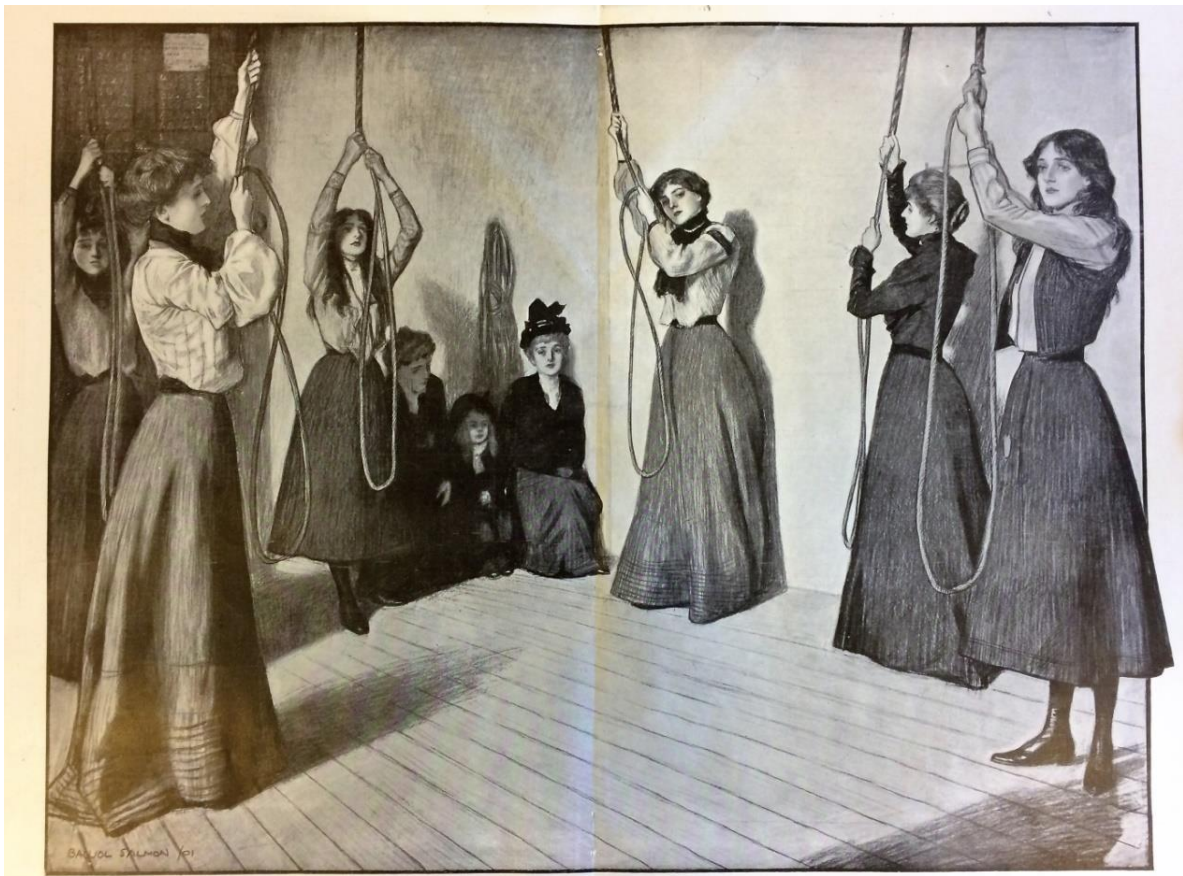


Another early ringer was Rosetta Alice White, born on October 8th 1880 and raised in Basingstoke, who was the daughter of Henry White a well-known ringer and instructor at St Michael, Basingstoke. Consequently, Alice would often accompany him to service ringing and was soon joining in by chiming the bells at a young age. When Alice was 11 years old she learnt to ring bells full circle and progressed to ringing methods both on tower bells and also on hand bells, the practices for which were often held at her parents' home. In 1895, Alice successfully rang a quarter peal of Grandsire triples and then on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1896, rang her first full peal of 5040 Grandsire Triples at St Michael's. This was reported to be the first tower bell peal rung by a lady anywhere in the world (*The Bell News and Ringers' Record*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1896, page 462). The peal band was made up of 6 local ringers and 2 invited visitors from Salisbury. It was conducted by her father, Henry White. In July, Shortly after this momentous achievement, she rang in another peal at St Michael's with her younger sister Dora, aged 13 years. Alice also rang in a Peal of Grandsire Caters at St Nicholas, Guildford, making her the first lady to ring a peal on 10 bells. In all, Alice rang a total of 32 peals.



Christmas Bells drawn by R Sauber taken from *The Illustrated London News Christmas Number 1896*, page 23 (23.3cm by 31.5cm)

On 2 July 1898, *Bell News* reported that Alice had been charged by a rampaging bullock on 23 June, whilst on its way to the slaughter house, was knocked against a wall, badly bruised and received serious injuries to her face. Luckily, she made a good recovery and Alice's ringing continued to progress over the following years. She became a very proficient and well known ringer, often meeting visiting ringers from the surrounding area with her father at the station and accompanying them to both St Michael's and All Saints churches to ring the bells. In 1920, two years after her father passed away, she married Joseph Salvaneschi who was the General Manager of the Liverpool Telephone (New System) Co. She presumably moved to Liverpool following their honeymoon in London and then emigrated to Canada in 1940 where she continued to live until her death in 1979.



Fair Bellringers at the Church of St Andrew, Bradfield taken from *The Graphic* 1 June 1901 (44.0cm by 33.5cm). Drawn by artist Balliot Salmon

Another lady who was a noted ringer and later joined the Ancient Society of College Youths was Margaret Nichols (later Mrs Shurtleff) of Boston, USA. On a visit to London with her ringing father, Dr A H Nichols, in 1902 she rang two hand bell peals on the same day (17 August). These performances were followed by a tower bell peal of Grandsire Triples at Acton the next day, and then a peal of Stedman Triples at St George, Southwark on 23 August. It is thought she might have become an eminent ringer in London had she not returned home to the USA after her visit. The College Youths were sufficiently impressed to present her with a set of 10 hand bells to take home with her. It is interesting whether the

motion to restrict membership of the College Youths to male members only in 1919 would have succeeded had she remained in the UK. It was to be another 79 years until the rules were amended to permit women to again become members from 1998. In 1954 she helped form the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers. Margaret Nichols had a fascinating life apart from her ringing, as recorded in her autobiography *Lively Days* (see Appendix).

The growing number of women in ringing led to the suggestion of attempting an all-female tower bell peal of Grandsire Triples. This was arranged for 1 July 1911 at Christ Church, Cubit Town in London. This tower was chosen as a light and easy going ring of bells. The ladies band were drawn from Oxford, Portishead, Leicester and London which led to attempt not starting until 4pm due to having to travel. Unfortunately, there was a problem with the 7<sup>th</sup> bell which caused the conductor, Nellie Gillingham, to miss a call after which the bells ran round at the course end. The general consensus of those listening was that the striking had been excellent. After tea, provide by the Vicar, touches of Double Norwich and Stedman Triples were rung. A further attempt was arranged at the same tower on 20 July 1912 which resulted in a successful peal of Grandsire Triples, the first by an all ladies band, being rung in 3 hours and 4 minutes. This attempt had involved ringing for over 5 hours on the day after the first attempt was stood up after around 2 hours ringing. Both Alice White and Mary Nightingale who had rung in the original attempt were unable to take part so the band comprised:

5040 Grandsire Triples

1. Sarah Pigott
2. Eva N Belcher
3. Lilian Willson
4. Mary Jukes
5. Evelyn Steel
6. Nellie Gillingham
7. Edith Parker (conductor)
8. Clara Beazley

It was the first peal for the tenor ringer, first in the method for the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and first affected by calls for the 5<sup>th</sup>. It was Edith Parker's 50<sup>th</sup> peal and her 16<sup>th</sup> peal as conductor.

This peal gave rise to much publicity and led to the idea of a *Ladies Guild*. An advertisement in the *Ringling World* (2<sup>nd</sup> August 1912) asked those interested to contact Edith Parker. Following 40 applications a Guild was formed holding an inaugural meeting on 26 October 1912 at St Giles in the Fields, London. Edith Parker became the Guild's first Hon. Secretary and Treasurer, with Alice White as President although she could not be present on the day due to ill health.





Belles of St Clements! Girl Ringers: Shortly to attempt the Full Peal of Stedman Caters (5,148 Strikes), a feat that involves 3½ Hours Continuous Ringing: Members of the Ladies Guild of Change Ringers at St Clement Danes. Taken from *The Illustrated London News*, 9 January 1926, page 67 (21.0cm by 27.5cm)

