

## Prolific Peal Ringers

### 2: WILLIAM PYE (1870-1935)



William Pye was born at Chadwell Heath, Essex, on August 14, 1870, the fourth of the seven children of Daniel and Ann Pye. His older brothers, John (born 1858) and Alfred (1861) both learned to ring although his sister Sarah (1867) probably wasn't permitted. However, his three younger brothers, George (1873), Ernest (1877) and Albert (1879) all rang, and the middle four boys made the name of Pye known throughout the ringing exercise. Of them all, the greatest ringer was William Pye.

Like the rest of his family, "Bill", as he was known, started tower bell ringing at the five-bell tower of Little Heath, Essex, in 1882. The church has since been demolished. He already had a basic knowledge of change ringing for he rang a 720 of Bob Minor on handbells in 1881. It wasn't until he started eight-bell ringing several years later that his ringing progressed and he rang his first peal at Brentwood, Essex, on October 26, 1889, one of Grandsire Triples, conducted by Ackland J Perkins.

It was not easy to get invited into peals. At that time conductors preferred to invite ringers of proven ability and not provide ropes for the inexperienced and it was a year before he rang a second peal of Grandsire Triples. Meanwhile, he was attending practices at Walthamstow where the tower captain did give him the opportunity to call touches and quarter-peals of Stedman Triples so he decided he would arrange and call his own peals.

This did not run smoothly at first. Experienced peal ringers were reluctant to trust the calling to a young conductor with little record of success. However, after he conducted a peal of Stedman Triples at Walthamstow in 1894 he, with his brothers George and Ernest, gathered together a number of ringers and began to ring some peals. His big opportunity came in 1898. A T King, the secretary of the new Middlesex County Association, was working hard to get recognition for the society. He was prepared to obtain towers for peal attempts by guild members if Bill Pye would call the peals, enabling each of them to achieve his objective. The Middlesex County

Association became one of the foremost regional guilds and Bill Pye, in the course of time, became the most prolific peal ringer the world had seen.

He was not a big man, but he was certainly strong and had great stamina. He was employed as a platelayer on the railway, which probably kept him fit. He appeared to have indomitable energy for record followed record and his feats of heavy-bell ringing are legendary. They include 15,072 Double Norwich at Erith on April 3, 1899; 11,111 Stedman Cinques at Birmingham on December 26, 1901; 14,112 London Surprise Major at King's Norton, Worcs on May 11, 1903; ringing the tenor at Exeter (72 cwt) single-handed to a peal of Stedman Caters in 1903, the only time this had been accomplished; 18,027 Stedman Caters at Loughborough in 12 hours and 18 minutes on April 12, 1909. This was the first time the clock had been rung round and he rang the 30 cwt tenor and conducted the peal! His last long peal was 15,312 Cambridge Surprise Maximus at Ashton-under-Lyne in 1929 where he rang the tenor for eleven and a half hours!

He was also a very capable handbell ringer. He rang handbells before tower bells and, with brothers George and Ernest, rang peals of Stedman and Grandsire Triples in the mid 1890s. When Alfred was home from his army duties they rang brotherly peals of Kent Treble Bob Major as well and substituting William Keeble for Alfred they rang Superlative Surprise Major and New Cambridge. After practising for nearly a year this band finally achieved, on January 26, 1904, the first ever peal of London Surprise Major to be rung on handbells.

Many of his peals were scored on peal tours. They were usually very successful; he would tolerate no bad ringing. As C T Coles wrote of him, there were no lame ducks on his tours. He had a reputation to keep up and he would do nothing to impair it. Edwin Barnett recounted that in the first peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus after the Great War all went well until the last half-lead when a lapse by one of the ringers caused several bad blows. With the treble in 5-6 down Bill set his bell, remarking, "We can't have that; anyone outside will think the peal was cooked".

He was, however, very modest about his ringing career and his accomplishments. It was only with great difficulty he could be persuaded to talk about them. When approaching his 1000th peal the editor of *The Ringing World*, John Goldsmith asked him for a portrait to illustrate the forthcoming article and he was very reluctant to supply one; it was only under the greatest pressure that he consented to have it published.

His 1000th peal was one of Cambridge Surprise Royal, rung at St Clement Danes on December 16, 1911. He had conducted 752 of these. Only twelve were of Grandsire Triples and four of Plain Bob Major whilst over four hundred were in surprise methods. Some critics pointed this out and suggested that he hadn't helped many first pealers. However, he had enabled over fifty to ring their first peal of London and forty others their first peal of Bristol Surprise Major.

He married in 1906 and moved with his wife, Charlotte, to Leytonstone where he was recorded as working as a carpenter. He was elected Master of the Middlesex County Association in 1912, a position he retained until his death. He also

represented them on the Central Council from 1912 to 1923.

The first peal of spliced surprise major was rung in two methods at Whitley Bay, Northumberland in May, 1924. Bill Pye wanted to take part in this new development and arranged a series of peals in varying number of methods up to twelve, those from five to twelve being the first in that number of methods. Towards the middle of 1934 his health declined and, although he continued peal ringing until the end of the year, he was not really well. His last peal tour was to Cornwall in September and his last peal was Cambridge Surprise Major at Heavitree on September 22, 1934. He had a nervous breakdown the following December and was in hospital until his sudden death on March 8, 1935.

The funeral took place in the little country churchyard of Aldborough Hatch, Essex, where his first wife was interred. Amongst the mourners were his second wife and son, Mr E W Pye. Messrs C T Coles, R T Hibbert, E H Lewis, W Watson and J George rang a course of Grandsire Caters at the graveside. In subsequent months the ringers of Great Britain contributed to a memorial fund to his memory which paid for two treble bells to augment Leytonstone (his home tower) to a ring of eight. A memorial tablet of marble with lead letters recording the gift was placed in the church entrance porch. A peal board recording the 7,392 Cambridge Surprise Maximus at St Mary-le-Bow on December 19, 1925 in which he rang the 50cwt tenor for 5 hours and 38 minutes was also given to St Mary-le-Bow.

His final peal total was 1969, of which he conducted 1428. He rang 172 handbell peals, conducting 138 of them. When he rang his 1000th peal *The Ringing World* called him:

*"the greatest ringer of the time". Twenty years later when approaching his 2000th peal they said that there was "little need for a reappraisal" and he was still the greatest ringer of the time. When he died they commented:*

*"There passes the greatest ringer the Exercise has ever known. Judged from every angle of performance the late master of the Middlesex Association surpassed anything which ringers of this or any other generation have ever accomplished*

*"On all number of bells, on any weight of metal, he was a ringer par excellence; in any method or combination of methods he was a conductor with few equals and no superior.... A man of strong convictions and fearless in voicing his opinions, he was ever ready with appreciation of the achievements of others. Behind a rugged exterior was ever a warm heart, a generous nature, and one ever unostentatiously ready with tangible assistance for a friend in need."*

*RIP*

### References

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