

Biographical Record

William CHATTELL (1806 – 1875)

William Chattell was born on 8 August 1806 – by all accounts a restless and irritable spirit. He was the son of a farm labourer in Irthlingborough. His father and grandfather appear to have been bellringers. He started work on the land but disliked it and so moved to shoemaking, which he also found he disliked so he settled for becoming a baker. He spent much of his younger life roaming the country and, at some point, arrived in Leicester. He didn't make much progress in ringing since, as a journeyman, he didn't have enough time to give to it, but a travelling bookseller helped him obtain a copy of *Clavis Campanologia* which he studied during his night work. This helped him discover the workings of a peal and how to conduct.

Early in 1833 he left Leicester, visiting London, Exeter, Salisbury and Bristol on foot, then went on to Worcester, Bromsgrove and finally Birmingham. His shoes were falling off his feet when he arrived but he didn't want to embarrass himself by ringing with the Birmingham ringers in that state. He joined Mr Perks, flour dealer and baker, and in six months made a good enough impression with his work to stay on and help Perks' widow after his employer died that October.

On Sunday mornings, when he had sold all his bread and cakes, he went along and joined the practice at the Cathedral, for such were common in those days. Here he discovered that all were present bar a bob-caller. Chattell admitted to being able to call an eighteen score of Grandsire Minor which was duly rung. From then onward "the baker began to be somebody".

In Birmingham he got the help he needed to progress and Mr Hopkins saw his potential 'for the back end'. The legendary Elijah Roberts, who could tap whole peals on handbells, began took him in hand and in a short time an attempt at a peal of Grandsire Triples was made. It would seem that Chattell rang the worst-going bell in the tower and the peal failed. Some fudging must have gone on in a subsequent attempt when Roberts wasn't ringing but listening and noticed two part ends come up the same! Soon after this a legitimate peal was rung at Aston.

By July 1834 Chattell was conducting peals and extending his prowess to the tenor at St Philip's, which he turned in to Grandsire Royal to general acclaim. In 1841 the steeple keeper died and Chattell saw his opportunity to gain control over the ringing. He did a deal with the beadle, who knew nothing about ringing, but it meant he had to let the beadle have a proportion of the ringers' hard-earned cash. The ringers walked out and this was the first of Chattell's legendary run-ins with the ringers. He turned this to his advantage and taught a fresh band, possibly persuading some young ringers from Aston to ring at St. Philip's. Many of the younger recruits, who had been given scant attention by the old guard, flourished under Chattell's guidance. Just before the split Chattell had taken part in a peal of Stedman and, so entranced was he by its beauty that he swore never to ring anything else! At about this time he came upon John Day, a brass work manufacturer, gas fitter and a chronicler of ringers' activities in and around Birmingham at the time, leaving us invaluable information about the current ringing scene.

Things were not going well in Charlotte Street where Chattell was working and he took a bake house in Pope Street where John Day's parents lived. This started his relationship with John on a good footing. John went with William to watch the ringing and was awestruck. William offered to teach him and in return gave John the chiming bell to ring. John never failed in his duties. This

story might have gone better but for the influence of mischief-making busy bodies and William Chattell's predisposition to intemperance. Other ringers and composers made their way to Chattell's domain and were, at first, welcomed. Together these ringers managed to ring a peal of Stedman Caters, conducted by Chattell. However, these other ringers had greater inter-personal skills and were lured away from Chattell, tired of his overbearing attitude.

There were meetings at the Ring of Bells, attended by most ringers. Influenced by drink, Chattell usually ended up insulting one or other of the ringers including Henry Johnson. The involvement of William Andrews, a known mischief-maker didn't help. After some repairs of St Martin's bells there was the capability to ring Cinques but a failed peal attempt, and the post mortems after it, caused further friction. Hopkins, with the money and Chattell with the know-how could have made the ringing a going concern. Further efforts at 'friendly' cooperation were made in 1847 when a 10 at West Bromwich was made up. Johnson arranged a dinner and gave Chattell a ticket which he took with the usual lack of grace. There was a severing of relationships with John Day when the latter felt unable to leave a sickly family at 7.30 on a Sunday morning to ring at 8.15, as his wife needed him. Much sniping went on when Day next appeared and he left for good, though his old teacher didn't think twice about asking him again when he needed him!

In 1859 the combined teams of St Philip's and St Martin's rang a peal of 10,047 Stedman Caters at Aston, composed by Johnson and conducted by John Perks – tutored by Chattell but who had surpassed him. This gave rise to further acrimony and drinking. Once again Perks and Day were forced to leave and spent their time reviving the St Martin's ringing. In due course they were able to attempt a peal of Stedman Cinques. Knowing how much their old tutor wanted to ring this method they organised James William Haywood and J Billingsley to invite him. He accepted on the condition that his friend, Charlie Shaw, could also ring. One of the band stepped down in favour of Shaw and a good peal was rung – 10,047 by Henry Johnson in 6 hrs and 16 mins. Even so Chattell commented that "it was not much to crack about". They must really have felt some gratitude and affection for this curmudgeonly old grouch to lean over backwards for him!

His health deteriorated: his legs troubled him and his breath was bad. He continued to teach the young and abuse the old. His last peal was about 1870 calling Lates' 5024 Treble Bob Major from the treble at Bishop Ryder's Church. His health got worse and he became abusive towards customers, to the detriment of his business. He was admitted to the Little Sisters of the Poor hospice but only lived a few weeks. Henry Johnson probably paid for his stay at the hospice and for his funeral. He was buried in Harborne Churchyard, and a witness described the funeral as one of the most motley affairs ever witnessed.

Chattell's influence revived Birmingham ringing, which was at a very low ebb when he arrived. He taught more young ringers than anyone else. Many of them proved to be very talented, holding their own in the tower and on handbells so he must have been a prodigiously good teacher. He was also famous for his outings, which were really peal tours in all but name!



Reduced from John Eisel's *Giants of the Exercise* (from [CC Publications](#) and *Belfry Life in Birmingham c.1780-1860: The Recollections of John Day*, Ed: David Ingram and Richard Jones