

Biographical Record

John DAY (1825 – 1902)

Mr John Day, not to be confused with others of his family of the same name but different generations, was associated with the brass industry and the making of gas mantles at the burgeoning of this new industry.

He was born in in Birmingham on November 6th 1825. His father and uncle were to some extent both ringers. He lived most of his early childhood with his paternal grandfather where his Uncle Thomas would tap changes on handbells in a frame and at which he was very good.

John showed an interest in ringing but young lads weren't encouraged in the way that they are today. However, a friend of his uncle, William Chattell took pity on the boy and arranged to teach him to handle a bell in exchange for ringing the service bell whenever required. This Day did religiously for many years. Chattell proved to be an excellent though curmudgeonly teacher and Day claims he taught him everything he knew from the handling of a bell to conducting advanced methods of the day.

In February 1845 Day took part in his first peal, 6,000 Treble Bob Royal at St Philip's church. Peals were not so easily come by in those days and it was only the kindness of his friend, Henry Johnson, that Day became invited into a peal of Stedman Triples at St John's Deritend, and in July 1849 he called his first peal of Grandsire Triples at Aston.

At about this time he made frequent journeys with Chattell to assist the West Bromwich Society along with Mr S Marsh in several of the peals rung on 10 bells at Christchurch and later on in the only two peals rung on 12 bells in the tower.

Strong rivalry, an unpleasant nature, existed between the ringers in the various Birmingham churches to the extent that one band couldn't ring a ten-bell peal without assistance from another tower. It took the combined forces of Day, Johnson and a few others to reorganize the Martin's Youths so that they had between them a band which could ring cinques but, although St Martin's bells were in a poor state of repair and went badly, they managed to ring a peal of Stedman Cinques in 1863.

Shortly after this a series of disasters befell St Martin's belfry; broken bells, gudgeons and the like led to Day writing to the local press. The outcome was a public meeting and the establishment of a restoration committee. Unfortunately the desired re-hang proper never happened and a local hanger was called in who bodged the job, despite Day declaring at the meeting that patching and mending were not the answer.

Things went from bad to worse and the steeple was in need of repair. Also there was to be an imminent visit from Her Majesty (Queen Victoria) to Birmingham and this was thought to be the golden opportunity for a complete re-hang. Unfortunately, the local hanger got in first, convincing the committee that a bit of patching up would do the job, again despite Day's warnings. Johnson and Day were appointed to oversee the work, which turned out to be a thankless task. By Easter the following year the bells were

thought to be pealable but this brief respite from the gloom was short lived. Very dry winds set in and the 11th, always a poor-going bell, started to play up. One by one the bells became difficult and in a month the whole peal was unringable.

However, they didn't give up and meetings continued in the belfry and handbells were rung. The work on the rest of the church was all but finished by 1875 and Day and Johnson tackled Messrs Blews, Bellhangers and this time a good deal was struck and the bells put in very good order.

In 1877, through an unpleasant misunderstanding, Day severed his connections with the St Martin's Youths of which society he had been President since 1860. Later on in 1887 he joined the Holt Society at Aston and, as a member of the society, became instrumental in forming a Guild which has taken the name of St Martin's, combining the St Martin's Youths and the members of the Holt Society of Aston.

Day rang about 63 peals from Triples to Maximus, conducting 21 of them, though he never made a point of keeping a record.

Reading between the lines, Day's greatest achievement was as peacemaker and diarist of the local ringing scene. The vignettes of the local ringers are a perfect backdrop to the social state and ethos of the times; men who walked miles for peals; didn't want to give up work in their late 70s because they feared the work house; the general plagiarism of ringing compositions and the less than harmonious atmosphere that prevailed in the belfries.

Following marriage and economic difficulties, in the 1850s he moved to Harborne in 1856 and died there on 2nd June 1902. His obituary in *The Bell News* states; "he endeared himself to everyone....by the urbanity of his manners and the uprightness of his conduct".



This description is based on the account given in *Belfry Life in Birmingham c. 1780-1860: The Recollections of John Day*. Edited by David Ingrams and Richard Jones.