



York Minster, where peals of 11,036 Grandsire Caters and 5,332 Oxford Treble Bob Ten In were reportedly rung in February 1777 by 'The British Youths or The True Blues'

HITORICAL HOAXES

As well as listing all known peals rung at a tower, the Felstead database has a section for invalid peals for each tower. These may be invalid for various reasons, such as being false, actually rung at another tower or even a hoax. It might be assumed that the latter category is a fairly modern phenomenon, but many hoaxes have been recorded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hoaxes relate not only to peals but to ringers, as well as to false challenges, and will generally have been perpetrated with a malicious intent, although at this distance in time it is not usually possible to determine why. In this essay I will discuss some interesting hoaxes, including several remarkable series of hoaxes perpetrated in the nineteenth century.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

On 21 November 1733 *The Daily Post-Boy* reported that the College Youths had rung a peal of 7000 odd changes at St Michael's, Cornhill and that the next week they intended to go for a peal of 10,000 changes, a report that was repeated in other London papers. However, this was not recorded in the College Youths' peal book, and while this is not definitive (there were several peals rung by the College Youths later in the century that were not recorded in this way) circumstantially this was probably a hoax.

Another hoax peal of 5040 'Bob Major Quadruples' was said to have been rung at St. Chad's Church, Stafford, on 20 October 1768, reported in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* on 31 October 1768. The trouble is, there was never a ring of eight bells at this church, so this must have been a hoax.

A much more audacious hoax related to the heavy ring of bells in York Minster. On 15 March 1777 a report in the *Leicester & Nottingham Journal* claimed that a peal of 11,036 Grandsire Caters had been rung at York Minster on 25 February by a body called themselves the 'British Youths or The True Blues'. The report went on to state that the same society had rung a peal of 5,332 Oxford Treble Bobs Ten In (Royal) on the same bells a week previously, and that the

bobs had been composed by W. D. Crofts of Nottingham. The day after publication of this report the printer of the paper received a letter from W. Doubleday Crofts, saying that no composition of the kind had been sent to any place whatsoever, except to Leicester, Oxford and Shrewsbury, and that Caters could not be brought round in 11,036 changes, neither could Treble Bob Ten in be brought round in 5,332 changes. Moreover, Crofts had written to York who subsequently sent the resulting letter to the printer, and the ringers there had said that no peals had been rung at York. The report had been published because a person had left a paragraph at the printing office, saying that it would oblige several friends if it were published. Evidently the printer made enquiries, and went on to say 'we have since learnt that the Author of this falsehood is resident in Leicester, and a Person who was very near the end of the Tenor bell rope of St. Margarets in this Town, during the late performance at that church.' This is apparently enough to identify the person who submitted the hoax. However, the matter is not clear cut. The peal referred to was one of 10,080 Grandsire Caters rung at St. Margaret's, Leicester, on 25 February 1777, and the details of the band given by Morris in *History and Art...* (p.253) list James Slack and Richard Wright as the ringers of the tenor in the peal. So far so good, but the details of the band that rang the long peal which were given in the *Norfolk Chronicle* on 8 March 1777, while agreeing on the names of the ringers of the front nine bells, record that the tenor was rung by Samuel Nichols and Richard Wright. Unless more information comes to light, the name of the culprit remains uncertain, there being three possibilities.

Hoaxes and the Cumberland Youths

For most, if not all, hoaxes there must have been some hidden agenda, which is normally impossible to identify with any certainty, but sometimes there is a hint. So, for instance, a report in the *Morning Chronicle* of 3 December 1778 stated that the Cumberland Youths had rung a peal of 5337 'Cumberlands Royal Bob Set Changes' at Walthamstow on 30 November 1778. This phraseology is rather derogatory to the Cumberland Youths, and a simple check with the

peal book shows that that band did not record any peals between 9 Nov. 1778 (6160 Plain Bob Major at Horsham) and 29 Dec. 1778 (6608 Plain Bob Major at Croydon). This, with the name of the method said to have been rung, is enough to prove the hoax.

Members of the Cumberland Youths were also targeted. So, for instance, on 5 February 1791 the *London Chronicle* reported that 'Mr. George Gross, the celebrated composer of church-bell music, and many years beadle of the Society of Cumberland Youths' had been buried on the previous Tuesday (1 February 1791) at Bethnal Green. The report went on to say:

'Mr. Gross was the person who composed the whole peal of Stedman's triples, 5040 changes (till then deemed impracticable); for the discovery of which, the citizens of Norwich had advertised a premium of fifty pounds, which was paid to him about three years since, by the Society of St. Peter's, Mancroft, with the highest encomiums on his superlative merit.'

This was nonsense, of course, and no trace of such a prize has been traced: George Gross sen. did not die until 1803.

A very similar report to that in the *London Chronicle*, including the story of the premium of £50, appeared in the *Sporting Magazine* for July 1796, but in that case the deceased was stated to be 'Mr. — —Patrick.'

George Gross featured in another report that appeared in the *Morning Post* on 28 October 1799, which claimed that the Cumberland Youths had rung a peal of 10,368 Oxford Treble Bob on the bells at St. Giles, Camberwell, 'the critical part of which was the ingenious invention of Mr. G. G.—, beadle to the society.' The report went on to say that members of the different ringing societies in London went down to hear the performance, and made 'a handsome collection to encourage the ingenious, labourer,...' which raised £6 4s. 8½d.' It extolled the virtues of George Gross:

'This composition proves to the ringing world, that Mr. G. G.—'s predecessors, Reeves and Blackemore [*sic*], were mere novices.'

This is a reference to Jones, Reeves, and Blakemore, authors of the 1788 *Clavis Campanalogia*. It is also a very early example of the use of

a term that is familiar to the readers of a certain journal, and which came into more general use from the middle of the nineteenth century!

Rather less subtle was a hoax that was published in the *Morning Post* on 14 July 1801, repeated in the *Sporting Magazine* for August 1801:

‘Last week the inhabitants of Spitalfields were most delightfully entertained with a peal on their musical bells, by the Shoreditch Society of Cumberland Youths, called Tomb-stone Surprise; containing four Tittum, four Tyburn, and six Queen’s changes, with a variety of others equally musical, amounting to 8,119, performed in six hours twenty-seven minutes, and brought round at hand, being the longest and most critically just peal ever rang on those bells. It was the production of Mr. GROSS, the celebrated composer of bell music.’

Another hoax relating to Spitalfields was reported in the *Public Ledger* on 2 November 1824 which, although not mentioning the Cumberland Youths, was probably aimed at them.

‘THE VETERAN BENNETT.—On Friday last was rung Spitalfields Church, by eight men, whose united ages amounted to 563 years, a fine peal of Cambridge Treble Bob Majors, comprising 8,088 changes. It was conducted by the veteran Bennett, the Lincoln coachman; who, although in the 70th year of his age, is as active as most men at 50. Bennett has driven a coach constantly on the Lincoln-road upwards of 38 years, in which it is compu[t]ed that he has gone over 950,000 miles being six times the circumference of the globe; and it may also be considered a circumstance worthy of record, that on the morning of the above-mentioned surprising feat, the united ages of the six horses which brought his coach into London amounted to 83 years.’

In the interim there were specific hoaxes. A report in the *Morning Post* of 13 August 1803 claimed that the Cumberland Youths had opened a new ring of ten bells at St. Paul’s, Shadwell, by ringing 6,003 ‘Stedman Cators, reverse. Composed by Mr. Purser, beadle to

the society, successor to the late Mr. Gross. At the time there was a ring of six bells at Shadwell, so this cannot be true, but it clearly shows that the perpetrator had detailed knowledge of the Cumberland Youths. This detailed knowledge was again demonstrated when a report appeared on 12 October 1804 in the *Kentish Gazette*, repeated in several other papers, that the Cumberland Youths had been invited to open a new ring of bells at Dagenham, when they rang 7008 'Oxford treble bobs royal'. It was reported that in the evening, when further ringing was taking place, that Malachi Channon, the master of the society, got tangled in the rope and, falling on his head, was killed on the spot. All very circumstantial, but not correct, as Thomas Mears had cast a ring of six bells for the rebuilt church, and Malachi Channon was alive after this date.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Inevitably, as the number of newspapers increased in the nineteenth century, so did reports of peals and other ringing events, including what can only be hoaxes. Thus, for instance, the following report appeared in the *Public Ledger* on Wednesday 7 September 1808.

'On Saturday the Society of Devonshire Scholars rung, at the Cathedral Church, Exeter, with ten men only, a compleat peal of 6100 changes of that intricate method called Royal Court Bob, Ten-in, in four hours and 26 minutes. The manly powers of strength and skill, manifested by the performers, justly stamp the performance with the ne plus ultra of the ringing art.'

Quite some hoax! Curiously enough, the time claimed for this hoax is exactly that taken when Peter Border turned in the tenor single-handed to a peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus on 8 May 1965, the first single-handed peal on the twelve, but that was of a normal length.

Although we normally use the term 'jubilee' to mean an exact period of time, in former times it was used in a rather different sense, as a jubilee year. So, for instance, on 25 October 1809 began the golden jubilee year of George III's accession to the throne. Under a suitable heading the *Kentish Gazette* of 24 October 1809 reported that the societies of ringers of a long list of 62 places would each ring

a peal of 5040 changes, while the Liverpool College Youths would ring a peal of 5088 Oxford Treble Bob Major. A full listing is given on p.64 in *Order & Disorder 1800-1839*, where I describe it as a hoax. This is true in the sense that no-one would know all this in detail, but it can also be considered as an informed speculation, based on the personal knowledge of the originator of the text. At this period the person who is the most likely to have been involved is J. A. Parnell, the 'Gothic Traveller'.

Occasionally reports include information which is either a mistake, or, more usually, an indication that the report was not to be relied on. On 4 December 1812 the *Liverpool Mercury* reported that a peal of a peal of 6603 (yes!) Bob Major had been rung at Mottram in Longdendale on some unspecified day. The terminology was not correct, and the clincher is that the time taken was stated to have been 2 hours 37 minutes. There is a similar problem with a peal of 'Triple-Bob Major, all-in', said to have been rung at All Saints', Worcester on 29 December 1816. This is known only from a report in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* of 2 January 1817, where 12,500 changes were reported to have been rung in four hours.



Mottram in Longdendale

Daniel Jewson

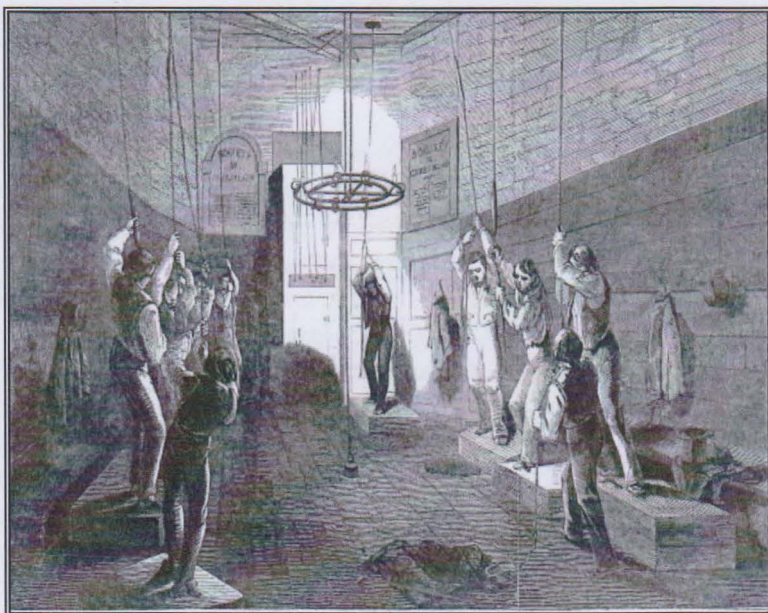
One of the most remarkable series of hoaxes were published in the first half of the nineteenth century, all of which involve the name of Daniel Jewson. The first indirect reference to this character occurs in the *Weekly Dispatch* of 30 April 1837. It would appear that a peal report had been submitted to that paper, which, while I cannot trace this report, provoked the following response in the column addressed to correspondents.

May we be permitted to ask "the celebrated Mr. Daniel Jewson," and the rest of the worthies calling themselves "College Youths." what grievous offence had the inhabitants of the parish of St. Magnus, Thames-street, committed, that they were subjected. on Tuesday last, to the jangling nuisance of "a true peal of Caters," that lasted three hours and a half, to the annoyance of the healthy and the torture of the sick?

Later in the same year the following appeared in the *Public Ledger* on 26 October, where it was reported that the Junior Society of College Youths had rung 'a true and complete peal of triples, on Stedman's principle, containing 35,000 changes, which was composed and called by the celebrated Mr. Daniel Jewson.' Even more remarkably, this was said to have taken place on the bells of St. Saviour's, Southwark. Needless to say, this was a hoax, and there is no record of any Daniel Jewson in any verifiable ringing performance. Here it worth pointing out that the Junior Society of College Youths of the 1820s merged with the senior society in 1830, a union which was dissolved two years later, the former members of the Junior Society establishing themselves as the Sussex Society, a name that soon reverted to that of the Junior Society of College Youths.

Four days later (30 October) a long report appeared in the *Standard and Globe*, copied in several papers, which claimed that on the intended visit of her Majesty to the city on the Lord Mayor's day, the Society of College Youths, the Junior Society of College Youths, and the Society of Cumberland Youths, had each agreed to ring a peal of caters on Stedman's principle. The College Youths would ring theirs at St. Bride's, Fleet Street, conducted by Mr. W. Dunn, the Junior

Society would ring at St. Magnus, by London-bridge, conducted by Daniel Jewson the secretary, which the Cumberland Youths would attempt theirs at St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, to be conducted by Mr. Zachariah Frost.'



Ringers at Bow in the mid nineteenth century. Image from The Illustrated London News, courtesy of Chris Ridley

The report concluded that 'Bets to a considerable amount are pending between the three societies, and six to one are offered by the connoisseurs in favour of the Junior Society.' Needless to say, nothing further is heard of these putative performances, but Jewson's and Frost's names surface again in connection with the opening of a new ring of bells at Westerham, Kent, which had been cast by Thomas Mears II, were opened on 21 and 22 November 1837, and on 6 December 1837 a peal of Grandsire Triples was rung on the new bells by the Lewisham Youths, reported in the *Maidstone Journal* on 12

December 1837. This was followed up by a report that appeared in the *Times* on 30 December 1837, quoted in full below:

‘EXTRAORDINARY FEAT OF CHANGE RINGING.—(From a Correspondent.)—A new set of eight bells having recently been placed in the steeple of the parish church of Westerham, Kent, upon which no performance of any consequence had been achieved, the Junior Society of College Youths (accompanied by their secretary, Mr. Daniel Jewson, and Mr. Zacharia Frost, of the Cumberland Society, who is considered by amateurs of the art to be the most competent man in England to ring a tenor bell), hired a van and four horses, and on Tuesday last, the 26th inst., took a run down there, and performed on the bells a true and complete peal of Oxford treble-bob-major, containing 14,120 changes, being the greatest number ever accomplished in that method. The peal was composed and called by Mr. Daniel Jewson, and the tenor bell was rung by Mr. Zacharia Frost, with his usual ability.’

These names also appear in a long article that appeared in both the *Standard* and *Times* on 26 June 1838, where it was announced that peals would be rung at various places on 28 June 1838 the day of Queen Victoria’s coronation, and the similarity to the report quoted *in extenso* above suggests that this came from the same hand. Among others, it was reported that the College Youths would ring a peal of 7152 Stedman Cinques at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, to ‘be conducted by the celebrated William Dunn,’ while the Junior Society of College Youths would ring 8000 Oxford Treble Bob Maximus at St. Saviour’s, Southwark, which would be conducted by ‘their active and intelligent secretary, Mr. John Orton.’ Among other attempts, it was stated that Mr. Zachariah Frost would ring the 53cwt tenor at Bow to 1620 Stedman Caters, while Daniel Jewson would ring 5040 Bob Major at All Hallows, Barking-by-the-Tower. This long report was fairly widely copied, and by the time it was copied into *Jackson’s Oxford Journal* and *Oxford City and County Chronicle*, both on 7 July 1838 the tense had been changed so that it appeared that these attempts had been successful. A full transcript can be found on p. 166 of *Order and Disorder 1830-1839*.

The following year there were two reports involving the name of Daniel Jewson, the first of which appeared in the *Weekly Dispatch* on 4 August:

'CHANGE RINGING.—Tuesday being the anniversary of the Tower Regatta, the Junior College Youths' Society, rang at Barking Church, Tower-street, a peal of 5,015 bob-major changes, which was conducted by Daniel Jewson, in three hours and five minutes.'

A second reference appeared in the *Morning Advertiser* of 19 October 1839, which reported:

'On Tuesday, the 15th instant, the Junior College Youths' Society resumed their ringing of the twelve bells of St. Saviour's Church, Southwark (which on account of the works going on there for some time past had been suspended), and achieved upon them four courses of double Stedman major changes, which was conducted by Daniel Jewson, being his eighth performance this year.'

One final report concerning Jewson appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* on 29 July 1841:

'NOVEL FEAT OF CHANGE RINGING.—On Tuesday, the 27th instant (being the anniversary of the Tower regatta), was rang at the church of Allhallows Barking, by the Junior Society of Cumberland Youths, a true and complete peal of 7,120 changes of bob-majors, being the greatest performances on the bells for the last forty years, which was completed, under the judicious arrangement of Mr. Daniel Jewson, in the unprecedented short time of four hours and five minutes.'

What are we to make of all this? First it needs to be said that, apart from the primary reports which had been copied, no other reports have been found of these peals that are claimed to have been rung, which is most unusual, as reports were often copied from newspaper to newspaper. All these references would appear to be connected, and there is some basis of truth in some of the names at least, but the whole context is such that nothing can be relied on. There was indeed a College Youth called William Dunn, of Bloomsbury, who joined in 1810 and was master in 1827, but there is

nothing to suggest that he was of quite such ringing celebrity as stated. In fact he is much better known as a maker of handbells, and his work as such is discussed by Bill Butler in *Musical Handbells* (pp.68-70). John Orton was indeed secretary of the Sussex Society when it was reconstituted in 1832. There are, however, other names mentioned on which doubts can be cast, although space does not allow for an analysis here, but we need to look at Zachariah Frost and Daniel Jewson in detail, whose names run through this series of reports. There was an Augustus George Frost, of Limehouse, whose name was entered into the Cumberland Youths' name book on 29 May 1827, who was master in 1836. Close, but not close enough! Daniel Jewson's name does not occur as either a College Youth or a Cumberland Youth, or indeed as a member of any other company. While there was a person of that name at the relevant period, there is nothing to suggest he was a ringer. His name occurs as a coal merchant in a trade directory of 1825/6, with premises in Beer Lane, Lower Thames Street, and in another of 1826/7 he was recorded as a lighterman at Cox's Quay, Lower Thames Street. On 26 January 1837 Daniel Jewson, jun. placed an advert in the *Morning Advertiser*, warning a tenant who had rented an apartment at 12 Beer Lane, Lower Thames Street, that unless he removed various goods that had been left for arrears of rent, these would be sold to defray the rent. The last record I have is that a Dan Jewson was a fruiterer and grocer at 12 Beer Lane in 1843. These seem to relate to the same person, or the same family at least, and there must be a background story here, all trace of which has been lost.

Also, by the time that the final report appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* on 29 July 1841 the Junior Society of Cumberland Youths was long defunct.

Responses to hoaxes

Except in the case of challenges, for the majority of hoaxes there is no subsequent response. I have, however, mentioned above one in respect of William Doubleday Crofts, and there were a few others. On 18 August 1844 *Bell's Life in London* (henceforth *Bell's Life*)

reported that the Junior Society of Stepney Youths has rung a peal of 'grandsire caters, upon Stedman's principle'. A week later a correspondent 'a Cumberland' stated that no peal had been rung, that there was no such method, and that there was no such company of ringers. Actually, around this period that particular phraseology was used a few times, and for those that can be cross-checked it generally refers to Grandsire.

In the middle of the nineteenth century *Bell's Life* was the most widely used medium by which other ringers could be contacted, for publicity purposes as well as to cause mischief. On 6 September 1846 a challenge appeared, stating that the ringers of Almondbury, near Huddersfield, would ring any other six-bell band 5,040 for the considerable sum of either £25 or £50. A week later it was stated that the Almondbury ringers denied having any knowledge of the challenge.

On 12 February 1848 the *Leeds Intelligencer* carried a very long report of a peal of Grandsire Triples, said to have been rung for the eleventh anniversary of the ring of bells at Rothwell, and a dinner that followed. A week later an editorial recorded that one of those named in the report had been in touch since and 'informs us that no such meeting took place. He says the whole of the paragraph alluded to is a base fabrication, and that the writer is deserving of great censure.'

A similar rebuttal followed a hoax peal at Yatton in 1848. On 23 September 1848 the *Bristol Mercury* printed a report of a peal of Grandsire Triples, said to have been rung there on 18 September 1848. The report stated that this was a 'return match between the societies of ringers of Bristol' and that the band, whose names are identifiable as Bristol ringers of the period (including Wm. Plummer, whose name featured in Essay No. 24), were members of the Bristol Youths. The peal was said to have been composed and conducted by Thomas Salter, who had a letter published in the *Bristol Mercury* a week later, in which he denied that it ever happened, saying that it was 'a most gross and impudent fabrication', and moreover that at the time he was more than sixty miles away, and had never ever been to Yatton.



St Bride's, Fleet Street, scene of one of the three hoax peals reportedly rung for the visit of Queen Victoria in 1837

An epidemic of hoaxes

A spate of hoaxes began late in 1851, all of which were convincingly written, but are easily identified from the fact that they were said to have been rung at fictional places. The first two appeared in the *Morning Advertiser* of 27 December 1851, which carried reports of three peals, in a section headed 'CHANGE RINGING.' The first was rung at Clerkenwell by the Cumberland Youths, which can be verified from the relevant peal book, but there were also reports of a peal of Real Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus, said to have been rung at Westford, Sussex, as well as a peal of Grandsire Triples at St Barnabas in the Fields, both of which places are fictional. That at Westgate was reported to have been rung by nine members of the Sussex Youths, with two gentlemen from Yorkshire and a visitor from London, and the tenor was stated to weigh 29cwt. While the names of the band were given, none are recognisable. Less detail was given in the second, and the names of the band were not given

Through 1852 and into 1853 another series of hoaxes was published in *Bell's Life*, not related to the above, but perhaps inspired by them. Remarkably, no one wrote in to query any of these peals, which, to us, are obvious hoaxes. However, at this period in most weeks *Bell's Life* carried several reports of ringing and these were included with the rest. They were well written, with accurate terminology, and do not stand out from the rest: often plausible supporting details were given. One feature is the wide geographical range of the alleged venues of peals, the first in the series being claimed to be a peal of 10,080 Kent Treble Bob Royal at St. Mary's, Haygate, Sussex, rung on 2 January 1852 by the Haygate Society on a 19cwt ring of ten bells, and the second a peal of 'Stedman's' Cinques, said to have been rung by the Wiltshire Youths on a 49cwt. ring of twelve bells at Leyton Undershaft, Wilts., on an unspecified date in January 1852. Other towers mentioned in the series were St. Mary's, Stratford (37cwt. ring of ten), St. Mary Abbots, Rainham (20cwt. ring of eight), Stamford Rivers (13cwt. ring of eight), the parish Church, Edmondane (29cwt. ring of ten), Christ Church, Edmondane (16cwt. ring of eight), and Christ Church, Eastham (32cwt ring of ten). The

names are all unremarkable, with resonances of other towers, but often the weights of the bells are not! All bar one of the eleven peals in this series of hoaxes were said to have been rung on tower bells, the exception being a peal of Grandsire Cinques which was reported in *Bell's Life* of 19 December 1852 as being rung in a local pub by the ringers of Christ Church, Edmondane, on 15 December 1852. The next, and final, report in this series of hoaxes, was of a peal of 5,020 Grandsire Royal, claimed to have been rung at Christ Church, Eastham, on 5 April 1853, and reported in *Bell's Life* on 10 April 1853. There was therefore something of a gap since the report in December 1852 but this does seem to be related to the previous hoaxes in the series.

Falsehood at Kidderminster – and a ‘peal’ at Ellington

Hoaxes then seem to have gone out of fashion, and I have nothing further until a letter appeared in the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* on 8 February 1864. This referred to a letter that was claimed to have been published in the edition of 26 January, which mentioned some ringers who were dismissed because they refused to ring on 10 March previously for the Prince of Wales's wedding, the reason being that the payment was not enough. This was followed by a list of the new ringers for 1864. This provoked a furious response from the Kidderminster correspondent of *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, a long response appearing in the issue of 13 February 1864. From the headings we learn that this earlier letter was directed at the ringers of Kidderminster, and that it was said to be

‘in the first place a tissue of falsehoods, and the second a disgraceful hoax, concocted too by a section of the dismissed men at a beershop. No letter appeared in the *Gazette* on January 26th. A notice of their dismissal and the cause, viz., their conduct on the 10th of March, aggravated by an attempt at overcharging, together with their general behaviour was alleged as the cause, and this information was obtained from excellent authority. It was not stated that they were discharged on the 10th of March, although their conduct, and

we witnessed it, was very disgraceful to Mr. Dixon and the Rev. C. J. Motteram.'

The letter went on to detail the ringers' misbehaviour, and alleged that the list of new ringers for 1864 'is an impudent fabrication. The names have been selected to cast ridicule upon the new movement, and begin with Powell, the town-crier, and end with Mr. Kench, the landlord of the Shakspeare [*sic*] Inn.' It went on to give what was said to be the correct list of ringers, stating that they would be placed under the tuition of a professional ringer from Oxford, and that a code of rules had been drawn up for their guidance. I have nothing further on this controversy.

Later in the same year another hoax appeared in *Bell's Life*. In the issue of 26 March there was published a report of a peal of 5,003 Grandsire Caters, said to have been rung on the 24cwt ring of ten bells at 'Ellington' by the society of change ringers of that place. At face value the report was completely plausible, giving details of the composition that was said to have been rung, but the place is fictional, and none of the ringers named can be identified as taking part in any other real performance.

A connected series of hoaxes

The next series of hoaxes also began in the pages of *Bell's Life*, where the following report was published on 8 January 1870:

'SEWARDSTONE, ESSEX.—On New Year's Day the following members of The North of Middlesex Change Ringers, with the kind assistance of Mr T. Lowman (member of the London Cumberland Society) met at Mr John Holt's, the Old Bell Ringer Inn, Sewardstone, Essex, to open a new peal of bells, when they rang in excellent style a true and complete touch of cinques, on the grandsire principle, consisting of 1870 changes, in the short space of 1h 18min. The ringers were stationed as follows:—J. Holt, sen, treble and 2, T. Lowman 3 and 4, S. Green 5 and 6, G. Furber 7 and 8, G. Holt 9 and 10, J. Holt, jun, 11 and tenor. The above touch was truly composed

and excellently conducted by Mr T. Lowman, being the first time it was ever completed on hand bells.'

All very circumstantial, but highly suspicious! I cannot find a person of the name of John Holt living in Sewardstone at the time of the 1871 census. The trade directory closest in date which is available to me is the Post Office directory of 1874, which records three beer retailers and two pubs in the hamlet of Sewardstone, but the name of John Holt does not occur, nor did either of the pubs bear the name quoted above. And as for Thomas Lowman, his name does not appear in the *Cumberlands'* name book either, so we can be confident that this is a fabrication.

This hoax was followed up by another more extensive hoax, or rather hoaxes, published in the *Clerkenwell News* on 16 April 1870. Three handbell 'peals' were listed in a column headed 'CHANGE RINGING.' The first of these was of Grandsire Triples, said to have been rung at the Norfolk Arms, Chigwell, on 14 March 1870, and the names of the band were four of those that took part in the date-touch at Sewardstone. The report concluded:

'The peal, which is in ten parts, was composed and excellently conducted by Mr. John Holt, sen.'

Evidently a wind up! However, there was yet more, as below this was a report of a handbell peal also said to have been rung at Chigwell, by invitation of Mr. Griffiths, the landlord. This was alleged to have been 6,144 'union grandsire massers', whatever that meant—it could not have been Grandsire Caters as there were only four ringers who took part, including John Holt, sen, and Thomas Lowman.

There is no doubt about what was said to have been rung in the third report in this batch of handbell peals, because this was stated to have been 5,058 Grandsire Caters, rung at the house of Mr. Walter Hale, Epping, by essentially the same band, and the report stated that it was 'Called and excellently conducted by Mr. John Holt, sen.'

The Society of Forest Youths

Just over a couple of years later a remarkable series of connected reports began to be published in *Bell's Life*, the first of these in the issue of 15 June 1872, and the ninth and last on 25 January 1873. These hoaxes refer to ten peals, the discrepancy being that a report in *Bell's Life* of a peal of Grandsire Triples, said to have been rung at King's Towerton by the Society of Forest Youths on 19 Nov. 1873, went on to say:

'The first peal of 5,040 on Thoydon Ham bells was rung on April 30 last by this society. Holt's original on the back eight: the time was 3h 19min 10sec.'

These hoaxes are based on the achievements of the Society of Forest Youths, said to have been established in 1864, and the Junior Society, established 1869, which took place at Thoydon, St. Cuthbert's-next-Thoydon, Minsbury and King's Towerton, with what appear to be offshoots. Thoydon Ham was claimed to have a 24cwt. ring of ten bells, St. Cuthbert's-next-Thoydon a ring of eight bells with a tenor a few pounds short of 34cwt., Minsbury a 16cwt. ring of eight, and King's Towerton a 20cwt. ring of eight. In the various reports there is no indication of the location of these towers, except that when a peal of Treble Bob Major was reported as being rung at All Saints', Thoydon Ham, on 1 January 1873 it was claimed as 'the first peal in the method on eight bells ever completed in the western counties.' It seems most likely that all these hoaxes were perpetrated by the same person, but there is nothing to suggest who that might have been.

Yet another series of hoaxes

After the final hoax in the above series, things went quiet until 13 September 1873, when a peal of 5,056 Kent Treble Bob Major was reported in *Bell's Life* to have been rung a week before on a 14½cwt. ring of eight bells at St. Martin's, Tongham, by the Botley Abbots Society. Other reports in the series refer to the Botley Youths (established 1867), and the Tongham and Botley Change Ringing Society, as well as the ringers of St. George's Kingshithe and the Livingston Youths. Peals were reported to have been rung at St.

Martin's, Tongham (14½cwt tenor), St. Margaret's, Tongham (14cwt tenor), St. Paul's, Botley (18cwt. tenor), St. Mary's, Botley Abbots (28cwt. tenor) St Nicholas's, Portshithe (tenor 1ton 19lb.), Shorewell (16½cwt. tenor), and St. George's, Kingshithe (34cwt. tenor). There is something of a problem with continuity in this series of hoaxes, and St. Paul's, Botley Green, and St. Paul's, Botley Cross, may well have been the same as St. Paul's, Botley, particularly as they were reported to have had rings of bells of the same weight. There is the similar discrepancy with regard to the two churches at Tongham, and the hoaxes were not consistent about St. Martin's, Tongham: two earlier peals were reported as having been rung there on a 14½ cwt. ring of bells (5,056 Kent Treble Bob Major at 'St. Martin's' on 6 September 1873 and Grandsire Triples on 19 October 1873 at 'St. Martin's, Tongham') while the report of a date touch of Grandsire Royal said to have been rung at St. Martin's, Tongham, on 31 December 1874, stated that the ring had a tenor of 24cwt. This problem of consistency was no doubt caused by the long period over which the 15 reports in the series appeared, the last one not appearing until 20 February 1875, which was a report of 1,260 Bob Royal, rung half-muffled at St. Mary, Botley Abbots, by the Botley Youths, on 15 February 1875.

Tailpiece

There was a respite of a year before the next hoaxes appeared in *Bell's Life*. On 19 February 1876 it reported two performances by the ringers of Plaistow, one being 5,040 [sic] Union Treble Bob Major rung on 15 February 1876, and another of Grandsire Triples rung on 11 February 1876. Although the location is not stated, it was inferred that the performance took place at Plaistow, and therein lies the problem, for I cannot find a record of a ring of bells in this area. As far as I can trace, no more hoaxes were published in *Bell's Life* which continued to report ringing performances until 1883, although in a diminished way.

CONCLUSION

This is convenient place at which to bring our study of historical hoaxes to an end. I have no later hoaxes that were published in *Bell's Life*, which, in the 1870s, was declining as a means of publicizing change-ringing performances. In 1874 42 issues carried relevant reports, declining to 32 in the following year, while in 1880 19 issues carried reports. However, that does not tell the full story, as many of those issues carried just a single report, rather than several which had been the norm. In 1881 six issues carried reports, 1882 five, and 1883 one issue carried the final report. The reason is not hard to find, as the establishment of the church weekly *Church Bells* in Advent 1870 gave an alternative means of publication, more in keeping with the changing attitudes of the period. That, and the establishment of *Bell News* in 1881, finally made *Bell's Life* redundant in this respect.

In this Essay I have tried to give an overview of hoaxes that have been perpetrated over a very long period, but because of the wealth of material I have not been able to use it all. The climax, of course, is the large number of hoaxes which appeared in *Bell's Life*, while publication in other newspapers declined, emphasizing the important place that *Bell's Life* played in the communication of performances to a wider audience than local newspapers. With the demise of *Bell's Life*, hoaxes did not die out, with occasional hoaxes appearing *Bell News* and the *Ringling World*, but I leave those to someone else to follow up!

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