

Prolific Peal Ringers

1: REVD FRANCIS EDWARD ROBINSON (1833-1910)



THE REV. FRANCIS EDWARD ROBINSON, M.A., C.C.
(VICAR OF DRAYTON, BERKS; MASTER OF THE OXFORD DIOCESAN GUILD.)

Francis Edward Robinson was born on January 5th, 1833, in Begbroke House, near Woodstock, Oxon, the son of Revd Francis and Sophia Robinson. Begbroke House was the home of his grandfather, Thomas Robinson, a very wealthy banker. Francis Edward's father, Francis, was the Rector of Staughton, Beds, but within a year of his son's birth was also appointed Rector of Stonesfield, near Woodstock. As was common at the time, he kept both benefices and appointed a curate at Staughton.

Francis Edward, known as Edward to his family, grew up in this area of Oxfordshire over the next sixteen years together with his four brothers and five sisters. In 1846 he went to Winchester College to continue his education, selected perhaps because his maternal grandfather, Revd E Rowden, vicar of Highworth, Wilts for sixty-four years, went there when he was a boy. During this period Winchester was very much a school for sons of the clergy and most of the tutors and masters were clergymen. Robinson's best subject was mathematics and he won the Duncan prize for this in 1849. From Winchester he went to Exeter College, Oxford, graduating with a fourth class honours degree in mathematics in 1853. From then until 1867 he worked in the Old Bank, Oxford, first as a clerk but later as a partner. This was, of course, the bank owned by his grandfather, Thomas. It is not certain where he was living at this time but he presented a treble to Stonesfield to make it a ring of six and also restored the chancel and gave the church an organ.

He learnt to handle a bell whilst an undergraduate, but was not introduced to change ringing until he visited Appleton in 1859. Alfred White and his sons Henry and Frederick were his instructors and he rang his first peal, one of Grandsire Triples, on October 13, 1859. His next was Kent Treble Bob Major, after which he embarked with the Appleton ringers on a long series of practice attempts for their first peal of Stedman Triples, which they achieved on February

12, 1861. He was so delighted to accomplish this that he gave two tenors to Appleton to make it a ring of ten at a cost of £254. In October they rang the first peal of Grandsire Caters on the bells.

Later that year on November 21, 1861 he married Henrietta Barter at Churchill, Oxon. Henrietta was the daughter of the Revd Charles Barter, Rector of Churchill parish and also nearby Sarsden. After the marriage the newly-weds made their home in Woodbourne House, Tubney, a village near Appleton. A year later Henrietta gave birth to a daughter, Grace, but the next year she tragically died following a stillbirth. This must have been a turning point in Robinson's life. He was a widower at thirty with a baby daughter and a job at the Old Bank, Oxford that didn't really interest him. He decided to change and go into the church. He married another clergyman's daughter in 1867, was ordained in 1868 and appointed curate at Tubney.

In *Among the Bells* he comments that he was ordained priest in 1869 and although living in Appleton Rectory, had to give up ringing for four years through the disreputable conduct of some of the Appleton ringers. He rejoined the band on December 3, 1873, by ringing a peal of College Triples and in the next six years rang a further nine peals. He was then presented with the benefice of Drayton, Berks, a 7 cwt six installed in 1871 and ringing assumed a greater role in his life. His ambition became to be the first cleric to ring a peal on the bells of his own parish church, so he gave a new treble and tenor to augment the existing six and went on to realise his dream.

As he was one of the first members of the clergy to ring it was inevitable that he would achieve a number of "firsts" involving clerical ringers. However, he was a forceful character and had a great deal of drive and determination and made many of these things happen. For instance, in 1879 he rang in the first peal in which all members of the band had been to university; the following year was the first peal at Drayton as mentioned above. In 1882 he rang in the first peal for the Oxford University Society and in 1884 he rang in the first all-clerical peal.

With the background outlined above and the knowledge that he was a staunch teetotaler, I'm persuaded that Robinson was part of the Oxford Movement and certainly passionate about reform in the belfry. He took part in the setting up the Oxford Diocesan Guild and at the first meeting was elected Master, a position he held until he died. He became well known all over the country and was invited to attend whenever a new guild or association was being set up. For instance on March 2, 1886 he spoke at a meeting in Hereford, which resulted in the formation of the Hereford Diocesan Guild. He gave advice throughout the diocese to towers on the state of their bells and travelled the country, preaching at services for ringers. He was a representative of the Oxford Diocesan Guild on the Central Council from its formation in 1891 until his death in 1910 and attended nineteen meetings.

He had other skills: he taught his sons Latin and Greek before they went away to school and when he was 60 learned Hebrew himself well enough to read the Old Testament. For 30 years he was the Diocesan Inspector of Schools and in later life was a J. P. In addition, he was a highly skilled wood-carver, and had beautified Drayton church by carving the oak choir stalls, organ stalls, organ case and bench ends.

His initial rate of ringing peals was very slow, only a few each year. This completely changed when James Washbrook burst upon the Oxford scene in 1884. Washbrook was a highly skilled conductor and whereas Robinson had taken 28 years to achieve 100 peals, with Washbrook in his band he rang 86 in 1888, four of them being record lengths. He rang 85 in 1889, and then the number dropped steadily each year until 1895 when he rang only 19. In subsequent years, up to 1906, the numbers steadily increased up to 92. This was the year of his 73rd birthday.

Among the Bells give August 9, 1905 as his 1000th peal. It was planned as a repetition of the silent peal of Stedman Triples rung in August 1899 the only difference being that Washbrook was going to ring two bells. In the eighth course they stopped after a mix-up over a bob. After a brief rest they started again, Robinson calling his favourite variation of Thurstan's composition, only for failure to come after 48 courses due to a broken rope! Two days later with the same band but with Washbrook's son ringing one of his bells, the peal was successfully accomplished.

Following the peal an illuminated address was presented to Robinson in front of his family from the Oxford Society and other ringers, congratulating him on ringing one thousand peals. Reports were issued in national newspapers including *The Telegraph* and the *Morning Leader* together with a photograph. The President of the Central Council organised a congratulatory dinner – but only for members of the Council!

Research carried out ninety years later shows that this date usually accepted for his one-thousandth peal is incorrect. He had forgotten a few peals he had rung in his early days and another has subsequently been found to be false. When these adjustments are made his one-thousandth peal was rung at St Peter's, Northampton on July 6, 1905, Stedman Triples conducted by F E Robinson.

In the remainder of 1905 he rang 84 more peals, 93 more in 1906 and another 82 in 1907, all the latter being of Stedman. Having achieved his primary objective of ringing one thousand peals he would have liked to achieve a secondary one of ringing a thousand peals of Stedman but this was not to be. In June 1908 he had a serious heart attack and his doctors warned him that he should not ring any more peals. On October 31, 1908 he resigned the living at Drayton and retired to Fair House, Wokingham. He had served the parish of Drayton for 32 years and the parishioners regarded him and Mrs Robinson with great affection.

He recovered and rang a few more peals, his last being on January 15, 1910 at St Andrew's, Hillingdon, which he recorded as his 1,250th peal. His final total was actually 1256, of which he had conducted 792. Over nine hundred of the peals were of Stedman and five were long lengths, the longest being 15,041 Stedman Caters in nine hours and sixteen minutes.

He died on February 16, 1910 aged 77. His funeral was at All Saints, Wokingham before "a great concourse of ringers", including "twenty clergy and members of the Central Council". Two memorials to him were placed in St Peter's, Drayton; ringers from all over the country paid for the carved oak screen in the belfry arch and parishioners gave the brass plate over the pulpit. Oxford Guild members gave a stone tablet in memory of their late Master that was placed in the cloisters of Oxford Cathedral.

Prolific Peal Ringers

References

- Bell News* 87/20 89/584,307 91/224 92/461x
94/463,375 95/102 97/589,63 98/326 99/
110,327 00/307 01/264 03/521,207,315 04/
195,198 05/282,284,288,326 06/694,170x,298
07/446 08/129,438 09/542,598 10/18,40,52,62
Ringing World 83/280
Among the Bells F E Robinson 1909
100 Years of the Oxford Diocesan Guild
William Butler 1981
Francis Edward Robinson (1833-1910) David
Herschell RW1983/6-9
Revd F E Robinson –A Remarkable Man John
Pladdys RW1983/28-9
Revd F E Robinson and his 1000 Peals John
Eisel RW1998/25,31-2