

Biographical Record

Thomas THURSTANS (1799? – 1858)

Thomas Thurstans was the person who solved the problem of composing a peal of Stedman using bobs and two common singles only, but little is generally known of his career. He was christened at St Martin's, Birmingham on 25 March 1799, but it is by no means certain that he was christened as an infant so he may not have been older than the suggests.

It was probably at St. Martin's that he learnt to ring at a relatively early age, and he rang his first peal, Grandsire Triples, at Kings Norton on 11 December 1811. Thurstans quickly became a leading member of the St. Martin's Youth and when Thomas Mears cast a new ring of ten bells for St. Thomas's, Dudley, in 1818, Thomas Thurstans turned the tenor in to the first peal of 5200 Oxford Treble Bob Royal, on 4 January 1819. The composition was one of Thurstans' own, although he did not conduct the peal.

In the following year, two famous peals were rung by the St. Martin's Youths on the bells of St. Martin's. On 17 April Thurstans turned in the tenor to 7200 changes of New Treble Bob Maximus (Kent), conducted by Henry Cooper, while on 28 December 6600 of Stedman Cinques was rung. The composition of Stedman Cinques was one by Thurstans and he conducted the peal from the eleventh bell.

Thurstans was a broad-set man, about five feet eight inches in height and very strong. He was a brass finisher by trade and, about 1825 was involved in a trade dispute, which resulted in a strike. As a result, Thurstans was sent for a month's hard labour at Warwick Gaol. Previously he had been quiet and respectable but after this disgrace while quiet at times, at others would act more like a madman and then even his friends avoided him. For some years he was employed at the same firm as his brother Charles and it was thought that his transgressions were overlooked through his brother's influence. Being a bachelor, he lived with his sister in Church Street, very near to St. Philip's Church - now the Cathedral.

Despite being a fine heavy-bell ringer, Thurstans' name is always associated with the composition of Stedman Triples although he composed in other methods as well. It is said that his main fault was a lack of patience in proving his peals. Thurstans submitted his compositions to Thomas Day for proof and he looked them over and then put them in an old hat that he kept for the purpose: the hat was nearly full before Thurstans produced a true peal. He worked at peals of Treble Bob Major with the tenors parted, eventually producing one of 15,840 changes. However, unbeknown to him, Thomas Day had already produced one of this number of changes, and Day's composition was eventually rung at Bethnal Green by the College Youths on 27 April 1868. At that time it was the greatest number of changes rung by one set of ringers.

In the composition of Stedman there was competition between Thurstans and John Lates who were both working towards a composition using common bobs and two common singles only. Lates produced one with 240 bobs and two Holt's singles only

and this was first rung at Aston parish church on 8 August 1842. The composition was, however, credited to Thurstans and this led to a dispute which established that it rightly belonged to Lates. Thurstans first obtained a five-part composition using common bobs and singles but since it had more than two singles he does not seem to have thought much of it and it has survived only through a copy being sent to East Anglia. Then he produced his four-part composition which achieved the desired object. This was first rung at St. Martin's, Birmingham, on 18 May 1846, conducted by Henry Johnson. Lates, who had the facility to follow a composition from outside the tower, was listening when the peal was rung and when Johnson came out of the tower after the successful completion of the peal he was accosted by Lates. The conversation was recorded by John Day in his memoirs many years later:

"Harry! what peal have you been ringing? the bells came round with a single." "I know they did," said Harry, "it was one of Tom's with two common singles, and now you can have it." Those who knew Lates could form a pretty shrewd idea of what he would say after that.

John Day also recorded Thurstans' sad demise:

The last time I remember seeing him he was respectably dressed in black, I think in mourning for his sister with whom he had lived for many years. He was carrying a basket of soil, which he had been getting for his window plants. He told me he was unwell and could not work. That was in the spring of 1858, and in the autumn of that year, Mr. T. Cole - a former member of the St. Martin's Youths - went to Johnson and told him that "poor Tom" was dead. From what Mr. Cole said, we were led to suppose that he had had a break out, and was taken ill in the street, it was said with English cholera. He was taken to "The General Hospital" and there died. No one knew who he was and no one enquired about him, so it came to pass that the parish authorities buried him - no friend or relative being near.

This description is based on the account given in John Eisel's book *Giants of the Exercise*, available from [Central Council Publications](#)