

Unveiling of Blue Plaque to FE Robinson, 22 May 2016

Francis Edward Robinson became a legend in his own lifetime. He died, and he's buried, in Wokingham – but it was during his 30 years here at Drayton that he made his mark on the world of bellringing.

He was born on 6th January 1833 at Begbroke House, the home of his grandfather Thomas Robinson, who was a wealthy banker. His father was the Rev Francis Robinson and his mother, Sophia was the eldest daughter of the Rev. Edward Rowden, vicar of Highworth Wiltshire. She was eight years younger than her husband, and not yet 21 when she gave birth to FE Robinson, who was the oldest of ten children. A year later the family moved to Stonesfield, where his father became Rector.

In 1846 Robinson went to school at Winchester College – his maternal grandfather had also been a scholar there. He excelled in maths at school and he went up to Exeter College, Oxford to read maths, and while he was there he learnt to ring. Also while at Oxford, and perhaps while at Winchester too, he came into contact with the Tractarian or Oxford Movement, which gave rise to the High Church Anglican tradition, and also spawned the Belfry Reform Movement in the late 1800s.

He graduated in 1853 with 4th class honours, which is rather low and has since been abolished. Whether that was caused by the distractions of undergraduate life we don't know – or it might be related to the fact that at the time Oxford held mathematics in very low esteem. Mathematical talent was concentrated in Cambridge, and even Charles Dodgson, who was Robinson's contemporary as a mathematician at Oxford, once advised a friend who was a promising mathematician to choose Cambridge rather than Oxford.

His low degree didn't hinder his career though. His grandfather Thomas owned the Old Bank in Oxford, and got him a job as a clerk. We don't know much about the fourteen years he

spent there. It seems he was absent quite a lot – but in due course he became a partner.

In 1859 he learnt to ring changes at Appleton, and his ringing took a major step forward. In October he rang his first peal, of Grandsire Triples at Appleton. I should explain for non-ringers that a peal is a continuous performance that typically takes around 3 hours to ring. It requires great concentration and a certain amount of stamina to stand for 3 hours.

A month later he rang another peal, of Kent Treble Bob Major, and in February he rang a peal of Stedman Triples, which was to become his favourite method. I can't explain the subtleties of different methods for those of you who aren't ringers, but suffice it to say that Stedman is a method of elegant simplicity that is also capable of huge variety.

In November 1861, aged 29, Robinson married Henrietta Barton, the daughter of the Rector at Churchill, and a year later their daughter Grace was born. But then in October 1863, less than two years after their marriage, Henrietta died tragically after a stillbirth. This was a turning point in Robinson's life. He was a widower at thirty, with a ten month old baby, and a job at the Old Bank that didn't interest him. He decided to go into the Church. After all, he'd been surrounded by clergy all his life.

In 1867 he married another clergyman's daughter, Mary Caroline Butler, with whom he had eight more surviving children: Frederick, Reginald, Arthur, William, Constance, Margaret, Carrie – and Vera. Vera learnt to ring in 1919, and in 1924 was the first woman to ring a peal at Wokingham – appropriately it was Stedman, her father's favourite method.

The year after he married, Robinson was ordained and he served his curacy at Tubney. Then in 1878 he was presented with the living here at Drayton, where he remained as vicar for the next thirty years.

FE Robinson is chiefly remembered for two things.

One is founding the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bellringers – one of many clergy inspired ringing societies. He was committed to the cause of Belfry Reform – to bring ringers who for centuries had operated autonomously, into the church and to recognise them as church workers. The clergy promoted change ringing, which they saw as an intellectually uplifting activity that would help raise the moral tone of the ringers, and they founded ringing societies to bring ringers together for mutual support.

By 1880 there were already three small ringing societies within the Oxford Diocese and Robinson played a key role in forming a larger society for the whole Diocese, which absorbed these smaller societies as branches.

In November 1880 there was a meeting in Reading to consider this proposal, and when it came to electing a committee, Robinson rose from the floor with a prepared list of names for who should be on it – 7 clergymen and 7 well known ringers. Of course his name was on the list – he was both a clergyman and a ringer.

A couple of months later at the Guild's inaugural meeting in Oxford he was elected as master, a post he held for 29 years.

Several times when he had serious illness he tried to stand down, but each time he was persuaded to stay on – and was still in office when he died.

The other reason he is remembered is as the first person to ring 1000 peals. He had only rung 18 when he came to Drayton in 1878, when he was already 45, and he had only rung 25 when the Guild was founded three years later. But ringing was now well and truly in his blood and peal ringing became a passion. He reached a thousand peals less than 25 years later – ringing an average of some forty a year.

He rang and conducted what he believed to be his 1000th peal here at Drayton on Wednesday 9th August 1905. Naturally it was Stedman Triples. Congratulations poured in from far and wide. After he died his records were found to be incomplete, so his thousandth peal had been somewhat earlier than he thought.

In all he rang some 1250 peals, in over 450 towers. As well as normal length peals he rang in several record lengths, some of which lasted over nine hours.

He was the first clergyman to ring a peal on the bells in his own parish church, and he rang in the first ever peal where all the ringers were clergymen.

But he wasn't just a capable and prolific ringer – he was also a proficient wood carver, and he carved the organ case, choir stalls and bench ends while he was here at Drayton.

When he was 75, illness eventually forced him to retire from the living here, and he moved to Wokingham. The rest obviously worked wonders because within a few months he was as fit, and as active as ever.

Wokingham is in the Sonning Deanery Branch of the Guild, and with such an eminent figure as Robinson moving in, the long-standing chairman felt it his duty to stand down so he could take over, which he duly did at the AGM in 1909.

A year later, on 22nd January 1910, he rang a peal in the morning, chaired the AGM in the afternoon, travelled to Beech Hill that night, and took four services the following day, which was very cold. And he then had a seizure.

By the following Friday he had recovered and began arranging a peal for Easter Monday.

But he had a second seizure, and he died on 16th February, bringing a remarkable life to its close.