Biographical Record

John Powell POWELL (1769 – 1849)

John Powell Powell was born John Powell Roberts on 3rd November 1769, the son of William and Elizabeth Roberts. His mother's brother John Powell died in 1783 having never been married so she and her family inherited his estate, which included Quex Park, Birchington, Kent. When her husband died in 1805, Elizabeth's elder son, Arthur Annesley Roberts inherited, and under the terms of his uncle's will had to change his name to Powell. When Arthur died in 1813 after a fall from his horse, the estate passed to John as the next oldest surviving son, and he too changed his name to Powell.

John Powell Powell's most tangible legacy is the Waterloo Tower, which he had built to house a ring of twelve bells, cast by Thomas Mears II of Whitechapel, at a total cost believed to be around £9,000. The grand opening was on 4th August 1819, with both the College Youths and the Cumberland Youths invited. The College Youths rang several touches and the Cumberland Youths rang the first peal – 5,213 Grandsire Cinques. A contemporary newspaper report said that Powell had built the tower '... with a view to acquire a practical knowledge of the abstruse science of Change-ringing, in which he is now being instructed by an able tutor, and in which he has made considerable proficiency'.

The tutor is assumed to be William Shipway, who rang in the opening peal and whom Powell subsequently employed, presumably as a instructor to the new band that was formed. Powell rang the tenor to a peal of Plain Bob Triples on the back eight at Quex in 1820, which Shipway conducted. On the day of the grand opening Powell joined the Cumberland Youths (of which Shipway was a long standing member) but in 1823 they both joined the College Youths, whose name book has a sketch of the Waterloo Tower by Powell's name.

The band at Quex – Quex Institution of Change Ringing – achieved some notable performances including the first peal on the ten bells at Canterbury Cathedral in December 1824, conducted by Shipway. The band's climax was a peal of Stedman Caters on 6th April 1828, after which it seems to have declined.

Powell's practical ability as a ringer seems to have been limited, but he was also interested in the theory of change ringing. Shipway was investigating the composition of Stedman Triples, and this seems to have inspired Powell's interest. He composed a half peal of Stedman Triples that has no more than two bobs in succession. It was rung by the Norwich Scholars on 3rd January 1825, conducted by Samuel Thurston, and the Norwich ringers were so impressed that they presented Powell with a medal, engraved with a long, laudatory inscription.

In January 1828 Powell published his researches into Stedman Triples, with touches of various lengths and several peal compositions. He acknowledged that they were all derivative work based on a composition by Joseph Tebbs of Leeds.

Powell joined the Royal Yacht Club in Cowes in 1820, only five years after its foundation, and his first yacht 'Briton' was a 95 ton schooner, which he sailed around the coasts of Britain during the summer months. He also collected cannons. In 1814 he built a round tower (about 50ft tall) as an observation point and signalling tower to communicate with his yachting friends as they sailed by. There is evidence that at some point he installed some sort of ringing apparatus using handbells in the signalling tower for the ringers to practise on, but no description remains.

John Powell Powell died on 14th May 1849 and his will made provision to vest the bells in the Waterloo Tower as heirlooms in his estate so they would not be sold.

This description is based on the account given in John Eisel's book Giants of the Exercise, available from Central Council Publications.