

Prolific Peal Ringers

11: JAMES EDWARD DAVIS (1867-1944)



Born in Bermondsey on May 1, 1867, James Davis learned to handle a bell at St George, Camberwell. He moved shortly afterwards and transferred to the band at St John, Deptford. His first peal was one of Grandsire Triples, rung at Deptford on April 19, 1891, and his first as conductor was when he called Holt's Original at Putney on January 5, 1893.

At that time most of the ringers in the south of London towers belonged to the Waterloo Society, and James Davis became first the secretary to the society and later Master. He built up the practices at St John, Waterloo Road to a high standard and, although the Waterloo Society faded away, he remained the unofficial leader of a very active band of peal ringers up to the outbreak of the 1939-45 War. A large number of methods was rung including Double Norwich – which was his speciality – Forward, Duffield and the standard Surprise Major methods. James called many of these and Frank Bennett called many of the remainder.

The peal ringing at St John's was only part of his band's activities. They visited many towers, not only in the Metropolitan area, but also in Kent. Concurrently with all this peal ringing he was steeple-keeper at St Margaret, Westminster and, after the First World War he was put in charge at St Botolph's, Bishopgate, which he made into one of the leading centres of ringing in the country.

To be able to ring the bells at St Botolph for the amount of peal ringing he wanted, he invented a type of silencer consisting of leather pads to cover the clapper, but with metal plates over the leather to do away with the distinctive muffled sound.

He had two spells when he served in the armed forces. In the South African War he served with the 2nd East Surrey Regiment for nearly two years, receiving Queen Victoria's and King Edward's medals. In the Great War he spent five

and a half years as a Quarter-Master-Sergeant in the Royal Engineers. He also held King George V's Coronation Medal, as he was one of those who rang the almost unringable bells at Westminster Abbey.

He had rung 400 peals by 1911 and moved up to his 500th by the end of 1913. The second 500 took him fifteen years as five and a half years were spent in the army. His 1000th peal was a peal of four-spliced Surprise Major at St Botolph, Bishopgate, on November 27, 1933, conducted by Charles W Roberts. Amongst his noteworthy peals were Holt's Original non-conducted; 10,400 Cambridge Surprise Royal and 7,392 Cambridge Maximus at St-Mary-le-Bow. His last peal was on December 26, 1939. He rang 1,131 peals of which he conducted 264, ringing them in 216 towers.

He died on Christmas Day, 1944 aged 78, and was buried in Streatham Park Cemetery. Amongst the mourners were his wife, a daughter, Emily, and two sons, Victor and Cecil.

References

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