

Unveiling of Blue Plaque for Rev. F. E. Robinson at Drayton, 22 May 2016

The name of the Reverend F.E. Robinson became familiar to me within a short time of me learning to ring – quite some time ago now. I learnt that Robinson was the first person to ring a thousand peals and that he had written a book *Among the Bells* to record his achievements. And one of the prized heirlooms of one of our ringers at Caversham is a copy of *Among the Bells*, so I became acquainted with the book from early on.

I have therefore been familiar with the name of the Reverend gentleman from early in my ringing career, and I feel it is now a huge privilege to be able to join in this ceremony of the unveiling of a Blue Plaque honouring the memory of the Reverend F. E. Robinson.

My brief today is to speak about Robinson's legacy to bell-ringing.

His legacy can be divided firstly into his achievements in peal ringing and the record of his peals in *Among the Bells*, and secondly his role in the formation of the organisational structure of bellringers.

A book review of *Among the Bells* appeared in the ringers' newspaper *The Bell News* in 1909 and a few extracts from it indicate why it became the popular book that it did. The review says: "No publication has ever been found to contain such a collection of photographs of churches as the volume lying before us." At the time that Robinson was ringing his peals, great steps forward were being taken in the development of photography, and it seems reasonable to say that he was an early exponent of the art, and fully perceived how photographs could enhance his book. As a comparison, *The Bell News* did not contain many, if any, photographs before the publication of *Among the Bells*, and it was not until after about 1912 that photographs started to appear more regularly, both in *The Bell News* and its rival newspaper *The Ringing World* which started publication in 1911. So this new book, full of photographs, must have been quite an eye-opener to its readers.

The book review also refers to the styles of church architecture evident in the photographs, so they stand as architectural evidence of how a substantial number of churches appeared at that time. And the review makes an observation on Robinson's influence in bell-ringing, when it says "His personality – and his pertinacity – has been the means in an extraordinary degree of establishing the practice of change-ringing at many churches where it had hitherto been unknown."

Among the Bells was published in twenty parts between 1904 and 1906, at a cost of 6d per part such as this [show copy]. It was then published as a single book in 1909 at a cost of 10s 6d [show copy]. A second edition of *Among the Bells* was published in the early twenties. So it had a wide circulation over twenty years and with the wealth of information it contained concerning many aspects of ringing, led the way in the development of the art.

So Robinson was the first person to ring a thousand peals, and out of interest the following are some notes about some other thousand-pealers:

- The second person to ring one thousand peals was William Pye in December 1911.
- The first person to ring two thousand peals was Ernest Morris in 1961.
- There are currently 494 people who have rung more than 1000 peals, 20 people have rung more than 4000 peals, and 4 have rung more than 5000 peals.
- The current record-holder has rung 6795 peals, and by one of those odd coincidences, lives not much more than a mile from here, in Milton.

I will now turn to the other aspect of Robinson's legacy, the administrative structures by which ringing is organised, both locally and nationally.

A simple way of looking at how the local structure, our Oxford Diocesan Guild, has developed, is by looking at its Annual Reports. The Guild has produced an Annual Report for each of the 135 years since it was founded in 1881 - except for 1977 for some reason.

Here are a few examples of these reports.

- This is an early one, for 1894 [show copy]. It bears the inscription "Guild Master's Copy" – so Robinson's own copy.
- This is the one for 1940 [show copy] – no disrespect intended to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but this is what *real* austerity looks like.
- And this is the report for last year [show copy] – if you can judge a Guild by its annual reports, then as you can see, Robinson's Guild is still going strong after 135 years.

And in terms of numbers of members of the Guild, in 1881, when the Guild was founded, it started with 314 members and 22 towers in union; as of last year there were 2430 members ringing in 305 towers.

Robinson also played a part in the setting up of the bellringers' national organisation, the Central Council of Church Bellringers. His role was mentioned in an article by Chris Mew in a very recent copy of *The Ringing World* about the formation of the Central Council. Chris Mew's article says: "Discussions took place in 1883 regarding the formation of a national body with the Reverend F. E. Robinson advocating a National Association."

I looked up the report of the discussions in *The Bell News*. They took place at a Ringers' Conference held at Reading on 4th Oct 1883 and a talk that Robinson gave does give us an insight into his approach and to his popularity with those whom he addressed. Robinson said "those who had the laying out of money on bells and towers should have the means of obtaining a better knowledge than they generally possessed of the right way to go to work [hear, hear]". And also "He himself had often been called in and asked to give advice, and generally found that the very thing he advised to be done had not been done [laughter]".

After visiting a tower with very difficult bells, Robinson said, "He afterwards advised the rector to discontinue employing the village blacksmith for the purpose of bellhanging."

And Robinson concluded, "Guilds and County Associations had now...existed for some time and he thought that what was now wanted was a central or National Association so that ringers could meet together once a year".

So, a central Association of ringers was what Robinson called for. Much discussion about the idea took place in the years following this conference, with Sir A. P. Heywood taking the leading role, but finally, eight years later, a central organisation for bell-ringers was set up in the shape of the Central Council. It continues to act in that capacity and still meets, as Robinson suggested, once per year.

The Reverend Francis Edward Robinson is now a legendary figure. He was not just a great bell-ringer and conductor of peals, but he was an innovator, one who could see what was needed for the future of his art, he was somebody who got things done and at the same time he was a jovial and humane man. It is very fitting therefore that his memory will be perpetuated by this blue plaque.