

Prolific Peel Ringers

24: JOHN WORTH (1910-1969)



John Worth was born in Macclesfield on February 19, 1910 and educated at Christ Church C of E School. From here he went into business as a plumber, heating, sanitary and electrical engineer in which craft he was highly regarded by fellow engineers.

His introduction to ringing came about 1922 when he learned how to handle a bell at Christ Church, Macclesfield, taught by H Longden. However, he did not progress to change ringing until 1928 when William Gayes introduced the six young Sunday service ringers to Grandsire Doubles. They all rang their first peal, conducted by John, on June 3, 1929. Before the end of the year most of them had rung peals of Bob Minor as well as Kent and Oxford Treble Bob Minor, all called by him. All this was despite the eight bells being very difficult to ring as they were hung so high in the tower.

More peals followed the next year. The first on the eight at Christ Church together with the first by a band of Boy Scouts on Empire Day at Over. He also began his association with Norbury that lasted the rest of his life and made him and his ability as a conductor known throughout the Chester Guild.

Ringing was not his only sphere of interest. He had a long record of faithful service to the church, on the PCC and as the vicar's warden. Through his efforts the bells were lowered forty feet in the tower and two new trebles added to make a fine ring of ten.

He served as a Ringing Master in the Chester Diocesan Guild, first in one of the districts and later as Deputy Master of the Guild. He was also their Central Council Representative from 1951-4 and 1960-3, attending six meetings. He was a Freemason, a member of the Lodge of Unity 261. He was also an expert in the game of billiards, playing for the Macclesfield and District Billiard League, winning many prizes. He was also happily married, but with a non-ringing wife, although his two daughters and son all took it up!

But ringing was his main activity. His one hundredth peal was at Hazel Grove on November 11, 1933 when he conducted London Surprise Major. He had called fifty-five of these: of his next one hundred peals he called no fewer than eighty-six!

In 1938, No 23 of the "Leading Conductors" series carried an article on him and described him as one of the conductors who helped make ringing history in the early 1920s, for he led the Norbury band that carried on the record breaking exploits in spliced Treble Bob Minor. They raised the total methods in seven extents to 51 and after their Lincolnshire rivals had pushed it further to 61, raised it even further to 73. This was the outward side of his ability: lesser known was his encouragement of up-and-coming conductors whom he helped and nourished.

He called the first peal in four-spliced Surprise Major for the Chester Guild in 1935. This involved training the band in learning the methods lead by lead, something that is common now but largely unknown at that time. Without his great patience and good humour at the practice sessions it would have been more difficult and taken much longer.

Some of his notable peals include the first of Surprise Maximus by a resident Cheshire band at St Michael, Macclesfield on December 6, 1947; the record peal of 21,600 Bristol Surprise Major rung at St Chad's, Over on November 10, 1950. The degree of concentration required to conduct this peal was so great he gripped the rope so tightly that his fingernails all went black and it took six months them to return to normal! Another

long peal was 15,480 Cambridge Surprise Royal at Worsley, Lancs on December 10, 1951. Other record lengths included 8,032 Spliced Surprise in eight methods, 9,568 in ten methods and 13,440 in six methods. Perhaps two unusual peals of Spliced Surprise Major should be mentioned, one at Bray, Ireland and the other at Paisley, Renfrew. He travelled to both of these by aeroplane, which wasn't the sort of transport ringers used in 1951!

Described as "The crowning event of his career", his 1000th peal was at his home tower of Christ Church, Macclesfield on December 2, 1961. The method he chose was London Surprise Major, and he asked his great friend, Edward Jenkins, another thousand pealer, to conduct it. In total he rang 1137 peals, of which he conducted 614.

In February 1962 he became ill and was out of ringing for seven months. He appeared to make a good recovery but those who knew him well were not convinced. He rang a peal of Yorkshire Surprise Maximus at Liverpool Cathedral on February 16, 1969 and the band, filled with elation at their success, went to Lincoln Cathedral the following week on February 23 for a peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus. As the band was walking up the hill to the cathedral John Worth collapsed and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. He was 57.

Over 300 ringers and friends joined the family at the funeral at Christ Church, Macclesfield on Thursday, March 2, 1969. The Vicar, The Revd Dick Rees led the prayers and gave the address. A course of Grandsire Caters was rung on handbells during the service followed by the committal at Macclesfield Crematorium.

Amongst his tributes, one writer described him as a conductor of high capability and no mean psychologist, who devoted considerable time and thought to the learner on whom the future depends: perhaps the last word should go to Robert B Smith, one of John Worth's friends and author of "My Life Among the Bells". He wrote: "John was an inspiration to us all – not only for his obvious talent as a ringer but his genius for encouraging us all to reach our maximum potential in the kindest possible way."

References

Ringing World 1938/393 1950/746 1957/123 1961/862 1962/2 1967/198,339 1996/321

My Life Among the Bells, R B Smith, 1999 p41