

Prolific Peal Ringers

5: GEORGE WILLIAMS (1857-1949)



George Williams was born at East Meon, Hampshire, on May 7, 1857 and, after being educated at the Dane's School, Corhampton, was apprenticed to a miller at Droxford. He learnt to ring on the four bells at Droxford, but transferred his allegiance to the neighbouring tower of Soberton when they were augmented to eight in 1883. Here he took his first steps in change-ringing but, to improve, he needed to cycle on his penny-farthing cycle sixteen miles each way to Southampton to practise plain courses of Grandsire Triples. One of his recollections in doing this was ringing half-muffled when Dr Livingstone's body was brought ashore on its last journey to Westminster Abbey.

His first peal was Holt's Ten-Part of Grandsire Triples at Soberton on January 17, 1884. A band had travelled from Leatherhead to ring this, the first peal for the Winchester Diocesan Guild to be rung in the county of Hampshire. His first peal as conductor was also Grandsire Triples at Soberton, rung a year later. His ability as a conductor soon became apparent and his 50th peal, rung in 1889, was his 35th as conductor and had been rung in twenty-six different towers.

On October 15, 1881, he married Martha, the girl from Meonstoke, just down the road. Martha, who was born on November 16, 1860, would later make history as the first member of her sex to ring a hand bell peal, one of Grandsire Triples on May 24, 1892, conducted by George.

It was about this period of his life that he lived for two short periods near Midhurst, Sussex and Capel, Surrey, where he built up good ringing bands in both places. At Midhurst he trained two complete bands at the same time, calling the duplicate one his "second eleven"!

About 1891 he moved to Brighton and, with George Attree, built up the famous company that scored so many "firsts" in Surprise methods. Keith Hart and Frank Bennett were two other prolific peal ringers who were members of this band.

It was largely due to George's energy and enthusiasm that ringing in Hampshire moved on from early nineteenth century attitudes. He saw it develop from "Stony" and Grandsire Triples to Surprise Royal and he called the first peal in the county in many different methods. He was friendly to first-pealers and the number of ringers he shepherded through their first peal was probably greater than any other conductor of his time.

He was elected a member of the Central Council on its formation and enjoyed a continuous membership, missing only five meetings. From 1891-1896 he represented the Winchester Diocesan Guild; 1897-1905 Sussex County Association; 1906-17 Honorary member; 1918-27 Winchester Diocesan Guild; 1928-49 Winchester & Portsmouth Diocesan Guild. He also served on the Peals Analysis Committee. At a district level he was general secretary of the Winchester Diocesan Guild 1912-17 and Ringing Master 1918-49.

He joined the North Stoneham tower in 1905 and was largely instrumental in raising the funds to augment them to a ring of eight. As a golden wedding gift he gave two more trebles to make them into a very light ring of ten; a further gift he made to the church was a beautiful oak screen. This was as a memorial to his wife who died on November 1, 1935. Amongst his civic duties he was a parish councillor, chairman of the West End Liberal Party and a member of the Central Body of the Hampshire and General Friendly Society.

He rang 1,504 tower bell peals, of which he conducted 1,034; four handbell peals of Grandsire Triples, conducting them all; 6720 London Surprise Major, at that time the longest peal of London with the tenors together, on the death of Queen Victoria at St. Peter's Brighton and, with William Pye, the first peal on Exeter Cathedral bells in 1902 where the tenor was turned in single-handed.

He died in his sleep at his home on January 28, 1949, aged 91.

References

Bell News 89/246 91/124 92/431 93/498,385x
94/218 95/333 97/8,12 01/252 02/499 07/407
11/406 14/94,

Ringing World 12/99,12 22/617 31/683 37/319
38/27 39/481,485 49/59,65,71 50/173