

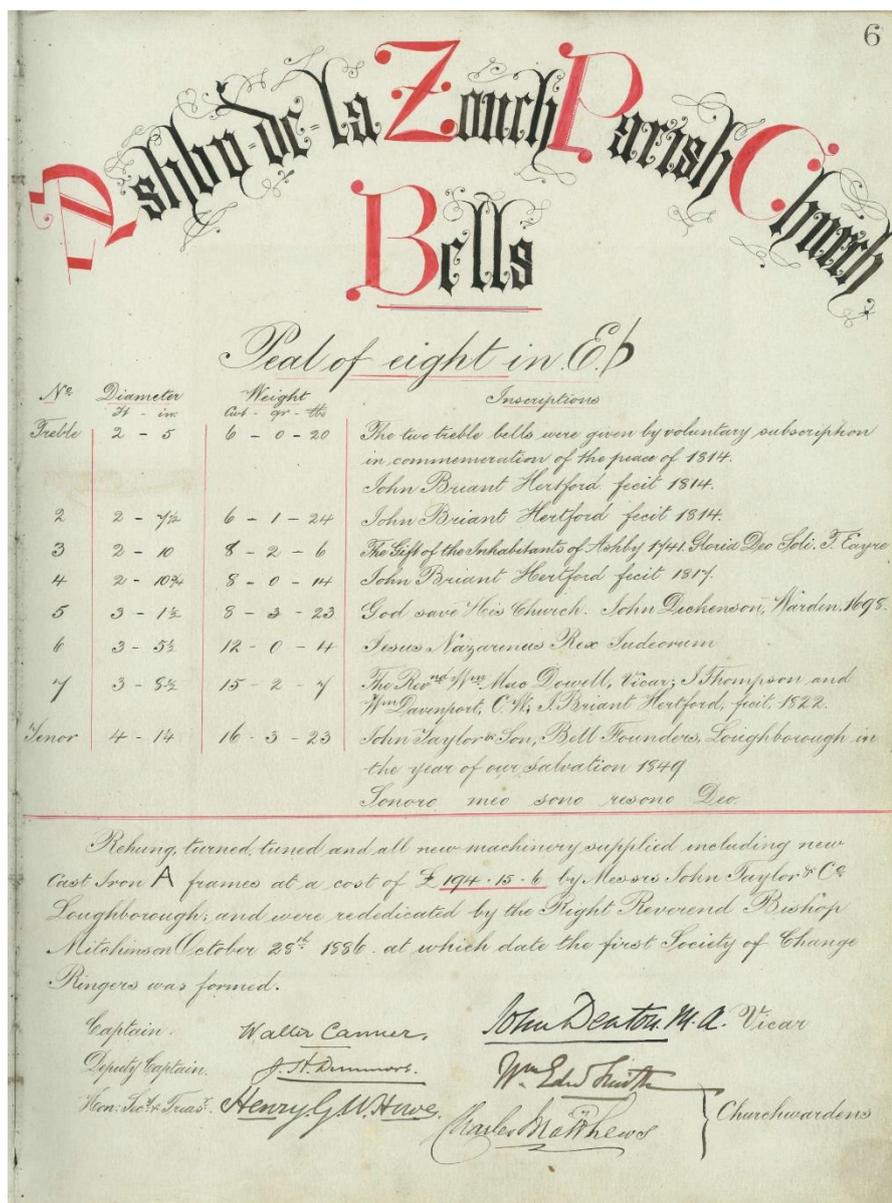
Golden Days for the Bell Ringers of St Helen's Church

On 5th November 1886, a report appeared in 'Church Bells,' about a service held in St Helen's Church, Ashby de la Zouch, on Thursday 28th October, to celebrate the opening and re-dedication of the church's eight bells. In 1886, the upper part of the Tower was renewed, four 'exceedingly large handsome pinnacles' were erected on it and the bells were despatched to Taylor and Sons of Loughborough, who turned and tuned them, then refixed them on new machinery, including new cast iron A frames, at a cost of £194 15s 6d.

The service was led by the Right Rev Bishop Mitchinson, Bishop of Peterborough

(Leicestershire being in the Diocese of Peterborough at that time). Standing beneath the tower arch, the Bishop said, 'By virtue of our sacred office we do solemnly set apart and separate from all profane and unhallowed uses these eight bells, given at various times to this church and parish; and now, after the recent work done at them, I declare them dedicated afresh to the glory of God, for the benefit of His Church.' The Bishop then gave the ropes to the Vicar, Canon John Denton, saying 'receive these bells as a sacred trust committed to thee, as the appointed minister of Christ in this church and parish, and take heed that they be only used in His service and for the benefit of His people.' Canon Denton then handed the ropes to the Captain, Mr W Carver¹, and the Deputy Captain, Mr Liggins, of the church's Bell Ringing Association, who handed them to members of the Midland Association of bell ringers, who rang 'a short peal of great beauty' under the direction of their President, Mr Percival Heywood. Most of the ringers that day were from the St Paul's (Burton) Society.

¹ This is a mis-print. The original captain was Mr Walter Canner.



Canon Denton was an extraordinary man, tireless in his work over almost 50 years in Ashby. A Yorkshire man by birth, he arrived in Ashby in 1854, immediately after his ordination as priest by the Bishop of Peterborough. His appointment was as Curate to the Rev Marmaduke Vavasour, but in October 1856 he was given a 'perpetual curacy' of Holy Trinity Church at the other end of the town, which had been built in 1839 as a chapel of ease for St Helen's. In 1857, he married Vavasour's third daughter, Mary Anne Elizabeth, and they set about producing a large family of their own. In 1860, he succeeded in raising sufficient funds to build the first vicarage for Holy Trinity Church and in 1866 he engaged architect James Piers St Aubyn and local builder George Lilley to extend Holy Trinity Church by erecting a Chancel 22 feet wide and 28 feet long to replace the 'mere recess' which had been the Chancel of the original church. An enlarged vestry, an organ chamber, new stained-glass windows and other decorative work were also part of the scheme, as well as alterations to the nave and a remodelling of the churchyard. Denton was also instrumental in the division of Ashby into two separate parishes, making him the first Vicar of Holy Trinity Parish. When Vavasour retired in 1875, Denton was appointed Vicar of St Helen's, where he immediately set about his most ambitious project, the extension and restoration of the old parish church, which took place between 1878-1880 at a cost of around £12,000. James Piers St Aubyn was the architect here too and George Lilley the main building contractor. With the extension of the church, pew rents became a thing of the past and the choir, previously an ad hoc group who sang from the rear balcony, became a formal robed group for the first time, singing from newly built stalls at the head of the nave. The work on the tower, reluctantly postponed in 1880 due to lack of funds, was the final act in completion of Denton's work and the formation of a Change Ringing Society would have added to his prestige and pride in his great work in the town.

The Church owns three important original documents, which help to explain the formation and progress of the Society. These are Ringers' Attendance Registers, 1886-1905 and 1926- onwards and a magnificent leather-bound Peal Book, given to the Society in 1889 by Robert Davenport, one of the original members of the Ashby Society. The earliest attendance register was returned to the church in April 1953, after it was purchased in a sale of the effects of former Ringing Association Secretary George Hatton after his death. Sadly, the Attendance Register from 1906-1925 has not yet come to light.



Ground floor ringing room at St Helen's, much as it would have been in 1886.

It is clear from the first page of the 1886 Attendance Register that the St Helen's ringers were inexperienced and being mentored by ringers from St Paul's Church in Burton on Trent, under the leadership of John Jaggard. It was mainly the St Paul's ringers who rang at the dedication service on 28th October and again on the following Sunday for both morning and evening services. It was noted in the Register that *"After the Evening Service we were visited by Mr Jaggard, Mr Wakley and Mr Griffin all of Burton, who also joined five of our own members in a short peal and afterwards expressed their satisfaction at the progress the members were making"*. What isn't clear is how long prior to the re-opening of the bells the Burton ringers had been teaching an Ashby band.

Again, on Saturday 18th December, *"a party of 6 Burton gentlemen visited the Tower and assisted by Messrs W Canner and J H Dunmore rang the plain course of Grandsire Triples."*

Walter Canner was an Ashby man through and through. Born in the town in 1863 and baptised at St Helen's Church, he was a house painter, like his father before him. His father held the additional role of Parish Clerk. He was a young man of just 23 when he became a founder member of the Ashby Society of Change Ringers. He was a regular conductor of peals from 1888 until around 1899, but an intermittent ringer after that. He became a publican for a while, running the 'Waggon & Horses' Inn on Lower Church street. From 1903 onwards he was listed in the Attendance Register as an 'honorary member.' Sadly, there are no records for the Society between 1906 and 1925. He died, aged 51, in 1915. Walter's brother, Herbert, was also a ringer at St Helen's for a while, but he left Ashby in 1891.

John Henry Dunmore would have been 22 when he too became a founder member of the Society in 1886. A Solicitor's Clerk, he spent his entire life in Ashby, working in the same solicitor's office. As well as being a bell ringer, he was for a chorister for 80 years and Secretary to the PCC. A half-muffled quarter peal was rung after his funeral in August 1952, at the age of 88.²

It's a pity that a copy of the rules of the new Ashby Change Ringing Society has not come to light, as discipline was strict and members were fined or suspended for breaking the Tower rules. Several names were 'struck out' of the register as a result of non-attendance without a good excuse. In December 1886, *"in pursuance of Rule III the name of JNO Grundy was struck out in consequence of non-attendance, he not making any excuse, at the same time admitting his not taking any interest in the art of change ringing"*.

At the formation of the Society in October 1886 there were 14 names on the Register. By April 1887, there were 24. Burton ringers' names appear regularly. Most prominent among them are John Jaggard, John Austin, William Wakley and Joseph Griffin. It seems probable that they travelled the 14 or so miles to and from Ashby by train.

John Jaggard was the most frequent visitor to Ashby. He conducted many peals and quarter peals until the Ashby ringers were able to do so themselves. Born in Oxford in 1861, Jaggard was taught to ring by his father, Master Cooper Charles Jaggard. When the family moved to Burton on Trent in 1873, John helped train a band of young ringers at St Paul's Church in the town. The young band rang their first peal, Kent Treble Bob Major, in November 1879 and went on to become pioneers of Surprise ringing. Jaggard was a ringer, a conductor and a composer and one of the founder members of the Midland Counties Association. He was himself a Cooper at Bass Brewery in Burton until he moved to

² Ringing World. 1952. P.579.

Wolverhampton in 1897. In later years he was a pub landlord and a regular ringer at Birmingham Cathedral. He died in 1942, at the age of 81.³

Several other talented ringers of their age, John Austin, William Wakley and Joseph Griffin were also members of the St Paul's band and founder members of the Midland Counties Association. Leonard Bullock and William J Smith of Burton also assisted the Ashby ringers from time to time.

The progress of the Ashby ringers is steadily noted. On 5th December 1887, the Ashby Society rang its first quarter peal, conducted by John Jaggard. Two days later, the Midland Counties Association held



its quarterly meeting at Ashby. Ringing was followed by a sit-down tea at the Queen's Hotel on Market Street, presided over by the Association's President, Percival Haywood. He congratulated the Association on the quality of its peals that year, in a large number of methods, and "congratulated the local band on their progress, and hoped soon to see them score a peal. Mr W Wakley proposed a vote of thanks to the Vicar (Canon Denton) for the use of the bells and expressed the pleasure that that Gentleman's presence among them gave to the Association. The Vicar, in retuning thanks, heartily congratulated the Association on their success, and spoke of his deep appreciation of the work, assuring them of his continued support."⁴

The Ashby band were determined to ring their first peal, attempting Holts Ten Part Peal (Grandsire Triples 5040) twice in December 1887, with John Jaggard as conductor, both times unsuccessfully, though on the second occasion they rang for 3 hours and 10 minutes before it was lost.

On Sunday April 15th the first 504 by the Society alone, was rung in 18 minutes. Participants were W Liggins 1, H Canner 2, J Jacques 3, J Hopkin 4, W Owen 5, J H Dunmore 6, W Canner (conductor) 7, J Curtis 8.

On 30th April 1888, after several more attempts, Holts Ten Part Peal was achieved, under John Jaggard's direction. It is recorded on one of the Peal Boards which still grace the Ringing Chamber. "The start was made at 6.40, the striking being very good, part after part went by, the same excellence of striking being maintained throughout, till at length (9.44) came the welcome cry "that's all" bringing to

³ From the obituary of John Jaggard in the Ringing World. 1942. P.511.

⁴ Church Bells. Vol 17. Dec 30th 1887. P.126.

a close a well struck peal. It is the first peal in the method on the bells, the first by all except the conductor and also the first in which any Ashby men have ever taken part.”⁵

Wm Liggins treble, Herbert Canner 2, Thomas Jacques 3, James Hopkin 4, Jn H Dunmore 5, John Jaggar 6, Walter Canner 7, Jos Curtis 8. Conducted by Mr Jno Jaggar. Time 3 hrs 4 ½ min. Average 27.72.

Ringling had its social side too. On 4th June 1888, *“The members afterwards adjourned to the house of Mr Jacques, where they partook of an excellent repast which was intended as a complementary dinner to Mr Jno Jaggar the highly esteemed instructor to the Society. Also to commemorate the achievement of the first peal by the Society.”⁶*

Thomas Jacques was a founder member of the Ashby Society. Born in Ullesthorpe in 1861, he was a pork butcher on Market Street in Ashby. A keen ringer, he conducted a touch of Grandsire Triples in November 1892, but from August 1893 he was marked down in the Attendance Register as ‘sick.’ He died on 31st December 1893, aged just 33 years, leaving a wife and two small sons. His colleagues rang a quarter peal of Grandsire Triples on the day of his funeral, with the bells half muffled. He had been a Corporal in ‘1’ (Hastings) Company of the 1st Vol Battalion Leicestershire Regiment and was interred with full military honours in Ashby Cemetery. Interestingly, Walter Canner was buried with Jacques when he died in 1915.

There’s a bit of a mystery surrounding William Liggins who, at 31, was the oldest founder member of the Ashby Society in 1886. He was a regular ringer, taking part in the first quarter peal rung by the Society in December 1887, and was elected Tower Captain in 1891 when Walter Canner stood down. He was re-elected at the AGM in April 1892, but just five weeks later, on 22nd May 1892, he resigned from the Society and I cannot find any record of him ringing again. In 1911, he was still in Ashby, working as a Wine Merchant’s Manager, but there is no record of his death or burial in the town or local area.

James Hopkin, a colliery clerk, was born in 1860 and brought up at No.3 the Church Yard. A founder member of the Ashby Society, he kept in touch after moving first to Leamington Spa and then to Aston. In June 1891, the Ashby ringers went to Warwick, Kenilworth and Leamington for their annual excursion, no doubt to meet up with their former colleague, who joined them for ringing on the day. He was an excellent calligrapher and the Peal Book was sent to him periodically to be updated. The Attendance Register records that he was paid ten shillings for *“colours for entering up the Peal Book”* in 1900. A regular ringer all his life, he died in Aston in 1936 and has an obituary entry in the Ringing World.⁷

Joseph Curtis was 28 when the Ashby Society was founded. He lived his entire life in Ashby, working as a gardener. By 1911, he was living at No.1 the Churchyard and was Verger at St Helen’s. He rang his first peal on an inside bell in November 1893. He died in 1947 and is buried in Ashby Cemetery.

With the confidence of the Ashby band increasing, on 4th July 1888, accompanied by John Jaggar, they went on an outing to Ashbourne where they attempted a Peal of Grandsire Triples, which was unfortunately brought to an end when the 2nd rope slipped the wheel. On 22nd July, John Dunmore conducted his first 504 Grandsire Triples and on 24th July, Walter Canner conducted his first quarter peal of Grandsire Triples as the ringers celebrated the re-opening of the Ashby Baths.

⁵ Ringers’ Attendance Register 1886-1905

⁶ Ringers’ Attendance Register 1886-1905

⁷ Ringing World. 27th March 1936. P.210.

It is noted in the Attendance Register that on *“Thursday Oct 25th 1888 – it was intended to start for a Peal of Grandsire Triples on the 2nd anniversary of the re-dedication of the bells, but owing to illness near the church this idea was abandoned and the rector of Coleorton, the Rev W B Beaumont, having kindly placed the Bells of St Mary’s Church at their disposal, eight members of the Society availed themselves of the opportunity and a start was made for Holts Ten part Peal of Grandsire Triples which was successfully brought round in 3 hours 2 minutes, the ringers standing as follows. W Liggins 1, H Canner 2, J Jacques 3, J Hopkin 4, W Owen 5, J H Dunmore 6, W Canner 7, J Curtis 8. Conducted by Walter Canner.*

It was William Owen’s first peal and W Canner’s first attempt as conductor.”

William Owen was another founder member of the Ashby Society and a regular ringer until the end of 1895. The final reference to him in the Attendance Register is in June 1900, when he rang alongside his son, Fred, in a quarter peal of Grandsire Triples to celebrate the marriage of Mr I Johnson German at Netherseal.

There was more cause for celebration when, on 29th November 1888, members of the Midland Counties Association, including several Ashby men, rang a peal in honour of the marriage of Walter Canner, Ashby Tower Captain, to Miss Hill of Packington. On 17th December, *“the following rang a ‘date touch’ of ‘Bob Major’ in 1 hour 8 min. W Liggins treble, Jas Smith 2, J H Dunmore 3, James Hopkin 4, Wm Owen 5, L Bullock 6, John Jaggard (composer & conductor) 7, Walter Canner Tenor.*

*The above with other members of the Ashby Society were afterwards entertained to supper by Mr and Mrs Canner. A most enjoyable evening was spent and the occasion taken advantage of to present Mr Canner with an engraved silver mounted malacca cane by the members of the society as a small mark of their appreciation of his services as conductor of the Society and to commemorate the calling of his first peal as conductor on October 25th”.*⁸

On 28th February 1889, *“The following members of the Society rang a peal of Grandsire Triples (Holt’s ten part) in 3 hours.*

William Liggins treble, Herbert Canner 2, Thomas Jacques 3, James Hopkin 4, William Owen 5, John Henry Dunmore 6, Walter Canner 7, George Thornley tenor. Conducted by Walter Canner.

*It is the first peal rung by G Thornley, also the first peal rung in Ashby de la Zouch by an entirely local band.”*⁹

George Thornley was a shoemaker in Ashby, who joined the Society at its inception. He rang Tenor.

Milestones continued to be attained by the keen Ashby band of ringers. On *“Thursday May 9th The following members of the Society rang a peal of Grandsire Triples (Holts Tenpart) in 3 hrs 5 min.*

Robert Davenport treble, John Hy Dunmore 2, William Liggins 3, J Hopkin 4, Thos Jacques 5, Herbert Canner 6, Walter Canner 7, George Thornley tenor. Conducted by John Henry Dunmore.

*It was intended to ring this peal on the anniversary of the first peal achieved by the Society, but in consequence of a death near the Church it was postponed. It is Mr Dunmore’s first peal as conductor. Mr Davenport’s first peal. Mr Liggins’ first peal with an inside bell”.*¹⁰

⁸ Ringers’ Attendance Register 1886-1905

⁹ Ringers’ Attendance Register 1886-1905

¹⁰ Ringers’ Attendance Register 1886-1905

On 21st August 1889, the Ashby band rang a peal at St Oswald's, Ashbourne, the first peal to be rung on the bells, and were entertained to dinner afterwards by Robert Davenport (the donor of the Peal Book) and on 9th October, Burton on Trent was the destination. As can be seen from the following description, ringing wasn't the only activity on the day's agenda:

"Leaving Ashby by the 1.00 train, Burton being reached at 1.35, and being met by Mr Griffin, the party was conducted through the breweries of Messrs Bass & Co and then to St Modwen's Church where 2 touches of Grandsire Triples was rung (being conducted by Mr W Canner & Mr J H Dunmore). After lowering the bells a move was made for St Paul's, where a 350 Grandsire Triples was rung by R Davenport 1, W Canner (conductor) 2, W Liggins 3, J Austin 4, W Owen 5, W Wakley 6, H Canner 7, J Jacques 8. The next move was to the Railway Inn where tea was partaken of under the Chairmanship of Mr C Matthews (Churchwarden) and after spending an enjoyable hour left for home."

This period, between 1886 and around 1910, was the heyday of the Ashby band, as more ringers joined and milestones were achieved. One of the new 'probationers' in 1889 was Ernest William Beadsmoore, a 16 year old painter's apprentice. He was the first of many members of the Beadsmoore family to ring at St Helen's. He rang for over 65 years, his final peal being at Netherseal in December 1953, eighteen months before his death at the age of 81. In the 1955 report of the local

guild, *"The Secretary, Mr J W Cotton, in his report referred to the loss by death of Mr E W Beadsmoore ... in paying tribute to the service given to the Guild by Mr E W Beadsmoore, Mr Cotton said: 'A great and noble gentleman has passed from our midst, one who strove so hard – following the division of the MCA- to see this Guild formed and who, in spite of advancing years and failing health, had served on its committee since 1946.'"*¹¹

John Dunmore became Tower Captain in May 22nd, after the resignation of William Liggins and life carried on. The Society enjoyed its 'annual picnic' at Staunton Harold in September 1892; a varied day which included 'touches' on the bells, tea at the Saracen's Head (now a private house), a tour of Staunton Harold Hall, the home of Earl Ferrers, and hand bell ringing. The vicar, Canon Denton, was one of the party.



¹¹ Ringing World. 1955. P.75

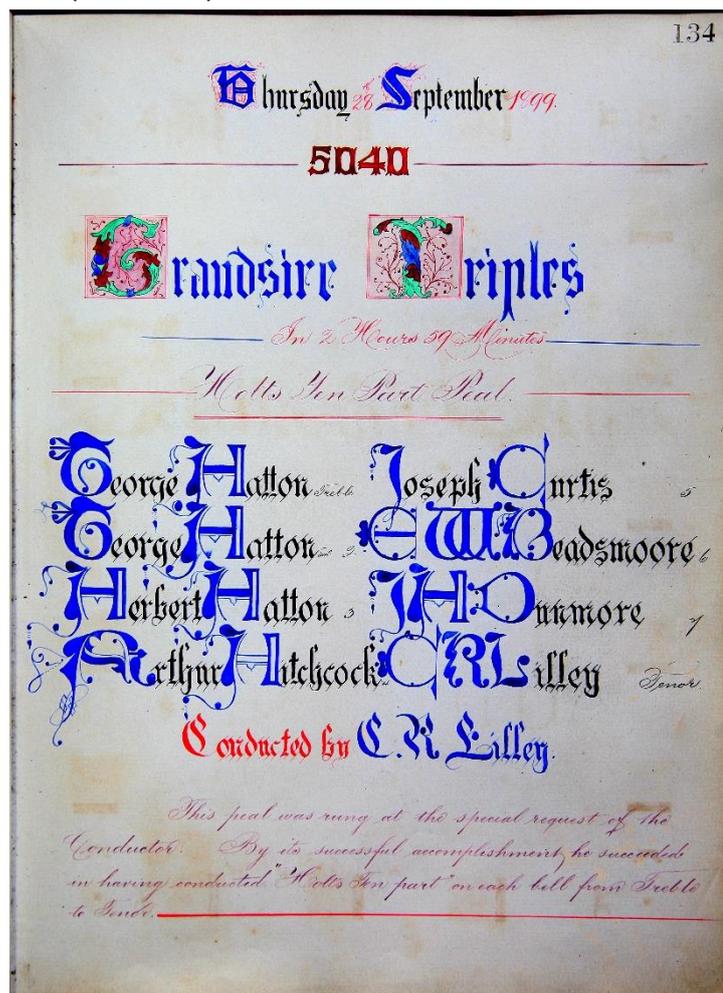
On 10th November 1892, the Bishop of Peterborough visited St Helen's to unveil a memorial window to William Edward Smith, a churchwarden for 31 years, and to dedicate a new oak tower screen to the memory of Edward Mammatt, a supporter of both church and bells over many years. A touch of 546 Grandsire Triples was rung for morning service and a quarter peal in the same method during the afternoon.

One event not documented in the Ringers' Attendance Register was a peal of Stedman Triples (Thurstan's composition) rung on 4th October 1893, though it is written up on one of the Peal Boards in the Ringing Chamber and in the Peal Book. The stunning calligraphy in the Peal Book is likely to have been the work of former Ashby ringer James Hopkin. The ringers were 1. Walter Canner, 2. John H Dunmore, 3. William J Smith, 4. Joseph Griffin, 5. William Wakley, 6. Herbert Canner, 7. Thomas Holmes and 8. Nathan J Pitstow. The conductor was Joseph Griffin. Just three of the ringers were from Ashby and it was the first peal in the method for John Dunmore and Herbert Canner. The rest were Burton ringers, apart from Nathan Pitstow of Saffron Walden, one of the great ringers of his day. It must have been an exciting event for the Ashby ringers to take part in a peal with him in their home Tower.

Ringers came and went, but there were still 23 names on the Attendance Register at the end of 1894. This fell to 13 the following year and no peals were recorded, though there were several quarters, in Grandsire Triples and Stedman Triples. In May 1897, members of the Midland Counties Association, including several Ashby men, rang Holt's Ten-part peal of Grandsire Triples and in June a quarter peal of Grandsire Triples was rung by the Ashby men for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

On Sunday 26th October 1897, the ringers celebrated the eleventh anniversary of the re-dedication of the bells with a peal of Grandsire triples (Davies's Five part) "in 3 hrs 4 min by Wm Wainwright 1, W Canner 2, G Hatton 3, A Hitchcock 4, J Curtis 5, E W Beadsmore 6, J Hy Dunmore 7, G Thornley 8. Conducted by Walter Canner. First peal by W Wainwright."¹²

George Hatton had been a faithful member of the team since March 1890 and rang treble to his first quarter peal of Grandsire Triples in February 1891. By 1892, he'd been joined in the tower by his eldest son Herbert, while George jnr joined the team in January 1893. Thus began a



¹² Ringers' Attendance Register 1886-1905

long association with the Tower by the Hatton family, who rang together in several peals.

A Packington man, George senior moved to Ashby as gardener to the Rev Charles Pratt in around 1890 and stayed in the service of Pratt's family for 64 years. An obituary appeared in the Ringing World in 1928.¹³ He is described as quiet, unobtrusive and reliable, as both a ringer and a man. A member of the Midland Counties Association, he had 19 peals to his credit and was Tower Captain in Ashby from 1896-1905. His coffin was carried by four of his fellow ringers and the bells of St Helen's were rung half muffled on the day of his funeral.



Oak Screen, erected in 1892 in memory of Edward Mammatt, which separates the ringing room from the nave.

Herbert Hatton also worked as a gardener and, in later years he farmed in Packington. He rang his first peal at Ashby, Grandsire Triples, on 24th October 1896. For his brother, George junior, it was his first peal on an inside bell. Herbert is recorded as an 'honorary member' of the Ashby band from around 1903.

George junior, an Estate Agent's Clerk in the town, remained a loyal member of the Ashby band all his life and it was among his effects that the original Ringers' Attendance Register was found after his death in 1953. The last Ashby quarter peal he took part in was of Stedman Triples on 20th November 1947, for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth to Philip Mountbatten.

Ringing tower bells is a way of publicly commemorating both happy and sad events; local, national and international. There are many records in the Peal Book of ringing for weddings, anniversaries,

¹³ Ringing World. July 27th 1928.p.474

funerals and other significant occasions. Two muffled quarter peals were rung in January 1901, following the death of Queen Victoria. In June 1902, the ringers gathered in the tower to celebrate the end of the Boer Wars, with 'firing' of the bells and a quarter peal of Grandsire Triples. In 1903, a quarter peal of Grandsire triples with the bells half muffled marked the funeral of Canon Denton and the end of his almost 50 years' association with the town.

During 1899, three peals were rung in the Ashby tower by Mr Charles R Lilley of Loughborough, an honorary member of the Ashby Society. The third of these, on 28th September, "*was rung at the special request of the Conductor. By its successful accomplishment, he succeeded in having conducted Holt's Ten Part on each bell from Treble to Tenor.*"¹⁴

Ringling at St Helen's was clearly still thriving when the first Ringers' Attendance Register reached its final page in 1905, although in the preceding five years the only *full* peals rung had been during visits from the Midland Counties Association. None were rung by an entirely local band. From 1902, the calligraphy in the Peal Book faltered, then faded away completely. All peals rung at St Helen's have now been written up by a modern calligrapher, as part of the Church's recent Heritage Project (2015-2018), but due to the loss of the next Attendance Register there is little record of how the ringers fared between 1905 and 1925. When the next Register was begun in January 1926, there were just nine names: George Hatton, Ernest W Beadsmoore, Joe Curtis, John Curtis, Alfred Beadsmoore, F Beadsmoore, J Bradford, J Peck, H Beadsmoore. George Hatton senior's final attendance was for two services on 8th July 1928, just two days before his death.

There is very little detail about ringling in this later register. It is mainly a list of names and how the tower funds were spent. Although the bells were still rung, the heyday of the late 19th and early 20th century was clearly at an end and only occasional quarter peals were rung. Visits from the Midland Counties Association (later the Midland Counties Guild) were rare. Two world wars also impacted on ringling both locally and nationally, and over time the Ashby bells, always heavy and with an extremely long draught, became more challenging to ring.

Julie Starkey

2021

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¹⁴ Ringers' Attendance Register 1886-1905