

Biographical Record

Henry Thomas ELLACOMBE (?? 1790 – 30 Jul 1885)

Henry Thomas Ellacombe was born in 1790, the son of William Ellicombe, for fifty years rector of Alphington, near Exeter. Ellacombe changed the spelling of his name in later years, claiming that his version was more correct. After graduating from Oriel College, Oxford, in 1812, he studied engineering under Marc Isambard Brunel at Chatham dockyard and in 1816 was described as 'Resident Engineer'. However, in that year he was dismissed from his post by the Navy Board and returned to Oxford to study for ordination and took Holy Orders: he became curate of Cricklade, and was curate-in-charge of Bitton, between Bath and Bristol, from 1817 until 1835, when he was appointed vicar. During his incumbency he not only restored the parish church, but built three other churches as well.

In 1850 Ellacombe was preferred to the living of Clyst St. George in Devon which he held until his death in July 1885. The patronage of Clyst St. George had come into the Ellicombe family through his mother, and the living was held in succession by his maternal uncle and his elder brother William, whom he succeeded. During his incumbency, the bells at Clyst St. George were augmented to a ring of six bells, his name appearing on the tenor which was recast in 1864 in memory of his only grandson.

Apart from his parochial duties, Ellacombe had a wide range of interests. He was a skillful botanist, and it was said that he had grown successfully 5000 different plants and flowers from all parts of the world. Another interest of Ellacombe's was the antiquarian study of bells. In his middle seventies he visited all but two of the belfries in Devon to collect details of the bells. He gave his results in a paper read to the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society on 7 June 1866, and these were published in book form in 1872. Later, on the basis of material mainly collected by correspondence, he published books on the church bells of Somerset and of Gloucestershire.

Ellacombe was stated by his son to have been a ringer from his youth, but he himself infers in his writing that he started to learn to ring changes about the year 1866 and the limit of his achievement is said to have been Grandsire Doubles. On Boxing Day 1874 the Huntsham Society, led by C.A.W. Troyte, together with William Banister, visited Clyst St. George to pay their respects to Ellacombe. Several 120s, and a 720 of Minor were rung, and Ellacombe took the treble to a 120 of Grandsire Doubles. We know of at least one occasion on which he rang on more than six bells. In October 1867, in company with Canon Cattley of Worcester, he visited St. Martin's, Birmingham, to have a ring on the twelve bells there. Cattley was pressing for a ring of twelve bells for Worcester Cathedral, and Ellacombe went to Birmingham to try his hand on twelve for, as he said in a letter referring to Worcester '...I wanted to try my hand in twelve, as I am to be the treble of twelve parsons - if alive and well - who are to open the new bells there.' On this visit to Birmingham a three-course touch of Stedman Cinques was rung, but it seems unlikely that Ellacombe took part in this.

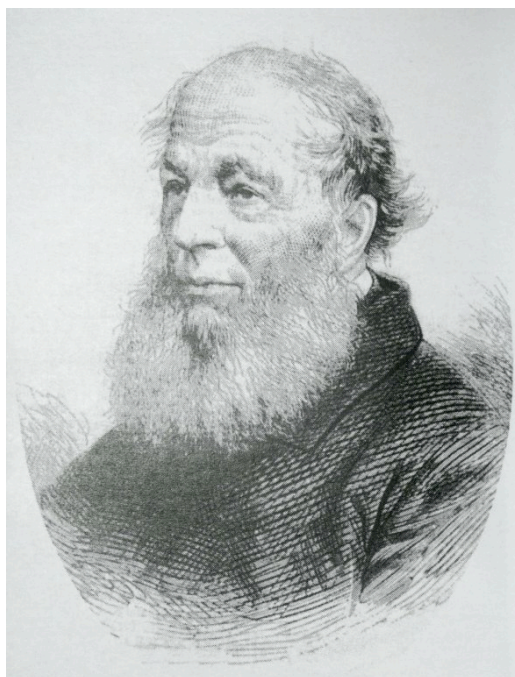
Ellacombe's interest in belfry reform started when he went to Bitton in July 1817. He disapproved of the way in which the ringers rang after service on Sundays for practice and seldom attended church, and that they had possession of the belfry key. Soon he gained possession of the key, and eventually persuaded the ringers voluntarily to give up ringing on

Sundays but to have two practice nights instead. The bells were chimed on Sundays, and to this end he promoted the chiming hammers that bear his name.

Ellacombe felt so strongly about the need for belfry reform that, after he had read a paper on belfry reform to the Bristol Architectural Society on 10 December 1849, he published it the following year as a book entitled *Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers*. This evidently fulfilled a need, as it went through four further editions, each expanded from the previous one, the last of which was published in 1884. It must be admitted that in the country generally the situation was not good, and standards were changing so that behaviour in the belfry, which would not have raised an eyebrow in the eighteenth century, was becoming unacceptable. In particular, Ellacombe did not approve of the prize-ringing matches that were then customary, particularly in the South-West, normally sponsored by the local publican, and he never missed an opportunity to fulminate against them in the pages of *Church Bells*.

Perhaps the innovation that has had the most effect on the development of the Exercise was that of the introduction of the territorial associations. The first of these was the Devon Association, and Ellacombe played his part in its foundation. In March 1874 a preliminary meeting was held in Exeter, with Ellacombe in the chair, at which a motion establishing the Guild of Devonshire Ringers was passed, the objects being the cultivation of change ringing and belfry reform; Ellacombe was elected a vice-president of the infant body. This was the first of the great territorial associations and the lead shown was soon followed by other areas.

Although of great age, Ellacombe rang with the band at Clyst St. George until within a few years of his death, always ringing in the New Year. He only began to fail within two months of his death, but his mind was still clear at the end. He died on 30 July 1885, at the great age of ninety-five and was buried five days later. Many muffled touches were rung to his memory across the country - as far as Edinburgh - and members of the Guild of Devonshire Ringers rang a muffled peal at St. Sidwell's, Exeter.



This description is an abridged version of the account given in John Eisel's book *Giants of the Exercise*, available from Central Council Publications