

# **RINGING OUT THE AGE**

*by*

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*Ringing out the Age*

# ENGLISH BELLS

AND

## BELL LORE:

*A BOOK ON BELLS*

BY THE LATE

THOMAS NORTH, F.S.A.,

EDITED BY THE

REV. WILLIAM BERESFORD,

Vicar of S. Luke's, Leek.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

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## RINGING OUT THE AGE

### INTRODUCTION

The earliest pioneers in the study of church bells such to Tyssen, Raven, Ellacombe, and L'Estrange, in their published county works on bells concentrated on the bells themselves. However, the scope was widened by Thomas North, emphasised by the title of his first county work, published in 1876: *THE CHURCH BELLS OF LEICESTERSHIRE: Their Inscriptions, Traditions, and Peculiar Uses*; ... This sub-title, or variations on it, was used for all his other county books on church bells, Northamptonshire (1878), Rutland (1880), Lincolnshire (1882), Bedfordshire (1883), and Hertfordshire, the latter being completed posthumously by J.C.L. Stahlschmidt in 1886. Because of his poor health, North compiled most of his information by post, relying on numerous informants, and it is clear that one of the things that he asked about was the question of local customs. At the time that North was carrying out his surveys many of these customs were dying out, or had died out in living memory. Also the information he collected related to mainly rural areas, where such customs had lingered on. Stahschmidt himself also listed customs in his *Surrey Bells and London Bellfounders* (1884) and *Church Bells of Kent* (1887). Generally, up to the start of the First World War most writers made an effort to note such customs as they could find.

One final work by North that had not been published at the time of his death in 1884 was his *English Bells and Bell Lore*, a summary of his research into customs and usages. His widow placed the manuscript into the hands of the Rev. William Beresford, vicar of Leek, who saw it through the press until its publication in 1888. This is a useful summary of the state of knowledge at that time, although it must be used with caution as further information has subsequently come to light. Nevertheless the wide range of customs is well illustrated, whether a single bell for some particular purpose, either ecclesiastical or secular, or the full ring being used. Some of these were for important state occasions, such as a coronation or its anniversary, or others such as Gunpowder Plot on 5 November. North

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quotes an extract from the churchwardens' accounts of St. Margaret's, Westminster, for 1605. It seems that after the Plot was discovered and foiled, the bells were rung in celebration, for which the ringers were paid 10s., the accounts stating that this was for 'ringing at the time when the Parliament House should have been blown up.' I make no comment!

### FUNERAL CUSTOMS

As will shortly appear, North's section on bells related to death is the most relevant to this Essay, and the customs are discussed in detail, beginning with the passing bell. This was rung when someone was dying, to give notice so that prayers could be said. It was, of course, the passing bell which was referred to on John Donne's *Devotions upon emergent occasions* No. XVII, written in the winter of 1623/4, which contains the words, usually quoted in part 'any mans *death* diminishes me, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never sent to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for *thee*.' Although the language is difficult, to get the full context the whole Devotion should be read.

Somewhere about the beginning of the eighteenth century the passing bell began to be rung after death, with innumerable customs to indicate details of the person who had died. The typical version is said to have given rise to the saying 'Nine tailors (tellers) make a man.' However, there was only a gradual change to ringing after death, and North records a case later in that century when the woman for whom a passing bell was rung in the old style recovered. Perhaps the most evocative report of ringing after a death was contained in the words put into the mouth of Robert Palgrave, tower captain in the book *Akenfield* (1969):

'The bells tolled for death when I was a boy. It was three times three for a man and three times two for a woman. People would look up and say, 'Hullo, a death?' Then the years of the dead person's age would be tolled and if the bell went on speaking, 'seventy-one, seventy-two...' people would say, 'Well, they had a good innings!' But when the bell stopped at eighteen or twenty a hush would come over the fields'

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North also recorded customs of ringing at burials, whether the bells were rung or chimed, and how this was done. However, as far as I can see, there was no mention of the 'whole pull and stand', rung at funerals and other occasions to mark the death of a person. Perhaps this was because it was current at the time and North's work was essentially antiquarian. This, however, is a development of a custom recorded in a section in the 1702 *Campanalogia Improved* which is devoted to the customary way of ringing for a funeral, not only upon the death of a ringer but also of any other young person. Before the funeral the bells were to be rung round slowly, and set after a whole pull, then the tenor rung a whole pull on its own, then repeated. This was carried on until the funeral took place, after which the bells were rung in the usual manner. An alternative was to muffle the bells, and proceed as before, with the bells being rung open after the funeral. The 'whole pull and stand', as it became known, was general, and subsequently it became the custom to do this for as many times as the person being commemorated had lived.

Another funeral custom was reported in the issue of the *Ipswich Journal* which was published on 8 August 1730. A young ringer had died in London, and was buried on the evening of 3 August, on which occasion the London Scholars met at St. Michael's, Cornhill at seven in the evening to ring a 'Dead Peal'. The report went on to say:

'the Clappers of the 12 Bells therein were tied round with Leather, they raised the Bells, and having rung 12 Rounds, they then rung only the Tenor, a like Number attending to the Years of his Age, and in the same Order all the rest gradually to the first, they then rung some time round on the 12, and the like on the Tenor, which concluded the mournful Ceremony, which drew the attention of Crowds of People, when ceasing till the Corps was interr'd and the Clappers uncovered, they then rung a Peal of Changes for an Hour with great exactness.'

The man who had died was only 24, otherwise this ringing would have been of a more extended nature.

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Another variation was given in the Laughton MS, which describes the activities of the Rambling Ringers in the 1730s, a text which was analysed in *Essay for the Friends* No. 22 (2015). Before a funeral the bells would be rung round a whole pull, followed by a whole pull on the tenor, then two whole pulls round and two on the tenor, etc. If the ringing was on six bells then after the six whole pulls of rounds the tenor would be rung as many times as the age of the deceased. The procedure is then reversed, with six whole pulls of rounds, followed by the tenor ringing six whole pulls, five whole pulls of rounds followed by five whole pulls on the tenor, etc, until after the last whole pull of rounds the tenor again rings for as many times as the age of the deceased. Laughton noted that this variation was used at Islington for William Ibbot, a wheelwright.

### A HEREFORDSHIRE CUSTOM

As has been noted above, more customs of funeral ringing, or ringing to mark a death, have been found since North performed his pioneering work, and the purpose of this Essay is to discuss yet another custom which has been found recently, and which, on current evidence, was restricted to Herefordshire and its immediate locality. In the middle of the nineteenth century there was a cluster of reports in the Hereford papers referring to a style of muffled ringing which was called 'ringing out the age', a development of Laughton's system. In this a whole pull of rounds was rung, followed by a whole pull on the tenor, two whole pulls followed by two whole pulls on the tenor, increasing until as many whole pulls were rung as the age of the deceased, followed by that number of whole pulls on the tenor. If the deceased was of considerable age, the ringing was also of considerable length! This custom was described—but not very well—in the *Hereford Times* on 13 July 1850, where it inferred that the bells were usually half-muffled and went on to state: "“Ringing out” the death of an individual is by no means common, and the party to whom such a distinction is paid must have gained either great national or local respect to merit it."

The custom of ringing out the age in this fashion seems to have been centred on my own tower of All Saints', Hereford, but a few other country parishes in the vicinity are also known to have used it. Of course, it

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is quite possible that yet more parishes used it and further reports will yet be found.

### HEREFORD

The first record I can find was in connection with the funeral of Sir John Geers Cotterell, who lived at Garnons, a few miles west of the city. He died on 26 January 1845 and was buried at Mansel Gamage on 1 February. Two days later a lengthy report of the funeral appeared in the *Hereford Journal*, which went on to say:

'In this city most of the respectable tradesmen closed their shops, and every mark of respect was shown to the memory of the lamented baronet. The ringers at All Saints Church commenced a muffled peal (to ring out the age) at three o'clock in the afternoon, and completed the arduous task at one o'clock on Tuesday morning, during which time 7744 rounds were given. This number, with 7744 times the cover bell passed between the peals, makes a total of 15,488 times that the large bell revolved upon its axis. The peal was conducted by Mr. E. S. JONES, Sexton of Hereford Cathedral.'

Sir John was in his 88th year when he died, and if the calculation was based on 87 completed years, by my reckoning should have been 3828 whole pulls or 7656 rounds: if based on 88 years it should have been 3916 whole pulls or 7832 rounds. Hence there is a slight discrepancy in the number of rounds. However, the major point is that the ringing took some 10 hours!

On 7 April 1846 the funeral took place of Edward Foley, Esq., of Stoke Edith, a member of another notable family of landed gentry. The report of the funeral at Stoke Edith church which appeared in the *Hereford Times* on 11 April 1846 concluded:

'In this city most of the shops were closed, and the church bells tolled mournfully, the damp and cold weather adding to the depression of the day. Soon after three o'clock the ringers of All Saints commenced a muffled peal (to ring out the age), which task

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was accomplished in about four hours. The peal was conducted by Mr. E. S. Jones.'

I am sure that the local residents were relieved that in this case Mr. Foley was in middle age (54)!

The two reports above both relate to notable local persons, but national figures were also commemorated in this way. When the great statesman Sir Robert Peel died in 1850, on the day of his funeral (9 July) the ringers of All Saints rang his age (62). The report in the *Hereford Times* on 13 July describes the custom, stating that it was local and by no means common, going on to say:

'The time occupied in ringing out the age of the great deceased was between six and seven hours in which 62 muffled and 62 clear peals were rung, between the peals the tenor striking successively, clear and muffled, from one to 62—the age which Sir Robert had attained. The total number of strokes on the bells was above 8,000.'

Evidently the bells were rung half-muffled. The report went on the list the ringers, stating that the tenor ringer was assisted at times by other ringers, and that 'the tenor bell was incessantly in motion.'

A week later a letter appeared in the *Hereford Times*, correcting the statement about the number of strokes on the bells, pointing out that the tenor bell struck a total of 7,812 times and the others 27,342 times, a total of 35,154, exclusive of raising and falling the bells. The ringing had started at about half-past four and concluded just after ten o'clock.

As indicated above, it was not only notable persons who were accorded this honour. On 20 December 1852 the funeral took place of Thomas Lee, who had died at the age of 82 and was interred in the burial ground of St. Peter's parish. As he had been a ringer for a great number of years the ringers of St. Peter's decided to pay their respects by having some muffled ringing of St. Peter's bells, and then to ring out his age at All Saints'. However, due to illness near the latter, the ringing there was stopped and Thomas Lee's age was rung out on the bells of St. Peter's. The



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report in the *Hereford Times* on 24 December lists the ringers and stated that this started about one o'clock in the afternoon and took until almost one o'clock next morning. This lengthy ringing provoked fury in the city, and a critical letter appeared below the report of the ringing. A petition was got up which was signed by most of the principal inhabitants of St. Peter's parish, and publicised in the *Hereford Journal* on 29 December, together with another critical letter, which claimed that the ringing went on for at least thirteen hours. The bells at St. Peter's still hang in the fittings which were used in 1852 which were antiquated even then, and so the length of ringing is something to be marvelled at.

Another ringer who received this honour was G. Stone, one of the All Saints' band of change ringers, whose age was rung out on 14 April 1863, taking two hours 17 minutes. A report in *Bell's Life in London* on 26 April listed the eight ringers who took part. George Stone was a (stone) mason, who had died on 10 April, and although the notice of his death that appeared in the *Hereford Journal* on 18 April does not give his age, it states that he died 'after a short illness, almost in the prime of life, and highly respected for his civil, quiet, and inoffensive conduct,...' It is not surprising that his age was rung out as a mark of respect.

Four days after the age of George Stone was rung out, a 'muffled peal' was rung in memory of Sir G. C. Lewis, late steward of the city and a notable M. P., but there is no indication that on this occasion his age was rung out. However, there is no doubt about the ringing to the memory of the politician Richard Cobden, whose age (62) was rung out at All Saints' on 7 April 1865. No time was stated in the report that appeared in the *Hereford Times* the following day, which went on to say:

'The expense of this mark of respect was defrayed by the subscription of friends and admirers of this distinguished statesman.'

## MADLEY

Madley is another place where a number of instances of ringing out the age have been recorded. The Very Rev. Dr. John Merewether, Dean of

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Hereford and rector of Madley, died at Madley but was buried in Hereford Cathedral on 9 April 1850. The report in the *Hereford Times* on 13 April 1850 stated that when the funeral procession returned to Madley the ringers commenced to ring out the age of the late Dean (53). This took three hours and 15 minutes 'and was completed at about nine o'clock; the tenor bell having revolved on its axis no less than 5,724 times, exclusive of rising and sinking.' It went on to list the ringers and their trades—a tailor, cabinet-maker, and three carpenters, the tenor being rung by two wheelwrights, alternately.

Rather less was the ringing on the occasion of the funeral of Joseph Bailey, M.P., which took place on 13 September 1850. The ringers of Madley rang out his age which, since he was only 38 years of age, took a much shorter time than the average for this type of ringing. The next day the *Hereford Times* reported:

'The ringers of this parish, wishful to pay the last tribute of respect to the memory of one whose loss is so deeply remembered and felt in this parish (without waiting for or soliciting any pecuniary reward for their labours), rang out the age of the deceased in a muffled peal on the musical and much admired peal of bells in the noble tower of that ancient and beautiful parish church; but on account of the deceased gentleman being only 38 years, the task was not a laborious one. The peal occupied one hour and 55 minutes, (exclusive of rising and sinking, which together occupied 35 minutes more,) during which time the tenor bell (taking double the number of pulls to either of the other bells) revolved on its axis 2,964 times.'

The report goes on to give the names of the ringers, a slightly different band to that which rang on the occasion of the funeral of Dr. Merewether.

The next reported occasion at Madley took place on 12 December 1851, when Charles Ballinger, Esq., a local landowner and resident of Madley, who had died at the age of 78 years, was buried at Goodrich. This ringing was reported in the following terms both in the *Hereford Journal* (17 December 1851) and *Hereford Times* (20 December 1851):

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'The task was rather laborious now, owing to the great age of the deceased, the peal having occupied 7 hours and 43 minutes, exclusive of rising and sinking, during which time the tenor bell, which is, including its machinery, full one ton weight, never ceased, having revolved on its axis no less than 12,324 times.'

Again the ringers were named, with their trades.

In 1864 the death of N. Lanwarne, agent for Mr. Lee Warner, a landowner in Madley parish, was reported in the *Hereford Times* (24 December 1864). On the afternoon of his funeral, which took place at Peterchurch, the Madley ringers met 'and "rang out" the age of the deceased in a muffled peal, which, on the beautiful peal of bells in the noble old tower, had a mournful effect.' In this case the time was not given nor were the names of the ringers recorded. Nicholas Lanwarne was aged 54 at the time of his death, which indicates that the tenor bell at Madley should have made 5940 blows.

### **EATON BISHOP**

A single report has been found of ringing out the age at this parish. On 11 March the burial took place at Eaton Bishop of Samuel Cox, Esq, M.D. After it took place what was reported in the *Hereford Times* of 15 March 1851 as the 'senior ringers' rang out the age of Dr. Cox.. The band was listed, and there were several others who also assisted, as the ringing was of an extended nature.

'The peal lasted six hours and five minutes, the 6th or tenor bell revolving on its axle 5710 times. Such a peal has not been heard in the parish before by the oldest inhabitant.'

There is some discrepancy here, as the notice of Dr. Cox's death which appeared a week before stated that he was 76. The number of revolutions quoted might have been an indication of the number of whole pulls, but even so was incorrect, as that would correctly have been 5852.

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### **KINGSTONE**

On 7 December 1855 Kingstone bells were used to ringing out the age of William Croome, Esq., of Cerney House, Gloucestershire. Whilst he was buried in a family vault at Cerney he had a connection in that he was a large landowner in Kingstone parish. He was of advanced years (74) and so, exclusive of raising and falling the bells, the ringing took seven hours and 24 minutes, the tenor striking 11,100 times. The report in the *Hereford Times* the next day stated:

‘A muffled peal ringing out the age of a deceased person being a great novelty at Kingstone, it was listened to with intense interest by the inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhood.’

The report also listed the ringers, and stated that they were occasionally assisted ‘by one or two amateur ringers.’

### **EARDISLAND**

A later report appeared in the *Hereford Journal* on 23 February 1867. After the death of the vicar of Eardisland he was buried at Tenbury Wells on 6 February. In such regard was he held after being incumbent at Eardisland for more than 50 years, the ringers of Eardisland decided ‘to pay the last tribute of regard to their late pastor by ringing out his age, seventy and eight years, the parishioners universally observing that he was a great and good man.’ A very similar report appeared in the *Hereford Times* on 2 March, which had the added information that the ringing occupied seven hours five minutes.

### **NEWENT**

Currently the only possibility of this custom taking place outside Herefordshire (but only just) comes in a report that appeared in the *Ross Gazette* of 12 December 1867. On 9 December one of the ringers, named Thomas Little, was buried, and he was much respected, the report stating:

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'This fact was testified on Monday last by the members of the Kilcot Club (to which he belonged), 12 of whom attended his funeral, as did also Mr. Isaac Gaze, Mr. Robert Merrett, and Mr. Thomas Hooper (veteran bell-ringers), and eight of the Newent ringers, out of respect to the deceased, he having been a ringer. As the funeral *cortège* wended its way to the cemetery, the church bells were tolled. In the evening the age of deceased (46) was rung out in muffled peals. This, we believe, is the first peal of the kind which has been rung on these bells.'

This suggests that the Herefordshire custom was being followed for the first time, but this is by no means certain. There was a connection between Newent and All Saints, Hereford, as in the late 1840s and early 1850s Thomas Bennett from Newent acted as instructor to the All Saint's ringers, and took part in the ringing for Sir Robert Peel, discussed above, so knowledge of the custom was quite possible.

### SELLACK

The latest report of the custom of ringing out the age that I have so far found is in the *Ross Gazette* of 17 October 1901. Thomas Probert, a noted ringer from Sellack, had died at the age of 75, and was buried there on 9 October. He was well known as a teacher of ringing, and in such regard was he held that four of the oldest ringers acted as bearers at the funeral, with others following. The report went on to say:

'Muffled peals were rung on the bells after the interment; and, desirous of showing their esteem for their old instructor, the ringers rang out his age, 75 years, on the bells at night. The time taken was six and three-quarter hours on a peal of five bells, and, although somewhat tired, all felt they could not do too much in honouring the memory of their good old instructor.'

Thomas Probert had visited many local towers during his long ringing career, and it may have been through him that the custom had been introduced into Sellack.

## CONCLUSION

The custom of ringing out the age was local to the Hereford area, and not very common at that. There are hints in the reports that some of the ringing was paid for by subscriptions, rather than from the parish funds, but in other cases the ringing was performed out of respect to departed merit. The latest report I have is from 1901, quoted above, and it is possible that other reports will yet be found. However, had such an unusual custom still been generally current when Bill Fussell was acting as instructor to the Hereford Diocesan Guild from the late 1880s onward, it seems likely that he would have recorded it in his diary, as he did with other stories of the past. He did not, and the assumption is that the custom was dying out, with a very late survival at Sellack.

Should anyone have come across this custom elsewhere, or have further examples of it taking place in the vicinity of Hereford, then I would be interested to hear. I should warn that the term is occasionally used elsewhere in a different sense. For example, the *Cheltenham Mercury* of 30 April 1881 reported some muffled ringing for the funeral of the Earl of Beaconsfield, which consisted of 'a mourning peal of 504 Stedman's trebles, and afterwards rang out the age. Ringing out the age is a system not generally understood. The execution is by ringing all the bells round, back stroke and hand stroke, then all the bells stand while the tenor strikes twice—counting the two strokes for one year.' This is clearly what is more usually referred to as the 'whole pull and stand' and not the Herefordshire version.

Finally, I must acknowledge my debt to the work of Thomas North, which forms the basis of the introduction to this Essay. Because of the local nature of the custom discussed above, it is not surprising that it was not recorded by him, being well outside his area of research, and shows that other local customs may yet be found.

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