

Prolific Peal Ringers

21: JOHN THOMAS (1882 –1958)



John Thomas, usually known as “Jack”, was born in Bristol on August 22, 1882 and learned to ring with several of his brothers at St Michael’s, Bristol. He undoubtedly took to it like a duck takes to water, for it was a time when young learners got scant encouragement and had to demonstrate their ability to progress even to get a ring. His first peal was one of Stedman Triples on the back eight at St Stephen’s on Boxing Day, 1899, conducted by G T Daltry. His first surprise peal followed a couple of years later and was Superlative at All Saints, Bristol, whilst his first as conductor was one of Bob Minor at St Luke’s, Bristol on February 7, 1902. He now started to get invited into more peals.

He called Holt’s Original for his first handbell peal and this was the first handbell peal to be rung in Bristol. He called it many more times in his career. When William Pye was going to ring the tenor single-handed at Exeter Cathedral to a peal of Stedman Caters he invited Jack to ring the treble - a great compliment to the young man. He joined with the Bristol ringers in a peal of London Surprise Major at All Saints, Bristol: this was the first in the method in the city and also for the entire band. For his 100th peal he called Thurstan’s One-Part peal of Stedman at Long Ashton in May 1905.

He married Miss Margaret Tyler, daughter of the former bell-hanger of the firm of Llewellyns and James, at St Michael’s, Bristol on Monday, April 20, 1908. The Revd M Vickers, a ringer, conducted the service before a large number of change ringers. The ring of six was kept going before the ceremony and after their wedding breakfast they rang a course of Grandsire Caters on the handbells.

His work as a bell-hanger for Messrs Mears and Stainbank took him all over the country and many rural bands benefited from his ability as a ringer and skill as a conductor. He had a wonderful ear for ringing: most of his ringing and conducting were done by ear alone, never noticing if a bell was odd-struck. He gained as much pleasure from helping a struggling band as in ringing a peal with expert ringers and in his own quiet way he gave a great deal of valuable service to the Exercise.

On January 6, 1911 he went to Long Ashton and rang his 150th peal: of these he had conducted 50. Shortly after this he moved from Bristol to London and joined the Sunday service band at Edmonton, also ringing peals with William Pye’s band, James Parker’s Edmonton band and the Ancient Society of College Youths. He rang a good number with them, including; 12,160 Bristol Surprise Major at Knebworth, Herts on April 8, 1912 and the first “Name” peal on twelve bells, conducted by John Cheeseman at St Giles’, Cripplegate on November 23, 1912. He served in the RAF during WWI and whilst on the airfield had both arms broken by a whirling propeller blade. He obviously recovered from this and rang in the first married couples peal on handbells on December 7, 1919 and on tower bells on November 6, 1920. William Pye called his first peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus at Chelmsford Cathedral on March 28, 1921.

He married Amy R Johnson at the parish church of Hinton-on-the Green on June 2, 1937 and they made their home in Enfield. She was a well-known ringer in Worcestershire ringing circles and a very competent peal ringer. They rang two “married couples” peals together, one of which was Stedman Cinques at Leicester. Amy later became the first lady to ring 500 peals with one of non-conducted Stedman Triples at Salford Priors, Warwicks on Jan 31, 1953.

In 1938 he was selected for one of the “Leading Conductor” series and this spoke highly of his abilities and service and particularly of his skill in being able to ring two tower bells to a peal. He rang the first peal of Double Norwich on two

tower bells at Corston, in Somerset, on July 13, 1928.

During the dark days of the war he and Mrs Thomas kept the art alive with handbell peals and on March 14, 1943 he rang Holt’s Original for his 500th peal. When the ban was lifted later in 1943 they taught a new young band at Edmonton and over the next three years the floodgates opened and many peals were recorded week by week with this band of young ringers, assisted by other stalwarts such as Charles W Roberts. In December 1946 Jack retired from the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and they went to live at Hinton-on-the-Green. At this point in time his peal total had reached 688.

During the next nine years he was very active both in tower and handbell ringing. It was not mere peal grabbing: a great deal of spadework was done with less-experienced ringers, which was reflected in the quality of the local ringing. On June 18, 1955 he went to St Stephen’s, Bristol and on the bells, on which he had rung his first peal, called his one thousandth - a peal of Stedman Caters. Of these, 621 had been rung on tower bells, (conducted 272) and 379 (conducted 216) on handbells. During the next three years he rang a further 61 peals, his last being at Great Comberton, Worcs on August 23, 1958 where he called a peal of seven Minor methods. His final total was 1061 peals, conducted 515.

On September 20, 1958 he was at a meeting in Painswick and was asked to call a touch of Stedman Caters. The band was not really strong enough so after about halfway he stood the bells up and started to walk away. He suddenly collapsed to the floor and despite all efforts to revive him passed peacefully away. He died as he had lived, peacefully and without fuss.

He had just passed his seventy-sixth birthday. His widow, Amy and other members of the family attended the funeral at S Peter, Hinton-on-the-Green, together with many village members and a large number of ringing friends. After the service and committal a course of Grandsire Triples was rung around the grave by four friends followed by a peal of Double Norwich Court Bob Major with his favourite composition. It was a fitting finale.

References

Bell News 08/107 11/652 *Ringing World* 37/390 38/573 52/89 55/418,441 58/645,673 (53/121 87/803)