

Prolific Peal Ringers

34: CYRIL KENNETH LEWIS (1913-2002)



Ken Lewis was born at Brabyns Hall Estate, near Marple Bridge on August 23, 1913, the eldest of the three sons of Thomas and Mary Lewis. Ken, the star of the village school refused to sit the entrance exam for the Grammar School although he demonstrated he could pass it! However, he was lucky to survive a very serious bout of pneumonia when he was thirteen and never attended school again.

At fifteen he got a job working in the office of the Vice Consul of Uruguay. Hard work, combined with night school made Ken proficient in accounting and commercial subjects and he rose rapidly through the office staff. He also studied Spanish and became proficient in both the spoken and written word. This made him valuable in his job, which changed to the control of exports to Uruguay and the Argentine, particularly of fabrics and cloth.

About 1932 Ken moved with his parents to Marple village where he learned to ring at All Saints, Marple, taught by Arthur Whiting. Norbury, not too far away, had a strong influence on his development and Ken soon was immersed in multi-Minor ringing.

However, his peal-ringing career only staggered into existence after thirteen unsuccessful peal attempts! Success came with one of three Minor methods at Knutsford on May 5, 1934, conducted by Sidney Hough. His first peal as conductor was in nine Minor methods and was on November 6, 1935.

He now began to progress rapidly as a peal ringer and also in his conducting abilities. He and John Worth of Macclesfield became good friends and in the latter years of the 1930s when the Lincolnshire and the Cheshire bands were competing to see who could ring the most Minor methods to a peal, the Cheshire band concentrated on treble-dodging methods whilst the Lincolnshire band included Plain and Alliance methods. John Worth called most of the Cheshire peals but when they rang the last peal in the series, one in 73

methods, as they were going up the stairs he told Ken to call it, as he knew the composition so well!

On joining the forces in 1940 Ken was stationed at Preston until June 1942 when he was sent to Meerut in India for three years. In the two years he was at Preston he met Cyril Crossthwaite and they rang handbell peals in up to thirteen Minor methods. After demobilisation he took advantage of the Government's Emergency Training Scheme for Teachers and, taking mathematics as his special subject, spent the next year at Padgate College in Warrington. His first post was at St Mary's Church of England Primary School at Stockport.

In 1948 he married Mary Elkins, a member of a well-known ringing family, at St Mary, Bowdon. They set up home in Altrincham where they were to remain for the whole of their married lives. Later, Ken became head teacher at St Margaret's School, Altrincham and when the town's three Primary Church of England Schools amalgamated in 1968 he was the obvious choice as head, a post he retained until he retired in 1978.

He gave unstintingly of his spare time to his church, where he was churchwarden, treasurer and secretary to the PCC at various times; his professional association, where he acted as both Secretary and President of the Cheshire Association of Head Teachers; as trustee to various local charities; the National Trust, where he acted as a room steward and fund raiser after retirement.

All of this was outside his ringing. His service ringing was exemplary; he was elected tower captain in 1958 and taught countless people to ring. His peal-ringing career was once casually described as "round the world on the 5th" as this was the bell from which he usually conducted peals! His 1000th peal took place on October 8, 1969, when he conducted a peal of 12-spliced Surprise Major at Hazel Grove for the Chester Diocesan Guild. Of these peals, 893 were on tower bells, of which he conducted 401, whilst 107 were on handbells, conducted 64.

His 2000th peal was due, according to Ken, about mid 1993. He didn't keep proper records, so late in 1992 he thought he had about 40 to go. Mary and his friends planned a date for it in May 1993 and Mary researched old Ringing Worlds, only to discover on January 14, 1993 he had rung his 2000th the previous day with one of Seven Surprise Minor at Sutton, near Macclesfield, conducted by Ivor R Nichols! Of the 2000, 1354 (632) had been on tower bells and 646 (401) on handbells.

At this milestone, he had conducted over half his peals, more than a thousand. This is something few conductors have ever done. There was nothing diffident about his conducting; no one ever complained about not hearing the call or change of method! There is a story about his conducting from the fifth a peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus at Bow. During this the tenor ringer was observed passing a message to the eleventh that caused him great amusement. It was passed down from eleven to ten, ten to nine and so down but stopped at the sixth. The front-end ringers were a bit mystified and consulted the eleventh ringer at the end of the peal. He said the

message had been: "There's another peal of Cambridge Max on at Cripplegate and Ken's calling that one as well!"

It is not easy to pick out which examples of his fine performances should be mentioned, as there are many. For instance, 21,000 Bristol Surprise Major at Over, Cheshire in 1950, conducted by John Worth; 15,840 Cambridge Surprise Royal at Worsley in 1951; 13,440 Spliced Surprise Major in six methods at Hazel Grove in 1961; a silent peal of Pitman's Four Spliced Surprise Major; a series of Spliced Surprise Maximus in up to 110 methods from 1966 to 1970 and so on. He took part in nearly all the Cheshire Band Peal Tours and in 1953 conducted the first peal of Spliced Surprise to be rung in Ireland. He was also a member of the team who rang in the first Maximus Tour, taking part in eight Maximus attempts in eight days.

Ken was first elected to the Central Council in 1948 and represented the Chester Diocesan Guild for three years and then became an honorary member until 1993 when he received the considerable honour of being elected a Life member. He never missed one of the 54 meetings. He was also a member of the Methods Committee 1948-1975 and 1981-2002. For the Chester Guild, Ken held many posts, from Branch Secretary to Master and he and Mary together produced the Guild Annual Report.

Ken's excellent work as a composer dates back to the early thirties when he contacted A G Driver and used his tables to increase the number of methods spliced into a 720 of Minor. One of the first "modern" peals of London Surprise Royal was his and is frequently used. He also composed a very simple extent of Plain Bob Major that was used when the 40,320 changes were first rung in July 1963. He had a constant flow of correspondence from ringers asking for compositions and he would always try to help promptly.

In 1997, his services to the Exercise and community was recognised by the award of an MBE. He died in hospital after a short illness on November 20, 2002, at the age of 89, being survived by his wife, Mary, daughter Kathleen and two grandchildren, Philip and Helen. His funeral was held on Friday, November 29, 2002 at St Margaret's, Dunham Massey, Altrincham and was very well attended by many friends and ringers from all over the country. Hand bells were rung during the service to Ken's favourite method on hand bells, Oxford Treble Bob!

His final peal totals were tower bells 1370, conducted 636 and handbells 655, conducted 408, totals 2025 (1044).

Ken was a popular and well-liked ringer and there were many appreciative comments after he died. Amongst them were: "His passing represents a very great loss to our church." "A good and inspiring friend of many." "These peals were some of the best ringing I have ever done and I am very grateful that I was able to ring with such a great composer and conductor." "He was a true gentleman." "Ken was undoubtedly a legendary ringer, one of my most unforgettable characters."

References

Ringing World 1934/293; 1969/912, 963; 1993/564, 1019; 2002/1222; 2003/6, 12, 20-1, 36