

Essay for the Friends No. 6

Snowdon's Ropesight



One of the most important facilities to be acquired by a beginner in the art of change ringing is that of ropesight, the ability to pick out the next bell to be followed in the changes. The choice of this word by Jasper Snowdon to be the title of his textbook on basic change ringing, the most influential elementary text that has ever been published, was thus most appropriate.

The second son of the vicar of Ilkley, Yorkshire, he was born in 1844 and learned to ring in 1861. However, he soon gave it up and did not recommence until 1870, when he formed the Ilkley Amateur Society. Although a fine practical ringer, it was through his writings that his name became so well known to the Ringing Exercise. In the 1870s a number of important articles appeared in the pages of *Church Bells*. His first book, published in 1877 in conjunction with Robert Tuke, was a transcript, with commentary, of the records of the Union Scholars of London. In 1878 he published *A Treatise on Treble Bob* Part I, with Part II appearing in June the next year.

At the time that *Ropesight* was written, there were only two basic textbooks for beginners available, those written by Troyte (see *Essay...No.4* and *Update*) and *Changeringing Disentangled*, written by the Rev. Woolmore Wigram. In 1879 Jasper Snowdon was asked to recommend a textbook for a band of learners but on carefully looking over these two books realised their shortcomings. He therefore decided to write a suitable elementary text based on his own experiences, the first pages of which were written on 15 September, and the Preface on 1 November. The first completed copies were received from the printers on 15 November, only two months after the book had been conceived. It differed from previous texts in that it was devoted solely to Plain Bob, using this as the means of teaching

the basic principles of change ringing. Costing 1s. (5p.), it was first advertised in *Church Bells* on 15 November, where there was comment on the necessity for such a book. A fortnight later Henry Dains, then Master of the Royal Society of Cumberland Youths, published a letter of support. The virtues of the book were more extensively extolled in a review in the issue of 13 December (Appendix) and such was the demand that the print run of 500 copies was sold out by April 1880.

In a letter that appeared in *Church Bells* on 10 April Snowdon stated that he hoped to bring out another work on the best-known methods, and at the same time issue a second edition of *Ropesight*, and in a second letter in *Church Bells* on 29 May he asked for criticisms of the book that he might improve the clarity of explanation. This second edition - which cost 1s. 6d. (7½p.) post free - was ready in October 1880, before what became *Standard Methods* (to be dealt with in a future essay). The book had been rewritten, much being added to the earlier chapters and to the chapter on seven and eight bells, and was again much praised in a review in *Church Bells*. (It is worth noting that in 1882 Troyte added a chapter on Plain Bob to the fourth edition of his *Change Ringing*, evidently as a result of the success of *Ropesight*). The length of the print run of the second edition of *Ropesight* is not known, but it is likely to have been more than the first edition, and so it remained in print for somewhat longer: it was not until July 1882 that Snowdon announced in *Church Bells* that the book was effectively out of print and that there were plans for a third edition. This took longer to prepare than the second edition and was not reviewed in *Bell News* until 2 June 1883. Although it was 14 pages longer than the second edition the price remained the same.

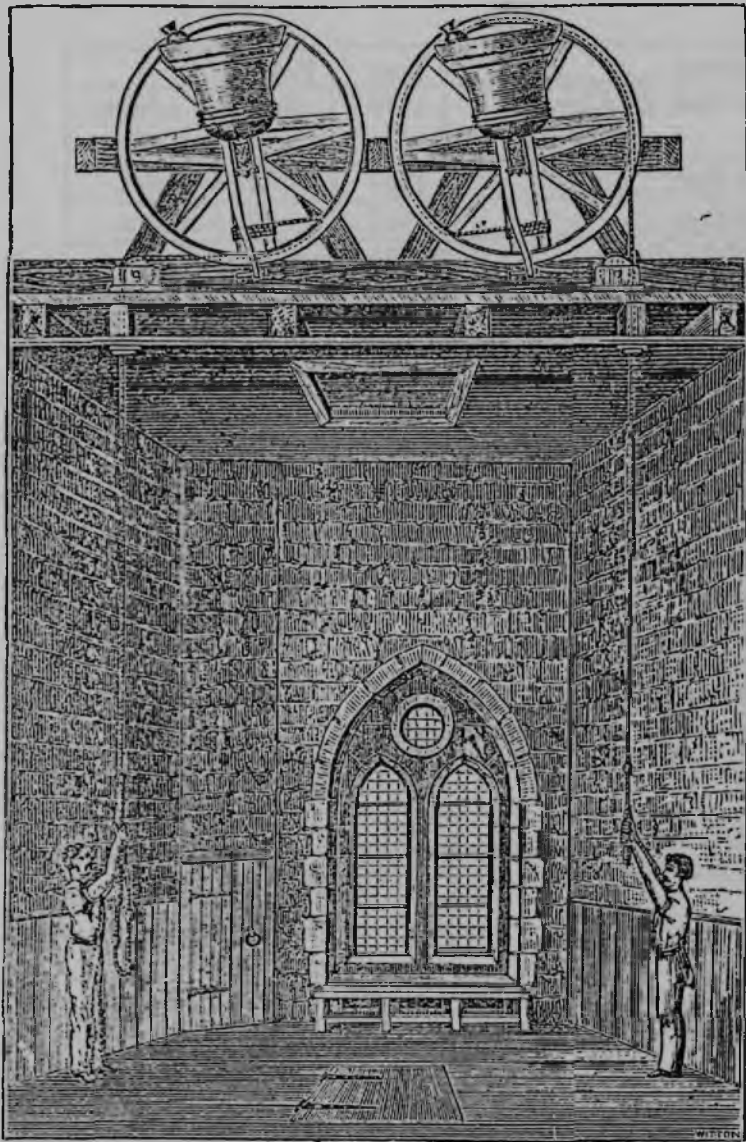
Jasper Snowdon died in 1885 and when a fourth edition of *Ropesight* appeared in 1891 it was stated to be 'revised and corrected by Wm. Snowdon' - a younger brother. For this

edition William Snowdon added a chapter on Striking and in the fifth edition of 1900 added a chapter on Rope Splicing. A chapter on Proof of Bob Major was added to the sixth edition of 1910, and with this the book assumed the form in which it is familiar today.

William Snowdon died in 1915, but *Ropesight* and other books in the Snowdon series continued to be published and distributed by his widow, Mrs. Laura Snowdon, with much help from her daughter, Miss Margaret Snowdon. Distribution was taken over by Margaret Snowdon for the ninth edition of 1936 although the *Preface* was written by Mrs. Laura Snowdon, who, sadly, became blind at about this time. She died in 1941 at the advanced age of 91. Margaret Snowdon died in 1962 and *Ropesight* could have become defunct, but a thirteenth edition was published by Christopher Groome in 1970 and a reprint in 1975.

A list of the various editions of *Ropesight* is given below. There are copies of all but the first edition in the CC Library, and I am indebted to Fraser Clift for the loan of a copy of this edition to help in the preparation of this Essay. In general the copies of the earlier editions have been well used, and certain of the CC Library copies have lost their outer covers. The typical outer cover associated with *Ropesight*, based on a drawing of two ringers that appears inside the book (Fig. 1), was certainly in use from the third edition onwards, but whether the second edition had such a cover I am unable to say. The cover of the first edition was the same as the title page (Fig. 2).

Edn	Publisher	Printer (if known)	Year	Pages
1st	Jasper W Snowdon, Old Bank Chambers, Leeds	The Yorkshire Post, 23 Albion Street, Leeds	1879	viii+79 +adverts
2nd	Wells Gardner, Darton & Co, 2 Paternoster Buildings	The Yorkshire Post	1880	X+117+ adverts
3rd	Wells Gardner, Darton & Co, 2 Paternoster Buildings	The Yorkshire Post	1883	X+131+ adverts
4th	Wells Gardner, Darton & Co, 2 Paternoster Buildings	J W Petty & Sons, Leeds	1891	viii+134+ adverts
5th	Wells Gardner, Darton & Co, 3 Paternoster Buildings		1900	Viii+14+ adverts
6th	Leeds: William Snowdon, 24 Basinghall Street	Fred R Spark & Son, Cookridge Street, Leeds	1910	viii+144+ adverts
7th	Mrs Laura Snowdon, Cartmel, Lancashire	Whitehead & Miller Ltd, Elmwood Lane, Leeds	1923	viii+144+ adverts
8th	Mrs Laura Snowdon, Cartmel, Lancashire	Whitehead & Miller Ltd, Elmwood Lane, Leeds	1929	viii+144+ adverts
9th	Miss Margaret Snowdon, Cartmel, Lancashire	Whitehead & Miller Ltd, Elmwood Lane, Leeds	1936	viii+144+ adverts
9th rep	Leeds: Whitehead & Miller Ltd		1944	viii+144+ adverts
10th	Leeds: Whitehead & Miller Ltd		1946	(vi)+144 +adverts
11th	Leeds: Whitehead & Miller Ltd		1950	(vi)+144
12th	Leeds: Whitehead & Miller Ltd		1955	(vi)+144
13th	Christopher Groome, Burton Latimer, Kettering, Northants.	William Lewis, Cardiff	1970	(vi)+144
1975 rept	Christopher Groome, Burton Latimer, Kettering, Northants	Dalkeith Press Ltd	1975	(viii) +144



HAND-STROKE.

BACK-STROKE.

Figure 1. Drawing used to illustrate *Ropesight*

ROPE-SIGHT;
AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE ART OF CHANGE-RINGING.

BY

JASPER WHITFIELD SNOWDON,

*President of the Yorkshire Association of Change-Ringers;
also a Member of the Ilkley Amateur Society of Change-Ringers; the Ancient
Society of College Youths; the St. James's Society of Change-Ringers; the Waterloo Society of
Change-Ringers; the Norwich, Gloucester and Bristol, and Durham Diocesan
Associations of Change-Ringers; and the Guild of Devonshire Ringers.*

PRICE ONE SHILLING.

LEEDS :
PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF THE YORKSHIRE POST, 23, ALDION STREET.

1879.

Figure 2. Title page of the first edition of *Ropesight*.

APPENDIX

Review of *Ropesight* that appeared in the issue of *Church Bells* of 13 December 1879.

BELLS AND BELL-RINGING.

'ROPE-SIGHT: an INTRODUCTION to CHANGE-RINGING.'

By Jasper Whitfield Snowdon.

Mr. Snowdon has written a book that is very much wanted. In the present state of Change-ringing it is not an uncommon thing to find a band of men who want to learn the mysteries of Change-ringing, and who yet do not know how to set about it. A clergyman sometimes finds himself in charge of a ring of bells, and he naturally wants to make the best of them, as of all other appliances in his parish. He finds a set of round-ringers, who pull and catch the ropes with cart-horse strength, and then say that ringing is harder than mowing, and, of course, requires more beer. His ring of bells gives him a fine field for benefiting the more thoughtful and refined of his youthful parishioners. But how can he do it? This book undertakes to show him.

Mr. Snowdon is peculiarly fitted for the post of teacher of such a party. An accomplished ringer himself, such as few can expect to equal and none to excel, he has, nevertheless, not rung from childhood. He has been in this dilemma himself. He cannot say he rang a 5000 before he was fifteen; and he would not have written so good a book if he could: for he would have forgotten his early difficulties, and so got into the peculiar phraseology of ringing that it would have become his natural language. He would have forgotten that these phrases are pretty sure to be read the wrong way by a beginner; especially a beginner without a teacher. The omission of a comma causes hours of thought, which a man, who is not a man of leisure, cannot give. Dodge in 3 4 up is pretty sure to be read dodge in thirty-four up; in and out at 2 is sure to be read in at 2 and out at 2.

Now this book avoids these things and explains these difficulties. It only undertakes to teach Plain Bob; and this system is the foundation of all ringing. Treble Bob, the Surprise peals, are all superstructures built upon Plain Bob. Mr. Snowdon thinks, and rightly, that if a man can ring Plain Bob well, he can easily go on to other systems without much further instruction; and that he will be in a position to understand at once what is said in any book about them.

But for any system what this book professes mainly to teach is essential, namely, the management of a bell and the power of reading the ropes. The former is a matter of practice, as the preface says; but even that may be much curtailed if Mr. Snowdon's teaching be followed. But reading the ropes is like reading a book. When a child learns to read it spells out the letters, and is confused by the words, especially if the words be hard and the print small. So a novice, entering a tower, sees nothing but confusion: the ropes seem all to come together, especially if the bells are rung quickly. But a good reader reads words, not letters: and yet he sees at a glance, by the look of a word, whether it is misspelt. And so a ringer sees at once who is leading, who is behind, which is dodging with which; and he can stand behind any ringer and follow his bell right through the peal. Now the more

carefully a young ringer attends to the directions of this book the sooner will he learn to read the ropes. If he neglects them he will still learn by practice: but he is like a person learning to read without an instructor, or who is careless of instruction. He will do it in time, but in a long time.

Mr. Snowdon adopts the plan of commencing with three bells. It would have been better if he had followed Mr. Troyte's plan, and began with two. Then he adds a fourth, then a fifth, and so on. At first there cannot be too few bells, nor can they be rung too slowly. It teaches the beginners to keep their bells up, and they can see the ropes more clearly when they go slowly; and the addition of an extra rope is a very serious addition to the family, especially when it is about the sixth.

The author's remarks about teaching another how to deal with a bell for the first time are especially valuable. The writer of this article took the book into a belfry and did exactly according to the directions. He taught three persons successively to set a bell at hand and backstroke, so that he could sit down and watch them, without danger to themselves or the machinery. This was done in 2½ hours, and none of them had ever rung a bell before, or hardly touched one.

Books on ringing are generally to be obtained of the author or from a bell-founder, and are frequently out of print. This book is no exception to the first part of his statement. It must be obtained of the author, or of Messrs. Warner the bell-founders, at 1s., and postage. Of course a saving to the buyer is effected by this means. There is no twenty-five per cent, or thirteen copies for twelve as a bookseller's profit. But on the other hand the clergyman aforesaid would go to his bookseller, who would go to his catalogue, and tell him that there was no such book as *Rope-Sight*, and even when convinced of the fact would not get it except as a favour to a regular customer.
