

Biographical Record

Reverend Canon George Frederick Coleridge (1857 – 1949)

Represented the Oxford Guild on the Central Council from 1891 to 1949,
President from 1921 to 1930 and attended 49 meetings

George Coleridge was born in the Devonshire vicarage of Cadbury, on November 10th 1857. He was educated at the Ayshford Grammar School, Uffculme; Chardstock, Dorset and St Edmund's College, Salisbury before proceeding to Keble College, Oxford.

He was first attracted to the sound of the bells while robbing jackdaws' nests and shortly afterwards, at the age of 10, learned to handle a bell at Cadbury. In his early ringing lessons the importance of good striking was instilled in him and this took precedence over all else. He believed that too many people were called upon to ring peals before they could strike rounds properly.

It was while up at Oxford that he took up change ringing and joined the University Society at a time when a number of clergymen were ringing who became prominent in the Exercise. Coleridge became Master of the Society and took part in the Society's first peal of Stedman Triples which was rung at Drayton, Berkshire*.

Coleridge was ordained in 1884 and took on a curacy in Caversham, Reading. Here the band made tremendous strides. By 1885 the band was able to ring a peal in 7 minor methods (including Grandsire!) and he conducted from the tenor. The next peal rung by the local band was two years later and included treble bob methods. During his ten years' curacy at Caversham he was instrumental in having the bells augmented to 8. Some of his notable achievements during his curacy were 6,720 and 12,096 of Double Norwich Court Bob Major; 13,054 Stedman Caters and 8,800 Superlative Surprise Major. The Bell News reports that in 1891 the peal on the newly augmented bells at Caversham was the first of Double Norwich for the entire band and his first in the method as conductor.

He moved to Crowthorne in 1894 as parish priest where there were two churches which had only one ting-tang each: his pastoral work kept him very busy and there was less time for peal ringing. He remained at Crowthorne for the rest of his working life and his 50 years at Crowthorne was marked by a great celebration at the British Legion Hall where he was presented with a cheque for £300: also present were members of other local churches and all levels of the diocesan hierarchy were represented. He was extraordinarily well thought of and had been Rural Dean for Sonning Deanery for 17 years of his time at Crowthorne, 1912-1928 and had been made an Honorary Canon of Christ Church, Oxford (1917) in recognition of his work in the diocese. He had been offered many other livings which he refused and he also turned down the Archdeaconry of Oxfordshire. The attendance book for the presentation had no fewer than 621 names in it (husband and wife counting as one) and Bishop Gore declared that there was not a member of the ringing Exercise who would not join in congratulating one "who is as widely known and as greatly beloved as any man in the long story of the art of change ringing". He continued to serve the parish for a further three years.

He was elected Master of the Oxford Diocesan Guild in 1934 and remained in post until 1946 when failing health caused him to retire and the baton was passed to the Reverend Elliot Wigg.

Coleridge's first peal was rung at Kirtlington, Oxfordshire on June 9th 1879 and his last, London Surprise, was on August 9th, 1932 at Bridgwater, his peal ringing career being cut short by knee damage when falling off his bike. He rang many peals of Stedman at Drayton with the Reverend F. E. Robinson and at that tower rang in a peal of non-conducted Stedman Triples. He was also in the band which was Robinson's celebrated 1000th peal, also at Drayton. This peal, incidentally, also contained James Washbrook and Washbrook's young son who was later killed in action. In all, Coleridge rang 273 peals. Some of his more memorable peals were: Stedman Caters at Warwick on October 11th, 1910, which was a first in this method 'by 10 priests of the church'; he rang in the first clerical surprise peal, Superlative Surprise Major at Prestbury, Gloucester on April 22nd 1912; he was in the first peal on Exeter Cathedral bells, Grandsire Caters on October 6th, 1902 in 3 hrs. 52 mins. – he was on the tenor with Mr Ferris Shepherd strapping; he was also in the first peal on the bells at Plymouth – 5006 Stedman Caters; another of his heavy bell performances was at Wells Cathedral for the Oxford Guild in 1894 in 3 hrs. 44 mins. at the time the heaviest peal ever rung single-handed by 10 men. He was a member of the band that rang the first Freemasons peal, Grandsire Caters at St Clement Danes in December 1919: it was rung for the ASCY. Canon Coleridge was a Past Master of the Heather Lodge and Past Prov. Grand Chaplain for the Province of Berkshire. He had a number of long lengths to his credit, including 15,041 Stedman Caters at Appleton, Berkshire.* One curious peal was Stedman Triples at St Giles in the Fields on February 7th 1925 when all the band were over 6 feet in height: the Canon was the tallest, his height being returned as 6' 4½". He was an acknowledged superb heavy bell ringer.

He served the Central Council of Church Bells Ringers as a representative of the Oxford Guild from its beginning, and from 1921 as its President for nine years where he was a greatly respected and beloved leader.

He is described by different people who knew him, variously as a raconteur, genial, urbane, unshakeable, an obvious leader and as someone who endeared himself to the hearts of all his parishioners as he had done in the wider field of the ringing Exercise among all who knew him.

He died on November 22nd 1949 and is buried in Crowthorne church yard.

Tributes appeared in The ringing World in 1949 on pages 583, 595, 609 and in 1950 on page 28

*Before the boundary changes in 1974 the starred parishes were in Berkshire and then transferred to Oxfordshire.

