

Essay for the Friends No. 19

Two Nineteenth-Century Text Books: Thackrah and Sottanstall

The kind reception given to *Order and Disorder in the Eighteenth Century* after its publication by the Library Committee in 2010 was a natural spur to get on and work on newspaper extracts from the nineteenth century, helped by access to digitised runs of newspapers. One result of this access was the discovery of many more significant extracts from the eighteenth century, enough to make it worth publishing a publish a supplement, which is in effect a free-standing work in its own right. Also the material discovered for the nineteenth century not only augments that in the Cyril Wratten collection, but many previously unrecorded peals have been discovered which have been sent to Alan Baldock to add in to the Felstead database. If you are compiling a peal book for your tower or claiming a significant number of peals rung there, it is worth checking the Felstead records in case any peals have been added recently, as in one or two cases this has rendered claims previously made invalid!

With input from the work of other researchers in this field, and from my own work and the Cyril Wratten collection, I estimate that in the last eighteen months I have input about 470k words into my computer, and there is at least another 150k words to be input for the period 1850-1870. Although this process is not yet finished, it has given me an overview of what was happening in the nineteenth century, which broadly agrees with the conclusions reached by other historians. Of course, detail will always be added, and no absolute conclusion can be drawn until all newspapers in the nineteenth century have been searched. In view of the proliferation of local newspapers during the period, that could take many years! Some newspapers reported

regularly on change ringing, and others did not, so there is the possibility that things were happening in places but were not reported. This point is important, for if we rely on ringing reports in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* then it would appear nothing was going on in Birmingham the middle of the nineteenth century, the reason being that reports were being published in the *Birmingham Daily Post* instead. Of course, the records of the St. Martin's Youths do record the bare peal records, but newspaper reports give more background. There is also the fact that in the middle of the century much reliance has been placed on the increasing number of reports of ringing that appeared in the extensive sporting pages of the weekly papers *Bell's Life in London* (first issue 3 March 1822) and *The Era* (first issue 30 Sept 1838) and attention has been drawn away from local newspapers, some reports in which duplicated those in the two periodicals mentioned above, but others do not.

The general feeling in the early nineteenth century is of decline, and exuberance spent, and generally a reduction in the number of peals being rung, continuing a trend from the latter part of the eighteenth century. There were also a reducing number of adverts for ringing matches, such a feature of eighteenth century ringing, but Cornwall continued to be a centre of such activity, although not a change ringing area. There were active centres of the art, of course, and I have quoted Birmingham above. London continued to be a major centre, although the College Youths were in decline, the story of this and the subsequent revival being told by the late Bill Cook. Norwich, of course, was still a major centre, and there were country bands, such as those in Kent, which declined early in the century. Activity picked up in Bristol and elsewhere as the century progressed, but the major area of activity was in the north, the area covered by Lancashire, north Cheshire, the East Riding of Yorkshire, and the north part of Derbyshire. Here the art gradually developed, not too surprising considering the

expansion in industry and hence population, and the material prosperity of the area, and by having established bands such as those at Leeds and what is now Sheffield Cathedral. One remarkable feature of the area was the interest in prize ringing, in which there was great competition, the number of recorded examples increasing towards the middle of the century, going against what appears to be the overall trend. Such contests could be between two bands, for a financial stake, such as the needle match between Oldham and Ashton-under-Lyne which took place in 1786 (*Order and Disorder...*, pp. 184-5). The continuing dispute between the two bands led to another ringing match between them many years later, on the new ring of bells at Flixton in 1808, when a challenge was made as to which band could ring Holt's Grandsire Triples in the shortest time. The Oldham Youths rang a peal in just over two and a half hours, but there was a miscall in the Ashton attempt, which came round at 5012 changes, thus losing the match.

The other type of match was general prize ringing, which flourished in the area particularly between 1820 and 1870, occasions when several monetary prizes were offered, and often a consolation for the band which travelled the longest distance without winning a prize. Some of these matches were advertised in newspapers, or mentioned in passing in news items, but more often printed circulars were sent round to bands that were likely to be interested, which implies a considerable amount of organisation and contact between bands. Very few of these circulars seem to have survived. Most competitions took place over two days, with a set piece to be rung, and it was not unusual for a time for ringing the piece to be specified, with a number of faults being given for deviation from that time. On eight bells, the method was often Kent Treble Bob Major, a favourite in the area, so much so that the later nick-name of 'Yorkshire Glory' was well earned! The touch specified was

perhaps a half peal, and if many bands entered, this entailed a considerable total length of ringing. Typically, each band would appoint a censor to count faults, and there would be at least one umpire, a ringer or ringers of good standing. When a prize ringing took place at Birstal on 24 August 1827 the test piece was reported as 'a half peal of new triple bob' and the ringing 'commenced at six o'clock in the morning, and continued nearly 24 hours.' Ringing through the night into the early hours was not uncommon!

Matches were occasionally rung on higher numbers, and I have to hand a printed circular for a match that was to take place at Huddersfield on Monday 25 Sept 1865, when the test piece was to be 2,000 changes of Kent Treble Bob Royal, or 1,600 changes, depending on the number of companies that entered. It was announced that the bells would be available for practice on Saturdays and Sundays prior to the match, up to 10 September. Rules for conduct of the ringing were laid down, which stated that the draw for order of ringing would take place at seven o'clock and 'Being only for one day, we shall want to have the first Company ringing by a few minutes after Seven o'clock, a.m.' No advert for this prize ringing has so far been found in the *Huddersfield Chronicle*, but on Sat. 23 September 1865 a news item in that paper stated that eight bands had entered, that the prizes were 12, nine, six and three guineas respectively, and that it was 39 years since there had been a similar trial in the town. A week later it was reported that the test piece had been 1,600 changes long, and that the first prize had been won by Bradford. It was evidently of great interest locally, as the report went on to say that 'The streets surrounding the church were constantly filled during the day by the inhabitants and persons who had come from a distance, to hear the ringing, and the greatest interest was manifested as to who would ring the best peal, and obtain the prizes.' This

emphasizes the considerable interest in such competitions, since, on the same day, there was a special train from Huddersfield to a hand-bell contest which was taking place at Belle Vue, Manchester, and this was likely to have taken away some who might otherwise have attended the prize ringing.

Prize ringing was not only on the higher numbers, and competitions of six bells were popular and hard-fought. This is not surprising in view of the strong six-bell tradition in the area, and a very high level of competence. I need only instance the peal of 15,120 changes of Minor rung at Wath-on-Dearne in 1816, consisting of extents in 21 different methods. Prize ringing on six bells sometimes consisted of a single extent—'peal' in the terminology of the time—but more often consisted of three extents. The methods were not usually specified, but if a competing band rang three 'treble' peals—what we would call treble bob—it would have its number of faults reduced because of the increased difficulty of the methods.

In view of the evident pride that the various bands had in their skill, it is not surprising that occasionally there were disputes, and one such occurred at Kirkburton in 1851. A ringing match took place there on 13 and 14 October 1851—length of test piece not stated, but a practice piece of 720 changes was allowed on the Monday—and the unpleasantness began with a dispute over who was appointed a censor for the Dewsbury band, which was led by Benjamin Thackrah (whose father of the same name had died the previous year). This dispute dragged on, and the report in the *Huddersfield Chronicle* of Saturday 18 October 1851 stated that 'The church doors were locked till they could come to a more amicable understanding, and this at length being accomplished the prize ringing commenced about three o'clock on Tuesday morning...' Seven bands competed, and if it was the usual three extents, the ringing must have taken most

of Tuesday. The winning band was Kirkheaton senior, and Dewsbury, favourites after the trial piece, came second. The report, sent in by a correspondent who may well have had a vested interest, called doubt on the proceedings, but the Kirkheaton ringers defended themselves in a forthright letter published in the same paper on Saturday 25 October 1851.

Thackrah's Art of Ringing

In view of the vitality of the change ringing tradition in the north, it is not surprising that two texts on change ringing were produced in the area in the mid nineteenth century. Neither had the stature of Hubbard's little book, *Elements of Campanalogia*, first published in 1845 and which ran through several editions, all published in East Anglia despite Hubbard having moved from Norwich to Leeds, Yorkshire, in the 1850s. The first of these texts was written by Benjamin Thackrah, of Dewsbury, very well known in the area. He was born in 1774, probably the Benjamin 'Thackrey' who was christened at Dewsbury on 4 April 1774. When he was about 20 years old he became one of the 'set' ringers at Dewsbury church, a position he held until his death more than 50 years later. Although no peal book survives, he is known to have rung more than 50 peals of 5,000 or more changes, the last being on his 76th birthday in the spring of 1850, although no details of this have so far been found and it is only known from his obituary. During his career he assisted in winning 24 prizes in competitions on six and eight bells. He was also well-known as a composer and his obituary, published in the *Huddersfield Chronicle* on Saturday 1 March 1851, as well as elsewhere, stated that 'Any difficult or mysterious question in the art of campanology, which might have been a subject of dispute among his brother ringers, were very easily solved when referred to "Old Ben."' The last time he rang was in a prize

ringing at Skipton on 21 May 1850 (the obituary incorrectly stated that this took place on 17 May 1850, but newspaper reports in the *Bradford Observer* prove otherwise) when the Dewsbury band was unsuccessful. He died on 20 February 1851, and was buried three days later, when ringers from 18 towers attended, and followed in procession to the grave, one ringer from each tower wearing a mourning scarf.

At the time of Benjamin Thackrah's death he left a corpus of unpublished work in composition, and his obituary, after it had mentioned various compositions, went on to refer to 'an immense number of other compositions upon six and eight bells, which are intended for publication.' This seems to have been in a state ready for publication, but this caused some controversy: on Sunday 12 October 1851 the following item appeared in *Bell's Life in London*:

'Mr. John Thackrey [*sic*] of Dewsbury, having observed an announcement that a treatise on change-ringing, compiled by his late father, is about to appear, writes to say that he only is in possession of the original manuscript of his father, and it will shortly be placed in the hands of some London publisher.'

A sharp response appeared a week later:

'The original copy of Benjamin Thackray's work on change ringing is now said to be in the possession of another son of the deceased; and in a letter to us he denounces his brother for sending us such a communication as the one we inserted last week.'

'Another son' seems to have been Benjamin Thackrah jun., for whom the manuscript was printed in Dewsbury the following year. After a short general introduction, the text goes on to discuss changes on the different number of bells from five up to eight. Naturally the section on Minor gives the figures of a

number of methods, which must give an idea of what was popular at the time. However, the only statement about the origins of the methods relates to Duke of York, an irregular method that was rung many times in peals of seven Minor methods, and it is stated 'The peal was composed by the Author of the present work, in the year 1794, and was first rung at Dewsbury, by the Society of Change Ringers of that place, on the twenty-second day of September, in the same year, being the Coronation Day of King George III.' In the section on Triples, Plain Bob, Kent Treble Bob, and Ringer's Surprise (a version of Treble Bob) were discussed, but remarkably not Grandsire. Another omission in the section on Major was Kent Treble Bob, the only methods quoted in the section being treble bob methods designated 'Surprise' as well as Cambridge and Superlative. Of importance is the fact that effectively he introduced what became known as New Cambridge Surprise Major, which was rung to a peal at Huddersfield on 18 February 1822, although not reported in the *Liverpool Mercury* until Fri. 12 April 1822:

'On Shrove Tuesday morning last, a true and complete peal of Cambridge Surprise was finely rung at Huddersfield, in Yorkshire, by St. Peter's Company, at that town, comprising 6720 harmonious changes, being the greatest length rung in that intricate composition, on eight bells, in England, which was both composed and conducted by Mr. Benjamin Thackray, a woollen-cloth worker, at Dewsbury.'

The last third of the book was not written by Thackrah, but mainly by William Sottanstill, of Sowerby Bridge, and starts with an explanation of the in-and-out of course, and falseness, and goes on to give a number of compositions of Kent and Oxford Major, mostly by Sottanstill, and details of when a few of them were first rung. Much space is given to the treble bob method Rose of England, and London Treble Bob and Cumberland

Exercise are also discussed. Stedman Triples is represented by a composition by Hudson, Thurstans' five-part, and his four-part, and there are various compositions of Stedman Caters and Cinques, all by Henry Johnson.

The overall impression of the book is that while it may have been a useful reference book, it was not at all suited as a basic text for beginners, with limited explanations and obvious omissions. It is doubtful if it was very successful, and only a limited number of copies have survived. This may be in part due to the fact that it does not seem to have been advertised in local newspapers, no adverts having yet been discovered. However, the contents are now easily available as a facsimile was published by Alan Ellis in 2007.

Curiously enough, Benjamin Thackrah junior was credited with having written the book. *Bell's Life in London* of 20 February 1859 records a peal rung at Earlsheaton on 12 February 1859, the report going on to say:

'After the peal an excellent supper was provided by Mr B Thackrah (it being the fiftieth anniversary of his birthday), to which upwards of twenty ringers from Hull, the potteries and other places, sat down. Mr Thackrah has been a ringer since his twelfth year, a period of thirty-eight years, and has assisted to win thirty-five prizes on 6, 8 and 10 bells, the first of which was in Darfield near Barnsley, when only in his fourteenth year. He is also the author of a work on bell ringing. After the amusements of the evening were appropriately wound up with a few short peals on the hand bells.'

Sottanstell's *Elements of Campanalogia*

One of the major contributors to Thackrah's *The Art of Change Ringing* was William Sottanstell, who went on to produce his

own book, *Elements of Campanalogia*, the title reflecting that of Hubbard's little book. Sottanstall was born at Sowerby Bridge on 9 July 1800, and lived in the village all his life, dying there on 26 May 1889. He was buried on 29 May, being carried to the grave by seven of his grandchildren, the bells being rung before the funeral by the Sowerby ringers and afterwards by the Liversedge ringers. Certainly he was interested in composition from a young age, and composed not only peals but many shorter touches. He was evidently keen on getting his work published, and contributed to Thackrah's text. He seems to have touted the manuscript round, with a view to getting it published, taking it to Birmingham in 1865. His visit was described in vivid terms in the recollections of John Day, published in *Bell News* in 1895:

'When Mr. Sottanstall came to Birmingham in 1865, hoping to get his book published here, he of course brought the MS with him, and I was one of the few who saw it. My uncle [Thomas Day, the famous composer of treble bob], Johnson, Chattell, and a few others looked it over, and it was eventually arranged that he, accompanied by his friend Mr. Holroyd, should take it to my uncle's house on the following day, so that they could look it over quietly together. He had already formed a rather unfavourable opinion of it, and criticised it very freely while they were going through it. When they came to Holt's one-part peal of Grandsire Triples and Sottanstall's variation of it he fairly lost his temper, and looking Sottanstall in the face, said, "So you could not let that alone, eh! I'd be ashamed of myself if I were you." After that outburst he took very little notice of the book or what was in it. When the book was published Sottanstall sent him a copy.'

Detail is lacking on how the book came to be published, but when it came out in 1867 it was described as 'Part Second' and covered changes on seven and eight bells only. Included were over sixty treble bob major methods, with large numbers of touches and peal length compositions. The book was brought to press by a committee, and the truth of the compositions was

verified by William Harrison, of Mottram, Henry Johnson, of Birmingham, and John Thorpe of Ashton-under-Lyne. There was no list of subscribers, but support from various parts of the country was acknowledged at the front. It seems to have taken some time to bring to press, and Sottanstell's preface was dated 6 October 1866, the title page was dated 1867, and in the prelims it is stated that it was entered at Stationers' Hall in 1868. As a frontispiece there is a photograph of Sottanstell, with serious face, seated in front of a Davenport and holding a quill pen, surrounded by eight handbells resting mouth downwards on the floor. All this was carefully staged as close examination shows that behind Sottanstell there is a backcloth with a painted scene, of the type used in a photographer's studio.

Currently there is no information on how many copies of Sottanstell's work were printed, but either it was a larger number than was justified, or it was not well received. At 960 pages plus prelims it was one of the longest books published on the subject and, in my opinion, one of the worst. It does, however, have a use because for some of the compositions it is noted where they were first rung, and for certain of these no other record has yet been found. It cost 9s. when published, and it was still being offered for sale in 1895 at a reduced price of 3s. post free. Sales were then being handled by Mr. Luke Illingworth, of Livesedge, possibly the son of Mr. John Illingworth, of Liversedge, who was one of the committee that saw the book through the press. Unlike Thackrah's book, there seem to be a reasonable number of copies surviving of this book, and the Central Council Library has two copies, but only one of Thackrah's work. However, this is compensated for by the interesting provenance of the copy of Thackrah, being first in the possession of Thomas Day, then his nephew John Day, who gave it to Sir A.P. Heywood, and was one of the collection of books which he bequeathed to the Central Council, and which were used to start the Central Council library.

And what about the first, unpublished part of Sottanstell's book? I understand that the manuscript still survives, but it may well be a mercy that it was never published. I have a copy of 'Part Second' in my own collection, and well remember the book dealer who sold it to me apologising that it was not complete, lacking the first part, to which I replied that it was a pity, but I had better have it anyway!

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Alan Glover for checking various queries in the Central Council Library, and for the loan of the Central Library copy of Thackrah's book.



A TRIAL OF SKILL
IN THE
Art of Change Ringing upon Ten Bells.

GENTLEMEN,
We respectfully inform you that a Trial of Skill in the art of Change Ringing, upon Ten Bells, will take place in the Tower of St. Peter's Church, Huddersfield, on Monday, the 25th day of September, 1863, when the following Prizes will be awarded for the best True Peals of Kent Treble Bob Royal, consisting of 2,000 Changes—or 1,600 Changes—according to the number of Companies that may enter:—

		2,000	THE PEAL.	1,600	THE PEAL.
			M. W. H.		M. W. H.
1st Prize,	Twelve Guineas	04352	1 . 1	62534	2 1 3
2nd "	Nine "	52436	1 2 2	54320	1 1 2
3rd "	Six "	54320	. 1 2	23456	. 2 2
4th "	Three "	23456	. 2 2		

A Sum of Money will be given to each Company that does not obtain any of the above Prizes, as the Committee may think proper.

Our Bells will be open for practice up to 10th September, on Saturdays and Sundays; but no practice will be allowed on Saturdays after Seven o'clock.

The first page of the circular, inviting competitors for the ten-bell prize ringing, to take place at Huddersfield on Monday, 25 September 1865.

THE ART
OF
CHANGE RINGING.



BY
BENJN. THACKRAH.

CONTAINING, IN ADDITION TO THE AUTHOR'S OWN WORKS,
THE LATEST DISCOVERIES IN THE ART OF RINGING,
COMMUNICATED BY THE MOST CELEBRATED COMPOSERS OF THE KINGDOM.

DEWSBURY:
PRINTED FOR BENJN. THACKRAH, JUN., BY JOSEPH WARD.

1852.

The title page of the text book, written by Benjamin Thackrah sen., but published the year after he died.

Clements
OF
CAMPANALOGIA;
OR, AN
Essay on the Art of Ringing.

BY
WILLIAM SOTTANSTALL,
OF SOWERBY, YORKSHIRE.

CONTAINING:—

IN ADDITION TO THE AUTHOR'S OWN WORKS, THE
LATEST DISCOVERIES IN THE ART OF RINGING
COMMUNICATED BY THE MOST CELEBRATED
COMPOSERS IN THE KINGDOM, WHOSE
NAMES ARE ATTACHED TO THEIR
VARIOUS PRODUCTIONS.

PART SECOND.

HUDDERSFIELD:

PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF G. AND J. BROOK, WESTGATE.

1867.

The title page of Sottanstall's work. It is fortunate that 'Part First' was never published.