

Biographical Record

William BANISTER (? Feb 1824 – 31 Jan 1917)

William Banister was born in 1824, the third son of Henry Banister, who was employed at Woolwich Arsenal as a caulk. Henry Banister had a large family, at least six sons and one daughter, and all six sons learnt to ring at Woolwich.

From 1843 onwards William was the inspiration of the band at Woolwich. In October 1846, when William was twenty-two years old, and working as a caulk like his father, the band rang a peal of Grandsire Triples, which included Henry Banister and four of his sons, and was conducted by William. This peal started a series of remarkable peals rung by the Woolwich band, all conducted by William Banister. In 1847 he conducted Holt's Original composition, and the next year he called peals of Kent Treble Bob Major, Stedman Triples, and what was claimed as Real Double Norwich Court Bob Major. Although the peal of Double Norwich was a first-rate achievement, it was not what would be accepted today as Real Double Norwich.

The band was able to ring well in the Surprise methods being practiced at the time: Superlative, London and Cambridge, although the band never rang a peal of Cambridge. On 10 February 1849 the band achieved a peal of Superlative Surprise Major, with five members of the Banister family in the band, which was composed and conducted by William. The peal board recording that peal continues:

The same band, after diligent practice and perseverance, completed on Octr. 11th in the same year 5600 changes of London Surprise Major, which arduous task was performed in 3 hours 27 minutes. This too was composed and conducted by William Banister.

To gain experience on higher numbers of bells, William regularly walked into London to ring with the College Youths, mainly at Cornhill and Southwark. He rang a peal of Stedman Cinques at Southwark on 19 December 1849, and took part in the record length of 7524 changes of Stedman Cinques rung at Cripplegate on 6 January 1851.

There were two peals of Triples in which Henry Banister and his six sons rang. The first was of Grandsire, rung in March 1852. The family stood in order of age, with the youngest son on the Treble, and Henry conducting from the seventh. Edward West, the regular tenor man and old Henry's son-in-law, rang behind. The second peal was of Stedman, rung in February 1860. Again the Banister family rang the working bells with William conducting, but with a different tenor ringer.

Early in 1865 William Banister was transferred to the dockyard at Devonport, Devonshire. In ringing terms this was like being cast into outer darkness, since change ringing was then almost unknown in Devonshire. The previous year the Calstock band, under the leadership of Colonel Harry Trelawney, had managed to master Grandsire Doubles, and in 1865 the band at Kelly succeeded in ringing 120s of Grandsire Doubles, but nothing started to happen at Huntsham until the following year.

With no tradition of change ringing to help him, William took charge of ringing at the Dockyard Chapel, and on 9 February 1867 the band there rang two 120s of Stedman Doubles, six of Grandsire, and a 720 of Treble Bob Minor. There was such enthusiasm that the bells were augmented from six to eight, and on 2 November 1867 the band rang a peal of Grandsire Triples.

William helped other bands as well, giving assistance to C.A.W. Troyte at Huntsham, and also to Colonel Trelawney. This was recognised, and when the Guild of Devonshire Ringers was formed in 1874 William was elected a vice-president.

In the same year he published a text book on ringing, but although he was a gifted leader in the tower, his text book was not what the Exercise needed. Despite that, two further editions were published, in 1879 and 1887, both by Warners, the bell founders.

In 1879 William retired, and became a member of Devonport Council. He represented the dockyard district for 30 years, for the last sixteen of which he was an alderman. Around 1905 he moved to Pembroke, but for five years the Council kept his seat open for him, such was the respect in which he was held.

He later moved to live with his daughter and son-in-law in Fulham, where he died on 31 January 1917, a month short of his ninety-third birthday. He was buried in Woolwich Cemetery, and a course of Stedman Triples was rung on handbells over his grave. Later the College Youths rang a funeral peal on Bow Bells.

William Banister left a son and a daughter, and three grand-daughters. Over thirty years after his death, one of his grand-daughters (who could remember him quite well) provided an unexpected insight into his character:

You will probably imagine from the eulogies written about him that William Banister was a charming and genial old gentleman. The truth is that, like a good many other noted men, he was not at all easy to live with. He kept his charm for out of doors, and was a morose autocrat in the bosom of his family. He had his good points, of course, and was very generous, and we think that in his funny way he was attached to us.



*This account is adapted from John Eisel's book *Giants of the Exercise*.*