

A Nineteenth-Century Notebook

By William Willans

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Jan. 17th.

1849

George Withey

Member of the

SOCIETY OF

COLLEGE YOUTHS,

BRISTOL.

MDCCCXLIX.

Fig 1

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Among the manuscripts in the Library is a handsome book of unruled pages, stitched binding, board covers, landscape format, in size about eight inches by five. This is Accession No 1751 - "George Withey (Bristol) MS book containing handbell tunes and change ringing methods and touches". However, inside the front cover there is a pencil note, "George Withey; with Wm Plummer's Best Wishes / January 12th 1860", for this is not a personal notebook but a collection of material compiled by one ringer for the benefit of another: a rare and possibly unique survival.

"BUY A BROOM"

The tunes are notated in numbers as for change-ringing, with the compass - "a peal of eight", "a peal of ten with one lower" and so forth. Apart from the occasional full stop or slur, there's no indication of rhythm - perhaps this was given out at practices, and in any case many of the tunes would have been well known to the players.

Two are hymns, "Mariners or Easter Hymn" and "Redcliff Chimes", the latter being the tune played at St Mary Redcliffe at set times after the hour strike. Known as "Old 113th", it can be heard to this day at St John's, Cirencester, going three times with one row of Tittums in between. Here it is given with one round on eight after the tune, so at St Mary Redcliffe it may well have been rounds instead of Tittums.

A few of the rest are familiar - "Buffalo Gals", "Blue Bells of Scotland",

“Home Sweet Home”, and of course “God Save the Queen”. Others have survived only in their titles. There's scope for research, perhaps – for instance, “Buy a Broom” is the tune generally known as “Ach, du lieber Augustin”, by which it is identified as a song that was a big hit in the early nineteenth century, sung in the character of one of the Bavarian girls who would come to England selling brooms in the summer, and who had gained a certain reputation – wholly undeserved, no doubt.

It all goes to show that handbell-ringing on this modest scale had gained a place in popular culture, and ringers were expected to have some skill at it.

“THE ART OF GRANDSIRE RINGING”

After the tunes, and 150 blank pages, there is the title page of the change-ringing section (Fig 1). The text has been cut out from print, the surround is hand-drawn, and the “Society of College Youths, Bristol” had nothing to do with the London society – it would have been a strictly local company.

The section begins with “The Art of Grandsire Ringing ... Which may be divided into 4 Methods (viz) the Treble Method, the Course Method, Place Making and Bob Calling methods...” There may be an echo of Shipway's “Campanologia” here, but what follows is in no way similar, with its eccentricities of spelling, grammar and punctuation: “... to know perfectly well when your Treble is on the lead and your Bell dodging which Place in the method your Bell is to make next Treble lead. Thus if your Bell be in 3rds place with the treble on the lead and nothing be called on the next treble lead you will have to dodge with your bell in 4th and 5th Place cutting Back Rope then go down to lead...” And so on.

A progressive sequence follows, from the six changes on three - “by

which you will see how the Treble is rang on the Hunt explained” - then Grandsire on four, “24 changes containing 3 bobs – Each Bell lying still Behind his 6 Blows while the bob is made and showing the way in which a Bob is made” - the plain course of Doubles, here entitled “A Course of Grandsire Minor”, followed by callings for the extent: “The 5th the Course Bell, 6 callings ... the 5th the Course Bell, 9 callings ... The 3rd the Course Bell, 9 callings.”

Next is Grandsire Minor, here described as “A Course of Grandsire 6 in Major” (Fig 2). The instructions are concise: “The method for Ringing Which is similar to any other Course in Grandsire Order”, followed by a touch, BBS x 4, written out in full - “A Musical Touch of Grandsire (6 in) Major containing 144 changes. Each Single bringing the bells in the Course ... Each Bell lying still behind while the Calling is made.

And then, “The Art of Grandsire Ringing (Triples)” - “See the Commencement of this article which contains the Treble method, and the Method for Placemaking is as follows to simply Guide your bell up and down, but you must be sure of your method and to strictly observe when your treble is on the lead then do double work and go out dodging either up or down as your bell Cuts at hand or backrope if at hand go back up if backrope come down.” The plain course is given in full, followed by this diagram of the work of the 5th:

“12345

125	in 3rds place
1275	in 4ths and 5ths cutting back
126745	in 6 7 Place cutting back
1246375	in 6 7 Place going behind
12345	Going Behind from the lead

Then there are touches - "Having shewn how the Treble is rang in the course also in the Major I shall now proceed to give Triples by the Treble Leads the Treble been the same thro all Grandsire methods". The selection comprises 336 (PPPB x 2, PPPS, all repeated), 168 (BBPP), 84 (BBSBBS) - "a minor touch" - and 42 (BBB), "the shortest touch that can be obtained it contains 3 bobs only". Also there is one given as 336 (BBPP x 2, BBS, all repeated) that on examination proves to be 308, and false.

Another 336 comes next, PSPSPB repeated; "The Most Musical Touch of Grandsire that can be obtained the Queens and Tittums Change being introduced - by making a Single on the first Bob the Bells will come round."

The higher stages are dealt with in short order. "A Course of Grandsire (8 in) Major 96 changes" - the plain course in full, no text - a plain course of Grandsire Caters, and Royal - "Grandsire (Ten in) Major" - and in conclusion Grandsire Cinques, "The Method for Ringing which is similar to Triples or Caters."

"A PERFECT SINGLE"

"The Art of Stedman Ringing" commences with the plain course "on five bells" with the quick and slow sixes marked - "A Plain Course of Stedman Containing 60 Changes the o are the wrong six and the x the right six". Then - "The way to ring a Six score is to Call a Single ... this is the last x 6 it is made thus

13254 then begin your Course again."

12354

In dealing with Triples, the author's powers are tested to the limit, and perhaps a little beyond. First, the plain course is described as "containing Eighty two changes" instead of 84. Then there is a page headed "The Method for calling Steadman's Principle and shewing how the Callings are made", with the figures for: "A Perfect Single which is made by the bells behind lying still one whole pull", in other words the common single - "The XX means Doubles which is made by the Back Bells lying still one Whole Pull. The Bobs is made by the Bell lying in 5ths Place one whole Pull. To bring your Bells round get the 6th wrong 6 then alternative courses (sic)" - and finally:

"In order for you to know or ascertain the mode adopted to bring the Bells home the following is subjoined:

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5326174
- 5361274
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3516724
5312674
5132674
1536247
1352674
3156247

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With the third row amended to 3516247, from the bob indicated, it does show the working of one form of "Double". The connection with calling round, however, remains obscure.

Finally, this on the higher numbers, complete with the author's signature: "The

(6)

Callings in Caters or Cinques is made the same as Triples with the Exceptions of the Following the Bob is made in 7ths place in Caters and 9ths place in Cinques as it is in Triples with the 3 Back Bells and the Doubles is made on all Bells behind 3rds place either in Triples, Caters or Cinques.

William Plummer”

The mention of “Doubles” in Caters and Cinques may well be unique.

Union Triples is next - “...the bells make the same Place through the first Treble lead but alters on the Treble leading her first Blow by a Bell making 5ths place... “ Then, a plain course of Union Caters, followed by a course of Bob Minor - “The Treble in the Hunt a Bob keeping the same bell in the Hunt or Grandsire Reversed” - courses of Bob Triples and Bob Major with no text, and a course of Plain Bob Caters, bizarrely entitled:

Oxford

“A Course of Union Treble Bob Caters containing 144 changes.”

All the pages that follow – and there are more than eighty of them – are blank.

There may be plenty in the essay at which one can smile - or frown – but at least it was an endeavour at instruction in an age when there was little teaching and no encouragement to learn. The celebrated Bristol ringer Edwin J (“Jack”) Brown had had his own difficulties in the early 1900's, “but before that ... a young chap had no chance at all to learn ringing”. At least Mr Plummer was prepared to give George Withey the chance.

WHO WERE THEY?

Of George Withey himself there is no trace. The only ringing with which he might be connected is a peal of Grandsire Triples at St Mary-le-Port for which "G Withy" shared the tenor ("Bell's Life of London and Sporting Chronicle", 23rd March 1856).

As a much older man, William Plummer is on the record in "Church Bells", in touches at St James (Vol X, page 707, 2nd October 1880) and a quarter at St Matthew's, Kingsdown (Vol X, page 751, 16th October). At the time of the notebook he appears in "Bell's Life" conducting an interesting handbell peal: "Bristol. On Tuesday evening week four members of the Society of College Youths of Bristol met at the Myrtle Tree Inn, Thomas-street, where they rang on eight of their musical hand bells a true and complete peal of grandsire triples, consisting of 5,039 changes... The peal contained 124 bobs and 116 plain grandsire singles, the seventh, the observation bell, being, it is said, the first complete peal of that description, with the bells in that position, ever rung in England. It was composed and conducted by William Plummer" ("Bell's Life", Sunday 16th February 1851).

The composition is odd, with a length of 5,039, but there's a clue in the total of 240 calls, as there would be in any three-lead-course peal, of which a few had been rung starting at backstroke to have the 7th as observation. In this one, there may well have been a special start – all bells above thirds lying still, perhaps – to achieve the same result, coming round at hand with a call, one row short of the extent.

Another puzzle is the statement that it had been the first "of that description", because a peal of 5,039 Grandsire Triples had been rung at All Saints, Bristol, on 16

June 1845, for which an almost identical claim had been made by the composer and conductor, James Mawditt: "This Peal contained 82 Bobs and 159 Singles: the 7th bell the observation ... the first Peal of that description, with the Bells in that position, ever rung in England." The times are almost the same, too – for All Saints, a very fast 2 hours 32 minutes; 2 hours 33 minutes for the handbell peal.

It does rather seem as though Mr Plummer had been guilty of a false claim. Or perhaps the unlucky victim of a hoax: there is a story here, if only one could get at it.

He may well have been the William Plummer who in 1856 was articulated to George Ley King, "Solicitor of Bristol", with whom he later went into partnership, the only other Bristolian of that name in Census records being one "William Plummer, Alderman of Bristol, Merchant" who had died in 1857. He certainly had a reasonable hand, of which the page at Fig 2 is a typical example.

Also, in Mr Ley King's office he would have had access to high quality stationery. This sort of notebook, for example - and perhaps, for the sake of his reputation, one had better stop right there.

My grateful thanks to Alan Glover for accommodating me at the Library, getting the downloads for the illustrations and generally helping me on my way: also to Dr John Eisel for photo-copies of the content many years ago.

"Buy a Broom" - the first few bars of the tune can be seen at
<http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/catalog/levy:046.045>

At the time of writing, a video clip dated 8 October 2014 of "Old 113th" being played on the Dent machine at St John's, Cirencester, can be seen on the FaceBook page of the Cumbria Clock Co:

<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=723602407721726>

The recollections of Edwin J Brown, recorded by Patrick J Bird and transcribed by Angela Newing, are from "The Ringing World" for 24/31 December 1976.

Thanks again are due to Alan Glover for locating material in "Church Bells and "Bell's Life".

The details of James Mawditt's peal at All Saints are taken from a copy of an elaborate handbill - seven different typefaces, with a picture of the tower - for which I am indebted to Richard L Jones.

"George Ley King, Solicitor of Bristol and his clerk, William Plummer" are on record as witnesses to the will of one John Abraham, proved 12 November 1851 -
<http://synagoguescribes.com/blog/jewish-will-extracts-18th-19th-century-details/jewish-will-extracts-18th-19th-century/?value=1496>

A Course of Grandioso. Cui Major

1 2 3 4 5 6

213546	215634	216453	214365
231456	251364	261543	241635
324165	523146	625134	426153
342615	532416	652314	462513
436251	354261	563241	645231
463521	345621	536421	654321
645312	436512	354612	563412
654132	463152	345162	536142
561423	641325	431526	351624
546243	614235	413256	315264
152634	162453	142365	132546
125364	126543	124635	123456

Containing 14 Changes
 The method for Ringing
 Which is similar to any other
 Course in Grandioso Order
 The Bell in 3rd Place one
 Treble lead are to dodge the
 next Treble lead in 4th and 5th
 Place ~~the next Treble lead~~ cutting
 Back rope and on the next lead
 to lie behind 4 B-lows and then
 come down and on the next lead
 to be in 4th and 5th Place cutting at hand
 see 5th Bell.