

The bells, the bells!

The sound of church bells being rung is one of the most characteristic features of the English countryside. You will almost certainly have heard them in Painswick, although they were forced into silence for much of the pandemic, as they were for much of the Second World War.

The bells are not rung at random, but nor are they rung to make a tune, or for any particular musicality. In England, bells are usually rung in ‘changes’, where one change consists of each of the bells being used ringing once in a particular order. They are then rung in a different order and so on, the aim being never to use the same order twice. If eight bells are being rung, there are 40,320 different orders they could be rung in. To ring all of these, even at a pace of one change every two and a half seconds, would take over twenty-four hours of continuous ringing!



The Tercentenary Bell installed in St. Mary's Church in 1986



The 'youths' who rang Painswick's record peal in 1920

The Ancient Society of Painswick Youths

Traditionally bellringers are referred to as youths, whatever their age and Painswick's bellringers are known as the Ancient Society of Painswick Youths. The society has existed for well over 300 years, although not always under that name.

Since at least 1686 there has been a strong tradition of change ringing in Painswick, with a particular emphasis in several periods on ringing long peals, sometimes of record lengths. Indeed Painswick still holds the record for the longest peal ever rung in the Grandsire Cinques method - 13,001 changes rung on 14th February 1920 in a time of 8 hours and 45 minutes.

"Nowhere throughout England is there a town or village where change ringing has been cultivated more assiduously over a long period of years than at Painswick. At no other place except Appleton have so many long lengths been scored."

J. Armiger Trollope, historian of bellringing, writing shortly before the Second World War



Did you know?

St. Mary's Church in Painswick has fourteen bells - more than any other church in Gloucestershire, even including Gloucester Cathedral!

Bellringing in Painswick

The Estcourt era

Some of the most glorious achievements of Painswick bellringing were in the nineteenth century, a period that was dominated by the influence of the Estcourt family. William Estcourt rang his first peal in Painswick in 1816 at the age of 17 and within a short time was conducting peals himself. He led the Society of Ringers for most of the next 40 years and took part in four record-breaking long peals.

At least three of William's sons, Oliver, Albert and James, were also ringers and James Estcourt is said to have composed two peals rung in 1851, when he was just 13. Oliver and Albert Estcourt went into business together as builders in Gloucester, becoming very successful and later Albert Estcourt was three times Mayor of Gloucester. Estcourt Road in Gloucester is named after him.



THE PAINSWICK BELL RINGERS OF NEARLY SEVENTY YEARS AGO
Reproduced by the kind permission of the Proprietors of the Cheltenham Chronicle & Gloucestershire Echo
Front Row :—John Morris, James Estcourt, Alfred Keene, Robert Birt (conductor and composer of celebrated peals)
Albert Estcourt (brother of James, and ultimately Mayor of Gloucester), William Estcourt (father of James and Albert).
Back Row :—Alfred Walkley, George Wright, Jerry Birt, David Marmont.

Painswick bellringers in about 1862, including three members of the Estcourt family



Commemorated in stone

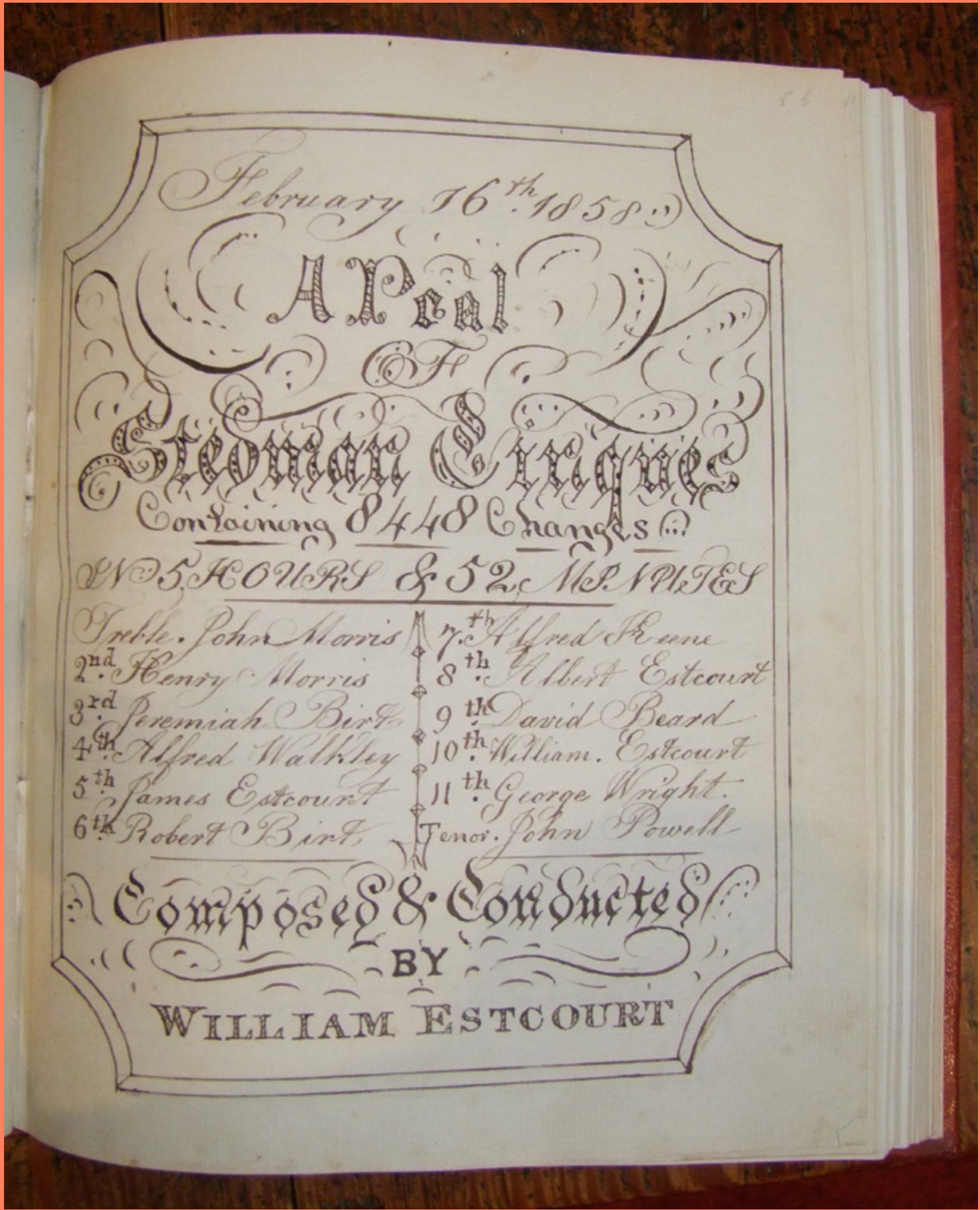
William Estcourt was a stonemason by trade and earlier ringers in Painswick had included the stonemasons John and Joseph Bryan, who carved many of the tombs in Painswick churchyard. So it's perhaps not too surprising that several of Painswick's famous peals are commemorated by carved stone memorials on the walls of the bell tower. As the first of these memorials says, they were 'desirous of transmitting ... to posterity ... an account of the several long peals that have been rung here'.



Record-breaking Ringing

In the first half of the 19th Century, Painswick ringers excelled in long peals and even peals of record length. Their first record was in 1816 when they rang 10,278 changes of 'Grandsire Caters' on nine bells, taking over 6 hours. The following year, after a rumour had reached Painswick that ringers in Bristol had beaten their record, they determined to extend it, ringing 12,312 changes on May 5th 1817.

Switching then to twelve bell ringing, they rang 10,224 changes of 'Treble Bob Maximus' in 1833, a record that stood until 1911. Other record attempts failed due to exhaustion or to mistakes in the ringing, but they claimed another record in 1858, ringing 8448 Stedman Cinques on 12 bells. After that, interest in record peals diminished, until a new group of ringers came together in the early 20th century.



A page from one of the Painswick Peal Books, recording the record peal in 1858

"When we ad finished thear was thousands of people thear one mite ave walked on thair Heds it tis thought thear nevver was so maney in the Churchyard before nor sence and there was a first rate band in Painswick at that time and thay plaid before us when whe left the Church"

Giles Mansfield, 57 years later, recording memories of the 1817 record peal

Bellringing controversy in Painswick

Should the bells be re-tuned?

By the end of the 19th century, several bells were badly worn and the wooden framework on which they were hung was so dilapidated that they could barely be rung safely. It was decided to take out the bells to install a new metal frame. Some of the old timbers were used to build the new Lychgate.

When the bells were taken out, it was asked whether they should also be re-tuned. A bell-ringing clergyman, Rev. Herbert Drake, listened to them with a 'musical friend' and wrote a long letter to 'Bell News' claiming that they were discordant. Others defended them - the very thought of re-tuning the glorious bells of Painswick simply makes one shudder, wrote the Rev. Charles Davies. And William Hale, leading the Painswick bellringers, appreciated the 'beautiful wild fascinating characteristic' that came from slightly irregular vibrations.

In the end the bells were not re-tuned and modern analysis has vindicated the decision. The bells are well-tuned considering their age and the technology available to the original founders of the bells.



A false peal

A more serious controversy erupted after what was perhaps the most famous peal in Painswick history - the 17,687 changes rung in 1930. It was the fourth attempt in a year to break the record for a peal rung on 12 bells. The ringers started at 8.10 in the morning and rang continuously without any food, drink or rest, finishing to great celebrations at 7.46 pm.

Unfortunately when the details were published, an error was found. One short group of changes had been repeated. Albert Wright, the composer, pointed out that by the time the repeats appeared, they had already rung over 16,000 changes, beating the previous record. But for most bellringers, that was not the point - there was an error, so it was a false peal.

Did you know?

The largest bell in the Painswick Tower weighs around 1.3 tons!
Even the smallest is around a quarter of a ton.

Painswick ringers then stoked up more controversy by announcing that they would erect a memorial to the record peal in the church. 'Ringing World' described this as an 'astounding proposal'. Painswick went ahead though and the memorial tablet is still there today in the Bell Tower, referring to the 'ringing of 17,687 changes' rather than claiming a record peal. One Bellringing Guild passed a resolution that any member who approved of the words '17,687 changes' on the tablet should be removed from the Guild. And a clergyman, referring to it as 'The Great Hoax of Painswick' said 'I do not wish to go into that church now as long as there is that untrue statement on its walls. I will avoid it as I will avoid Gloucestershire'.



Where are the women?

For most of the history of bellringing in Painswick, it has been men who have rung the bells. The first involvement of women may have come in 1902 when a visiting American, Margaret Nichols, took part in ringing 648 changes. But it was not until after the Second World War that women rang regularly in Painswick.

Things are very different now. In the last fifty years there have been three female Tower Captains (as the leader of the Ancient Society is now known), including the current Captain, Deborah Picken.



By the 1950s there is at least one woman in this group