

ALFRED WHITE

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

As the result of a fire during Frederick White's time of running the Company all of the early records were lost and so we only have snippets of information handed down by word of mouth and I am grateful to my nephew Chris White for the information he has acquired whilst researching our family tree. Thanks to Chris I am now in possession of copies of Alfred's will and death certificate

Alfred was born in 1804, the son of William and Sarah White, but as birth certificates didn't start until 1837 we have no idea of his actual birth date. We do know from Church records however that he was baptised on 3rd April, 1804 in APPLETON CHURCH so we can assume that he was born sometime during the first three months of that year.

Alfred was born one year before the battle of Trafalgar and one of the stories handed down through the family was that if Alfred was naughty as a young boy, he was told that old "Boney" (Napoleon Bonaparte) would come after him and he would run off and hide under the bridge over the stream situated at the entrance to Appleton.

In 1816-1817 Robert Southby, Lord of Appleton manor enclosed the original village green and apparently this caused uproar in the village. To appease the population, in 1817 he had the original three bells, cast at Chacombe, taken down and six new bells cast. They were cast and hung in a new bell frame by Thomas Mears of London and Alfred was one of the original six men taught to be a bellringer by Richard Pitman of Oxford. It was from this point that he started a lifetime of interest in bells and soon became the leader of the ringers. From this time on he was known as "The General". The new bells arrived in the village on 4th March, 1818 and Robert Southby paid for a feast which was held on the now enclosed village green. During the festivities the smallest of the new bells, the treble, was upturned and filled with beer and a good time was, we are told, had by all. This feast has been commemorated every year since without break and in Appleton to this day, even though the dinner is now held on the nearest Saturday in March, whatever date it happens to be it is known as 4th March day.

Alfred married Sarah Ridge in Ducklington Church on 19th July, 1830 and as the 1841 census shows him living in Lower High Street, Cumnor we can perhaps assume perhaps that he moved to Cumnor on marrying Sarah. We have records of four children born to Alfred and Sarah – there may have been more but we only have records of these four:

William Alfred White

Henry White

Frederick White

Eleanor White Born 28th, December, 1835

Baptised 13th March, 1831

Baptised 15th July, 1832

Baptised 2nd February, 1834

Baptised 31st January, 1836

All were baptised in Appleton Church so although living in Cumnor Alfred was keeping his ties with Appleton.

The 1851 census shows Alfred and Sarah living at the Greyhound in Besselsleigh where he was a Victualler and Blacksmith as well as running the village shop and bakery. We know that he was already hanging bells at this time and many an oak bell frame was constructed in the yard at the rear of this Inn by Alfred and his Sons.

Around this time he and others started a village band in Appleton and I quote from an advert *"The original Appleton Band are now open to fulfil engagements for Club Anniversaries etc. etc. All applications should be made to Mr Alfred White. The Greyhound Inn, Besselsleigh, Abingdon, Berks"*.

In 1854 and at his own expense, Alfred added two bells to the ring of six at Appleton to complete the octave and this necessitated the addition of a sound lantern on the roof of the tower to accommodate the extra bells. Alfred and his son Frederick also constructed the lantern and all of the work involved with this venture would have been carried out in the yard and in the forge here.

In 1861 The Revd Robinson, himself a bellringer taught by Alfred's son Frederick, whilst a curate at Appleton and Besselsleigh, gave two bells to augment the ring to ten and again the work was carried out by Alfred White and Sons. To further strengthen the tower a large wrought-iron band was placed around the top of the tower, just below the battlements and if you look through binoculars you will see stamped into each section of ironwork the initials AW

On 27th May 1867 he was appointed "Waywarden" of the parish of Besselsleigh in consequence of the parish having failed to nominate one which necessitated the appointment being made by the magistrate.

His wife Sarah died on 17th November, 1867 and he married his second wife, Elizabeth Bowler of Cumnor, on 1st September, 1868, the ceremony being in Besselsleigh Church conducted by the Revd. F. E. Robinson, now vicar of Drayton,

Alfred died at the Greyhound on 4th September, 1876 and was buried on 7th September in Appleton churchyard. A gravestone of wrought iron for Alfred was made in the forge by Alfred's son Frederick and it can still be seen on the south side of Appleton churchyard consisting of a platted iron ring containing ten bells around the inside of the ring together with a replica of the instrument Alfred played in the village band at the base of the gravestone. Frederick also made a similar gravestone for Jesse Avery of Besselsleigh, also a ringer at Appleton but this gravestone appears to have been removed from Besselsleigh churchyard.

Alfred carried out work on bells all over the country and we know that he worked in Yorkshire and has his name on one of the bells in Hereford Cathedral when he restored the frame and bells in 1865.

The Company continues to thrive having passed from Alfred, down through the family via Frederick, Alfred's son, who also designed and manufactured Church clocks. One of his clocks, if it has not been removed, is in the school just along the road from here. Frederick carried on the business at the Greyhound for a short time and indeed, whilst a refurbishment was taking place during Morland Brewery's ownership of the inn a fireplace was unblocked and some of his letters were found and placed in Morland's archives. Frederick eventually moved the business from here to the Three Horseshoes at Appleton and so it seems that Church Bellhanging and running a pub went together in those early days. Richard, Frederick's son was next in line followed by Frank, Richard's son and on finally to myself, Frank's nephew. Amongst thousands of other rings of bells, as a small Company we are proud to have rehung and continue to maintain the bells in St. Paul's Cathedral London, the bells at Windsor Castle, all the various Oxford college bells and those at the Cathedral in Oxford.

Unfortunately we do not have a photograph of Alfred and so have a photo of his gravestone in the "Company history" section of our website.

I have here the only piece of Alfred's paperwork left. All in his own handwriting and known amongst bell historians countrywide as "Alfred White's notebook. It records inscriptions cast on bells from all over the country, some of which have since been recast. It also contains details of ringing exploits by the Appleton Society of Change Ringers and even a list of persons executed at Oxford between 1822 and 1872.

I would like to thank The Oxford Blue Plaques board and in particular their secretary Eda Forbes for initiating the idea of a blue plaque for Alfred and to the landlord of the Greyhound for allowing it to be placed here.

I am extremely proud to think that after all these years a plaque has been placed here to recognise the vision Alfred had of starting a Church Bellhanging Company all those years ago, the oldest continuously trading Company of Church Bellhangers in the UK

**IT NOW GIVES ME THE GREATEST OF PLEASURE TO
UNVEIL ALFRED'S BLUE PLAQUE.**