

The St. Mary-le-Tower Society

The bells of St. Mary-le-Tower are amongst the best known in Britain. St. Mary-le-Tower, or St. Mary at the Tower to give it its proper name, takes its name from its proximity to a tower on the town walls. The tower and walls are long since gone and the only remnants today are nearby street names like Tower Street and Tower Ramparts.

The aim of this document is to give all known details of the bells that have rung out from the Tower. I also hope to provide an insight into the tremendous ringers, whose goings on have left St. Mary-le-Tower steeped in history, for there was a time that the St. Mary-le-Tower Society were the most accomplished company in the land.



On beginning research, I also decided on a secondary aim for this article. Throughout the years there has been a considerable amount of information published about St. Mary-le-Tower. However, some of it is simply wrong. In places I have chosen to point out these incorrect facts and in others I have decided to leave it out for now as this is only an early draft. I hope to provide a valuable insight into the true history of ringing at our wonderful church: St. Mary-le-Tower.

I hope you enjoy reading the article.

The Early Days

There were only five bells and a Sanctus bell present in the tower in 1553. The treble and tenor were then recast by Miles Graye I of Colchester in 1607 and 1610 respectively. In 1671 John Darbie of Ipswich recast the second and fourth bells and added a treble to make a ring of six. The addition of two trebles cast by Christopher Hodson in 1688 made this ring the second octave in Suffolk. St. Mary-le-Tower's octave was preceded by Horham in 1673 (the oldest surviving octave) and then followed by Framlingham and Bungay in 1718. The tenor of the octave was approximately 24cwt. The first full peal recorded on the bells was 5040 changes of Grandsire Triples on 12th December 1735. The peal took 3 hours 11 minutes and the band stood as follows:

Treble	William Weston	5 th	George Bond
2 nd	Thomas Bennett	6 th	Stephen Bond
3 rd	Robert Hogger	7 th	Isaac Whitehead
4 th	Stephen Kirby	Tenor	James Kirriage

The tenor ringer, James Kirriage, was 61 at the time. In 1812 two trebles were added to the octave to make a ring of ten. The newly augmented ring of bells was opened on Tuesday 7th of July 1812, being the first day of the Ipswich races. These new trebles were provided and hung by John Naunton, a local bell hanger and ringer. They were cast by Thomas Mears.

Three peals were rung on this ring of ten and all three are recorded on peal boards that still hang on the walls at St. Mary-le-Tower. Alas the new trebles only lasted 32 years before being recast by John Taylor & Son in 1844/5. Only one peal was rung on this ring of ten – Kent Treble Bob Royal on 16th February 1850 - before the great Victorian rebuilding where the tower, and practically the whole church, was demolished and rebuilt. The rebuild took place in phases, beginning with the chancel in 1850.



Here we have the old tenors. These bells were still part of the twelve until they were hung dead in 1999. On the left is the seventh of the old eight, 17-3-11 in F cast by John Darbie in 1671. On the right is the tenor of the old eight, 21-1-15 in Eb cast by Miles I Graye in 1610. The old tenor has a clapper inside and can be chimed as a sanctus bell.

Making Way for Twelve

As the great Victorian rebuilding commenced, the diocesan architect Richard Makilwaine Phipson wanted to make the most of the opportunity. Phipson was anxious to add another two bells, increasing the number from ten to twelve. However, George Bacon, a wealthy banker and philanthropist who was paying for the whole rebuild, would not consent to paying for this augmentation. He was only willing to restore the old ring of ten bells. This was possibly the only thing connected with the restoration of St. Mary-le-Tower church that Bacon did not readily agree to. On this he stood firm as he “declined to be answerable for its expense”. Phipson was especially keen on still trying to obtain the two extra bells and so a subscription was started for this purpose. The aim was to add a new treble and tenor to the peal and then two more bells would need to be recast to correct the tuning. Unfortunately, after months of hard work only £140 of the £300 pounds required was raised. Phipson reluctantly gave the order for the old peal to be rehung.

Around a month later Phipson was standing in Tavern Street when John Chevallier Cobbold walked by. Cobbold stopped and asked Phipson about how the works at the Tower were progressing. Amidst the conversation, Phipson mentioned how disappointed he was to not obtain a peal of twelve bells. Cobbold then asked how much extra was needed and abruptly said this excellent passage quoted from the 1882 bell news:

“Phipson, I have known you many years, and can trust on your secrecy; order the peal you wish, and you will find some day the £160 paid into your account, but never tell anyone whilst I live. I shall not even tell my wife. When I am buried have the great bell tolled, and after that you may tell anyone you like.”

Phipson went ahead and ordered the work to augment the ring of ten to twelve. Some months later, whilst looking through his banker’s book, Phipson found that a Mr Johnson had paid £160 into his account. After not associating this with the Tower straight away and questioning his bankers who expressed surprise that he knew nothing about it, Phipson realized that this must have been the money from Cobbold. Although he and Cobbold saw each other many times after the restoration, neither of them ever brought this matter up again. Phipson suspected that Mr Johnson was a play on words – he was John (Cobbold’s) son.

In 1866/67 the restoration work was completed and a new Treble and Tenor, cast by John Warner & Sons, were added. The 5th and the 9th (the old 4th and 8th of the ten) were also recast to correct the tuning. The figures and inscriptions for this ring of twelve were as follows:

Bell	Weight (cwt)	Diameter (inches)	Note	Date	Inscription
Treble	5-3-7	27	G#	1866	Cantate Domino Cantico Novo 1866 (i.e. “sing unto the Lord with a new song”)
Second	4-3-3	27	F#	1845	John Taylor and Sons, Loughborough, Founders, July 15 th , 1845
Third	5-1-0	28.5	E#	1844	George Taylor, Joselyn and Edwin Brook Churchwardens. 1844
Fourth	5-2-0	29	D#	1688	Christopher Hodson Made me 1688. R.M.T.S
Fifth	6-3-9	32	C#	1866	Laudate Dominum En Cymbalis renesonantibus – 1866 (i.e. Praise the Lord with the well sounding cymbals)
Sixth	7-0-0	33	B#	1671	John Darbie made me 1671
Seventh	8-1-0	35.5	A#	1607	Miles Graye made me 1607
Eighth	10-3-0	38	G#	1671	John Darbie made me 1671
Ninth	14-0-11	43.5	F#	1866	En Resono Reparata Maria Decora Vocata – Cast by John Warner and Sons, London, 1866 (i.e. Having been recast I sound again, I am called comely Mary)
Tenth	17-1-0	46	E#	1671	John Darbie made me 1671
Eleventh	24-0-0	51.5	D#	1610	Miles Graye made me 1610
Tenor	30-2-0	57.5	C#	1866	Triplex Persona Trinitas nunc Gaudia Dona – Cast by John Warner and Sons, London, 1866 (i.e. (Holy) Trinity, three persons, now grant joys)

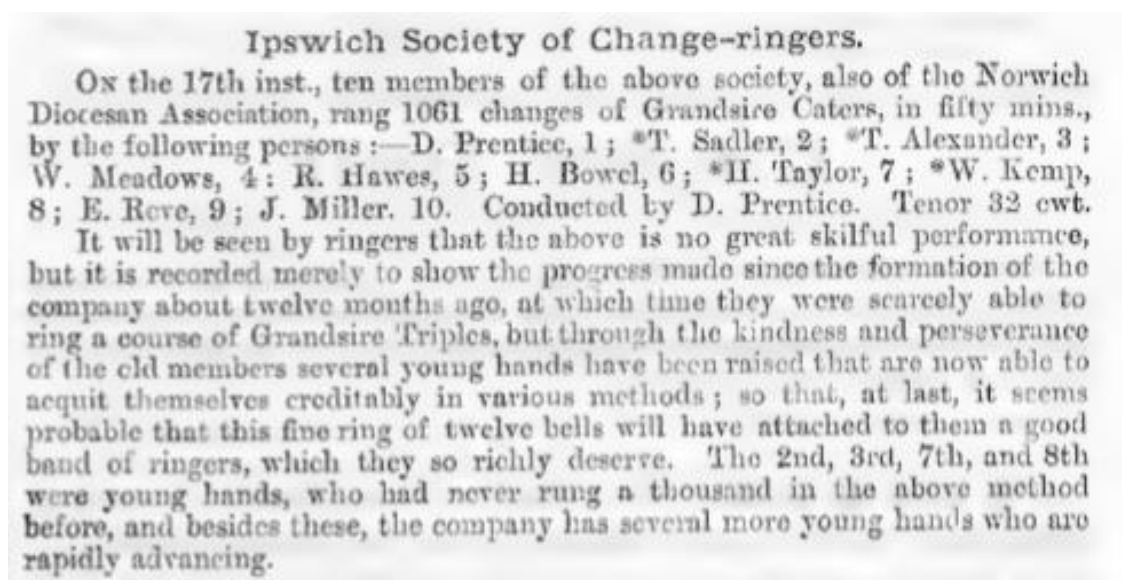
The new tower and bells were opened by a band from the Ancient Society of College Youths in 1867. The College Youths attempted a peal but were unsuccessful.

Interestingly, for decades after the rehangng and augmentation, the tenor was often incorrectly referred to as being 32cwt rather than 30-2-0. This mistake is even present on peal boards and in peal records. The true tenor weight was taken from W. M. C. Pearson’s “Principal Rings of Bells in the Eastern Counties”. Pearson was a close friend of the St. Mary-le-Tower society and rang many peals with them. He carried out extensive research for this book including contacting bell founders such as Warner and Sons – The foundry that cast the tenor for St. Mary-le-Tower.

These first peals on the restored bells are remarkable considering that when the St. Mary-le-Tower Society was formed in 1877, they could barely ring a course of Grandsire Triples.

A Young Company

When the St. Mary-le-Tower Society was re-formed in 1877, a number of the band were "young hands". This constant training and encouraging young ringers has really been one of the main things that kept the society at the top of its game for many years. The first published touch on the refurbished bells is shown below. It was rung in 1878:



It may only be a 1061 of Grandsire Caters but as you can see, it was really quite an achievement for the band.

A few years after the first peal on the new bells was accomplished, yet more young ringers would join the St. Mary-le-Tower Society. They didn't know at the time, but some of these youngsters would become exceptionally well known in the world of church bell ringing. Here is a peal that they rung at Bramford in 1885. All of the ringers are under twenty and five of them belong to the St. Mary-le-Tower Society:

BRAMFORD, SUFFOLK.
THE ANCIENT SOCIETY OF COLLEGE YOUTHS AND
THE NORWICH DIOCESAN ASSOCIATION.
On Saturday, April 11, 1885, in Three Hours and Thirteen Minutes,
AT ST. MARY'S CHURCH,
5040 CHANGES, IN SEVEN DIFFERENT METHODS
ON SIX BELLS ;
Being a 720 each of the following :
Double Bob ; College Single ; Double Court Bob ; Oxford Bob ; Oxford Treble Bob ; Kent Treble Bob ; and Plain Bob Minor.
Tenor 14 cwt. in G.

ALFRED A. PRYKE Treble.	FREDERICK TILLET .. 4.
CHARLES MEE 2.	THOMAS STEWARD 5.
FREDERICK MEE 3.	JAMES MOTTS Tenor.

Conducted by JAMES MOTTS.

A. Pryke belongs to the local company, the rest belong to the St. Mary-le-Tower Society, Ipswich. It is sixty-eight years since a peal was rung on these bells. The ages of the above do not exceed 20 years each.

The Commencement of Peal Ringing

It was not until 22nd October 1878 that the first peal on the restored bells was completed, being Grandsire Caters performed by a local band. In the following years there were four more peals on the ten, being two of Grandsire Caters (1878 and 1880) and two of Kent Treble Bob Royal (1880 and 1881). Then finally came the first peal on the twelve, Kent Treble Bob Maximus rung on 1st March 1881.

The following performances were all published in the 1878 Church Bells Paper. The first is a failed peal attempt of Grandsire Triples whilst the second is the first peal on the restored bells. It is amazing that despite such disparaging failures as the one noted below, the young company pushed on, striving to do better time after time. Little did they know, they would soon make Ipswich home to one of the finest companies in the country.

Change-ringing at St. Mary-le-Tower, Ipswich.

On Tuesday evening, 5th inst., eight members of the Ipswich Society, and also members of the Norwich Diocesan Association of Ringers, attempted to ring Mr. Taylor's six-part peal of Grandsire Triples, 24 courses, with 194 bobs and 46 singles. After ringing upwards of 4800 changes, unfortunately two of the bells got shifted, so that they had to jump into rounds. D. Prentice, 1; W. Catchpole, 2; R. Hawes, 3; H. Bowell, 4; H. Taylor, 5; W. Kemp, 6; E. Reeve, 7; E. Pemberton, 8. Conducted by D. Prentice. Time, 3 hrs. 27 mins. Tenor, 32 cwt.

Change-ringing at St. Mary-le-Tower, Ipswich, Suffolk.

On Tuesday, the 22nd ult., ten members of the St. Mary-le-Tower Society of Change-ringers, also members of the Norwich Diocesan Association, rang a peal of Grandsire Caters, consisting of 5021 changes, in 3 hrs. 26 mins., in honour of the 17th anniversary of the appointment of the Rev. J. R. Turnock as Vicar of the parish. D. Prentice, 1; J. Fosdike, 2; *I. S. Alexander, 3; W. L. Catchpole, 4; *R. Brundle, 5; R. Hawes, 6; *H. Taylor, 7; *W. Kemp, 8; *E. Reeve, 9; E. Pemberton, 10. Tenor, 32 cwt. The peal was composed by Mr. J. Cox, and has 5-6 the full extent behind the 9th in the 'tittum' position, and was conducted by D. Prentice. It is worthy of remark that this is the first peal that has been rung in the present tower, and it is upwards of twenty-eight years since one has been accomplished in Ipswich. Several attempts have been made but have proved unsuccessful. This is also the first peal rung by those marked thus *, and the first peal on Ten by any of the members.

In the next 8 years the St. Mary-le-Tower Society would go on to ring peals of Plain Bob Major, Double Norwich Court Bob Major, Grandsire and Stedman Caters and Cinques, Kent and Oxford Treble Bob Royal and Maximus and finally two peals of Double Norwich Court Bob Royal in 1886. This would start a new chapter in the society's history; their rise to glory as it were.

Between 1878 and 1886 the St. Mary-le-Tower Society rang a total of 32 tower bell peals at the Tower. A pretty good start I'd say.

The First Big Milestone: Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus

After their first peal of Double Norwich Court Bob Royal in 1886 the company decided to set their sights on ringing a peal in the maximus variant – a feat only accomplished once before at Norwich in 1817 (or maybe it had never been done, but we'll get to that...). On 30th November 1886, the company met to try Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus, not in the tower but in hand. They did however, only use one handbell each for this. After one evenings practice they had achieved just three leads. The following week they moved to tower bells and managed four leads. After this, for whatever reason, the idea of ringing Double Norwich Maximus was shelved for some time. Maybe they thought they were not quite ready for this challenge yet.

The endeavor to ring a peal of Double Norwich Maximus was revived in the latter end of 1888 when the company managed to complete a full course of the method. Pursuing this further, they accomplished three courses of the method for the first time on 30th October 1893. Note this is five years after ringing a single course – surely a testament to the difficulty of the method. This large step forward gave the company hope and with that, they powered full steam ahead.

A half peal of Double Norwich Maximus was completed on 23rd January 1894, being 2400 rows in one hour and forty-five minutes. Next were peal attempts on 9th February and two other dates that same year. These all failed. In 1895 five attempts were made. Again, all failed with the best being only one hour and five minutes long. Two attempts were made in the first half of 1896 on 6th April and 10th May. These were of such poor quality that the company nearly gave up. On 21th November they met again and this time rang for one hour and forty-two minutes “very fairly”. It was at this point the company decided to meet for an attempt every week until the full peal had been achieved. You can imagine their surprise when they met the following week and rang an excellent peal. After a long struggle, at last they had achieved their goal. This was their twelfth attempt for the peal. The company had now rung peals on eight, ten and twelve bells in the following methods: Grandsire, Stedman, Plain Bob, Kent and Oxford Treble Bob and Double Norwich Court Bob. They would soon add to this list.

Surely this shows the absolute tenacity and stubbornness of the St. Mary-le-Tower Company. Ringing a peal in such a tricky method placed them firmly amongst the leading change ringing companies of the time. And not to rub it in, they went back two weeks later and rung another peal of Double Norwich Maximus. Thus proving the band were more than capable of ringing the method and ringing it well.

**IPSWICH, SUFFOLK,
THE ST. MARY-LE-TOWER SOCIETY, IPSWICH, THE
NORWICH DIOCESAN ASSOCIATION, AND THE ANCIENT
SOCIETY OF COLLEGE YOUTHS.**

On Saturday, November 28, 1896, in Three Hours and Forty-seven Minutes,

AT THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-LE-TOWER,

**A PEAL OF DOUBLE NORWICH COURT BOB
MAXIMUS, 5016 CHANGES. Tenor 32 cwt.**

STEPHEN COOK* Treble.	ROBERT HAWES.. .. . 7.
EDGAR PEMBERTON 2.	HENRY BOWELL.. .. . 8.
ISAAC S. ALEXANDER 3.	JAMES MOTTS 9.
ALBERT E. DURRANT 4.	WILLIAM WOOD.. .. . 10.
WILLIAM L. CATCHPOLE.. .. 5.	ROBERT H. BRUNDLE 11.
WILLIAM MOTTS 6.	FREDK. J. TILLET Tenor.

Composed and Conducted by JAMES MOTTS.

*First peal. This is the first peal of Maximus in the method ever rung.

A Question of Firsts

Following the peal of Double Norwich Maximus there were a substantial amount of communications in the Bell News arguing whether or not this was indeed the first peal in the method.

In 1817 a peal was recorded at St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich. This peal is noted simply as Norwich Court Bob Maximus. As records were not kept particularly well the question at hand was; was this peal Single Norwich Court Bob Maximus, Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus or something else? Two weeks after the Ipswich company's peal was published, a letter appeared in the Bell News stating that Mr. Arthur Percival Heywood had conducted exhaustive research on the matter and concluded that an overwhelming amount of evidence points towards the Norwich peal being in the Double method. The Ipswich men however, simply did not agree.

William L. Catchpole of St. Mary-le-Tower argued the point until at least 1898, having a number of letters published in the Bell News. Catchpole and the other St. Mary-le-Tower ringers were particularly unimpressed as a note was placed in the Norwich Diocesan Association Report pointing out that the evidence suggests their peal was not the first in the method. There was also a suggestion at the NDA meeting in 1897 to include this note in the association peal book. Catchpole and Edgar Pemberton proposed a motion to not include this note in the peal book which was fortunately passed.

I have not looked into whether there has been further research on the subject of the 1817 peal in Norwich, but I suspect the peal being Double Norwich or not is something we could never prove beyond any doubt.

Cambridge Surprise Maximus

Once their bells were augmented to twelve and the first few peals had been rung, the accomplishments of the St. Mary-le-Tower bell ringers started to pile up as they began to solidify their place in change ringing history.

As it turns out, the endeavor to ring the first peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus wasn't nearly as long and strenuous as the attempts at Double Norwich. In fact, it was a rather short and sweet affair in comparison. The following extract is taken from 'Giants of the Exercise II' by Dr. John C. Eisel. It tells the story of the decision to attempt Cambridge Surprise Maximus and the consequent attempts. The story begins in 1908, with the Pye brothers and others having a peal weekend in and around Ipswich. What happens next is told by Charles J. Sedgely in 1958:

"After the peal at Ipswich the band adjourned to one of those places beloved of ringers for refreshment and talk. And the subject of Cambridge S. Maximus was broached by - so I have been told - William. Pye. Anyway, it was taken up by the progressive-minded ones, diagrams were produced and it was decided to try a course at St. Mary-le-Tower for service the next morning. Now it must not be thought that this would entail 'slap-banging' about: it was a band of experienced 12-bell ringers who did not tolerate that sort of thing. The attempt was made and about eight leads rung, quite a good start this was considered, and a peal attempt was fixed for a month later, which resulted in 41½ courses being rung, under the conductorship of James Motts. It was too good to abandon now, and another attempt was fixed for August 15th which turned out successful, for a very good peal was rung in 3 hours 47 minutes, James Motts again conducting the composition taken from Middleton's."

IPSWICH, SUFFOLK.
THE NORWICH DIOCESAN ASSOCIATION AND THE
ST. MARY-LE-TOWER SOCIETY, IPSWICH.
On Saturday, August 15, 1908, in Three Hours and Fifty-seven Minutes,
AT THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY-LE-TOWER,
A PEAL OF CAMBRIDGE SURPRISE MAXIMUS,
5280 CHANGES. Tenor 32 cwt.

EDGAR PEMBERTON Treble	WILLIAM L. CATCHPOLE.. 7.
WILLIAM MOTTS 2.	JAMES MOTTS 8.
ROBERT S. PYE 3.	WILLIAM PYE 9.
WILLIAM P. GARRETT .. 4.	EDWARD EVANS.. .. 10.
BERTRAM PREWETT 5.	LEWIS W. WIFFEN .. 11.
HENRY C. GILLINGHAM .. 6.	ROBERT H. BRUNDLE .. Tenor.

Conducted by JAMES MOTTS.

The figures of this peal are taken from the late C. Middleton's 5600 Cambridge Surprise Major, and was arranged by J. Motts. Further reference elsewhere.

The Further Reference States: *"The Peal of Cambridge Maximus at Ipswich – This is the first peal ever rang in this intricate method, and it must be conceded that such a performance bespeaks the highest need of praise for all the performers who took part. In achieving this they have added luster to the annals of their society, and also to the Norwich Association, of whom all are members. The brothers Pye hail from Leytonstone, Essex: Prewett from Bushey; all the rest are members of the St. Mary-le-Tower Society, Ipswich"*

The Golden Years

From 1896 up to 1939 the St. Mary-le-Tower Society had their best and most accomplished years. Their twelve bell success particularly kicked off after their first post war peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus on 5th March 1921. Even though the society had accomplished peals of Cambridge before the first world war, this was of particular achievement as the band was rather depleted after the war. It took them three years to build back up to it. This was especially hard as two of the most brilliant and respected members died in this time being William L. Catchpole (1918) and William Motts (1919).

After restoring the strength of the band a lot more peals began to be rung. These included Cambridge Surprise Royal and Maximus, Double Norwich Court Bob Royal and Maximus, Stedman Cinques and more. In 1926 peals of Forward Maximus and Duffield Maximus were rung. This was incredible for the time. Even in the present day these principles are seldom rung. In fact, the only tower bell peals of Forward and Duffield Maximus ever rung have been at Birmingham St. Martin and St. Mary-le-Tower between 1891 and 1933.

Between 1927 and 1934 the St. Mary-le-Tower Society rang the first peals in six new maximus methods. These were: Superlative Surprise (1927), New Cambridge Surprise (1928), Yorkshire Surprise (1929), Pudsey Surprise (1930), Little Albion Treble Bob (1933), Rochester Surprise (1934). There is a peal board in the tower commemorating these peals and the two of Forward and Duffield Maximus. This peal board was unveiled in 1936 by the President of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers and dedicated by the vicar in front of a large crowd of ringers.



The Women of the St Mary-le-Tower Society

For the majority of the time since English Style Change Ringing was developed, there was no real enthusiasm for women to come up the tower. One thing the St. Mary-le-Tower Society did extremely well was to foster an early generation of talented female ringers. Here I go into detail about two of the most notable.

Phyllis E. Tillett (Later Marriott): Coming from a long line of bell ringers that can be traced back at least five generations, Phyllis was no stranger to ringing. In 1931, at the age of 12, she was ringing rounds on twelve at St. Mary-le-Tower. This rounds included Robert Brundle, aged 80, who rang with five generations of Phyllis's family. Aged 14 and 2 months, after ringing the treble to Grandsire Cinques, she became the youngest woman to ring a peal on twelve bells. This peal included three generations of the Tillett family; Phyllis's father, John F. Tillett and her grandfather Frederick J. Tillett. In 1934 Phyllis was able to ring courses of Cambridge Surprise Maximus and actually rang a peal of it on 4th November and another one again on 24th November. Earlier in the year she also took part in a record breaking young ringers peal of Plain Bob Major at Crayford, Kent. At the time this was the youngest band to ring a peal. They had an average age of 15. The band is pictured below:



Phyllis's ringing continued to improve as she rang peals of Superlative and Rochester Surprise Maximus, Double Norwich Court Bob Royal, Bristol and London Surprise Major.

In 1936 Phyllis was elected Deputy Master of the St. Mary-le-Tower Society aged 17. This was the first time a woman had been elected an officer of the society. The following year she was promoted to Master and it is said she looked forward to the privilege of giving orders to both her father and grandfather.

Sylvia R. E. Bowyer (Later Pipe): Sylvia's ringing career started when she joined the band at



St. Matthew's church, Ipswich, in 1934. There were eight other women learning at the same time. Progress was slow at first so it was not until July, 1935, that Sylvia rang the treble to here first 720 of Plain Bob Minor. She rang her first peal on 8th February, 1936, on an inside bell to Plain Bob Major at Grundisburgh. Her first peal ringing year was a good one, ringing eight peals in total and finishing with Kent Treble Bob Maximus, her first on twelve. There had been two failed attempts at Cambridge Surprise Maximus earlier in the year. In 1937 Sylvia broke a record at the age of 21 by ringing the largest number of peals (42) rung by a woman in a single year. The peals ranged from Doubles all the way to Maximus. This includes Cambridge Surprise on six, eight, ten and twelve and Stedman Cinques. The Cambridge Maximus peal was in fact Sylvia's first touch in the method. Ringing this number of peals was a remarkable accomplishment especially as this was also the greatest number of peals rung in one year for the Suffolk guild by any one person.

Sylvia's first peal as conductor (at first attempt) was at Tuddenham St. Martin on 18th August 1937. The peal was three methods Minor being Kent and Oxford Treble Bob and Plain Bob. This made Sylvia the first woman to call a peal for the Suffolk Guild of Ringers and the first woman to ring the tenor to a peal for the guild.

The St. Mary-le-Tower Society elected Sylvia Deputy Master in 1938. In this year she proceeded to conduct peals of Cambridge Surprise on six, eight, ten and twelve; another first for women. Sylvia also rang her first peals of methods such as Pudsey Surprise Maximus (at first attempt) and Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus in the year.

At the end of 1938, for the first time in history, a woman topped the peal ringing list. Sylvia had rung more peals (62) than any person that year. Note this was only 4 years after she began ringing at St. Matthew's Ipswich and only 2 years after her first peal. A truly outstanding achievement. Sylvia was only 22 years old. Later in the same year she was, very deservedly, elected Master of the St. Mary-le-Tower Society. This made her the second female Master of the society.

As of 1939, the methods that Sylvia had rung to peals included: Cambridge, New Cambridge, Pudsey, Rochester, Superlative and Yorkshire Surprise Maximus, Kent Treble Bob Maximus, Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus and Stedman Cinques.

These two incredible young women surely set down a solid foundation for all young, aspirational female ringers entering the world of change ringing. They should certainly be looked up to. What they accomplished in the field was fantastic and they deserve to be remembered.

Maintaining a Fine Peal

The bells and tower have had a lot of work done on them since the twelve were first installed in the new tower. Detailed below is all the work that I have discovered up to around 1950:

Year	Contractor	Work Carried Out
1866	John Warner & Sons	Rehanging and augmenting to twelve by the addition of a new tenor and treble and recasting of two more bells
1888	Unknown	Tower repairs. Reconstruction of several buttresses. Bells not rung for over six weeks
1891	John Warner & Sons	New bearings and gudgeons supplied. Clappers put right. Bells put into first class working order
1912	Day of Eye	Rehanging of the front ten. Put in thorough going order
1916	Day of Eye	Seventh and eighth rehung after fire. New fittings added as necessary. Sawdust under bells replaced with Abbey's flag wool
1925	Alfred Howell	Rehang Tenor and general overhaul of the twelve
1928	Alfred Howell	Taking down the seventh for welding as a crack had appeared. The bell was then rehung
1933	Alfred Howell	Rehanging the tenth with new gudgeons
1934	Alfred Howell	Repairs to framework and fittings
1935	Alfred Howell	Clapper repairs
1939	Alfred Howell	Minor repairs to bells. Painting of the ironwork and bell fittings
1940	Alfred Howell	Bells lowered for safety throughout the war. We assume this means lowered to the ground
1946	Mears and Stainbank	Seventh recast and rehung
1949	Unknown	Crack found in top of steeple caused by weather-cock spinning when the bells are rung. 12ft was taken off the top of the spire to rectify this

Handbells

It may not be known to many ringers, but the St. Mary-le-Tower Society became very capable on handbells and achieved a number of firsts. Their first society handbell peal was Kent Treble Bob Royal in 1887. They were also invited to perform on handbells for many dinners and special occasions where they would ring methods such as Grandsire and Stedman Caters and Cinques, Kent Treble Bob Royal and Maximus and Double Norwich Court Bob Major.

Popular venues for the St. Mary-le-Tower Society handbell band were: The Halberd Inn, The Oak Lane Rooms, the ringing room at St. Mary-le-Tower and many residences of the ringers including the house of Henry Bowell of Bowell & Sons Bell Hangers. The Halberd was also referred to as “the meeting house”. It was common for the Society to meet there before outings and other events. The Pub is still open today. Some may remember the pub as PJ McGinty’s but it has since changed its name back to the Halberd.

They accomplished a number of incredible achievements. Most notable up to 1900 are the following:

- The first peal of Kent Treble Bob Royal rung in hand in the eastern counties. This was the first St. Mary-le-Tower Society handbell peal, 1887
- Supposedly the first peal of Plain Bob Royal on handbells, 1888
- Supposedly the first peal of Maximus on handbells (maybe just the first of Plain Bob Maximus), 1888
- Grandsire Triples, Holt’s Original in Hand. The peal was attempted the day before but was lost after around 3300 rows. At the end applause was given for such a magnificent performance, 1888
- First handbell peal of Grandsire Caters in the County, 1888
- A peal of 5568 Kent Treble Bob Major. This was notable as it was the first part of Day’s 16,608, 1889
- First ever peal of Oxford Treble Bob Royal in Hand (specifically retained in hand as a peal of Oxford Treble Bob Royal had been rung in hand before but it was probably lapped), 1890
- First peal of Double Norwich Court Bob Major rung in hand in Suffolk, 1895

Note I have not thoroughly checked all of these footnotes to make sure they are correct. This would prove difficult as there are no comprehensive records of handbell peals and many were rung in different styles (e.g. lapping).

The St. Mary-le-Tower Society had significant competition when it came to handbell ringing as the Sproughton Company began to ring a lot in hand around 1900. This includes peals of Cambridge, New Cambridge and London Surprise Major in hand. However, these were rung with only one handbell each. The New Cambridge and London were the first of their kind in Suffolk. The Sproughton company also rang a non-conducted peal of Kent Treble Bob Major on handbells in 1903. This was double handed and was the first non-conducted peal in the diocese of the time.

New Beginnings



Following the second world war, the St. Mary-le-Tower Society was a shadow of its former self. Inevitably some of the younger members of the band did not return. In the mid 1950s not many people attended the practices and so not much was rung. More ringers were then encouraged to attend. Certainly in the late 1950s and early 1960s the band was able to ring methods such as Plain Bob Royal and Maximus, Kent Treble Bob Royal and Maximus, Cambridge Surprise Royal (and on occasion the Maximus could be attempted), Cambridge and Yorkshire Surprise Major and Stedman and Grandsire Triples. As the mid 1960s approached several people left the tower for various reasons. The three people I know of so far left to teach new bands at Bramford and Henley. After this the Tower band, unfortunately, started to become depleted again.

The complete overhaul and restoration of the twelve bells at St. Mary-le-Tower was first suggested in the 1950s, little fundraising took place. By 1963 only around £100 was in the fund. At this point the enthusiasm for the restoration project needed to be rekindled. New life was brought to the project and, with the help of a generous legacy of £8000 from a deceased parishioner, the firm John Taylor & Co of Loughborough was selected for the job. The bells were removed at around Easter-time in 1975. The full scale restoration then took place with the recasting of a number of the bells, including a fine new Tenor of 34cwt tuned to Dflat. All the bells were tuned and hung in a brand new metal frame with new fittings. The restored bells were dedicated and rung for the first time on Sunday 12th September 1976. The ringers for the opening ringing on the twelve were: Cecil W. Pipe, Sally Munnings, Patricia Bailey, John L. Girt, Alan Munnings, Dennis Knox, Ranald W. M. Clouston, C. Mark G. Ockleton, Adrian Knights, Stephen D. Pettman, Howard W. Egglestone and Trevor N. Bailey.

The details of the restored bells were as follows:

Bell	Weight (cwt)	Diameter (inches)	Note	Date	Inscription
Treble	4-0-0	25	Ab	1976	Canticum Novum Cantat Domino 1866 The Gift of Avril Bittleston 1975 Recast 1976
Second	4-2-10	26.5	Gb	1976	John Taylor and Son Loughborough Founders July 15 th 1845 The Gift of George & Eva Symonds 1975 Recast 1976
Third	4-3-1	27.5	F	1976	George Josselyn esq: & Edwin Brook Churchwardens 1844 The Gift of Benson & Sylvia Hollis 1976 Recast 1976
Fourth	5-2-26	29.5	Eb	1976	Christopher Hodson Made me 1688. R.M.T.S Recast 1976
Fifth	6-0-22	31	Db	1976	Laudate Dominum in Cymbalis Benesonantibus 1866 Recast 1976
Sixth	6-2-26	32	C	1976	John Darbie made me 1671 Recast 1976
Seventh	9-0-13	36	Bb	1946	Miles Graye made me 1607 Recast by Mears & Stainbank, London 1946
Eighth	10-3-12	38.5	Ab	1976	John Darbie made me 1671 Recast 1976
Ninth	12-3-7	43.5	Gb	1866	En Resono Reparata Maria Decora Vocata – Cast by John Warner and Sons, London 1866
Tenth	17-3-11	46.5	F	1671	John Darbie made me 1671
Eleventh	21-1-15	51.5	Eb	1610	Miles Graye made me 1610
Tenor	34-3-6	57.5	Db	1976	Tripler Trinitas Nunc Gaudia Dona Cast by John Warner and Sons, London, 1866

The full inscription on the other side of the new tenor's waist reads:

*Recast with added metal 1976
This bell and the restoration of the remainder
of the peal were made possible largely by
the generosity of the bequest by
Miss Annie Dorothea Jackaman January 1974
Canon Geoffrey Tarris M.A. Vicar
Laus Deo*

Though they undoubtedly produce a magnificent sound, the bells cast in 1976 are not quality castings and there are some “unfortunate features” noted in Ranald Clouston’s report of 1976. The low quality of the castings can easily be seen from all manner of marks and ‘dents’ on the bells. Ranald was the Diocesan bell advisor at the time. Eight of the former twelve bells were recast, being the Treble through to sixth, eighth and tenor. The faculty granted included reproducing the original inscriptions in facsimile on the recast bells. None of the former tenor’s inscription was reproduced in facsimile and in fact one word has been left out and another altered. The recast treble’s inscription also has errors with words transposed and a date moved. The Christopher Hodson fourth of 1688 had impressions of a number of coins of the period, none of these have been reproduced. The arms of the Borough of Ipswich appeared on the old 1671 sixth and eighth with an ornamental border. The sixth also had a mask appearing twice. None of these items have been reproduced on the recast bells either. To add to this, the new sixth bell has a poorly cast area just above the soundbow. This cavity has been filled with some compound to hide the defect.

A sharp second bell was added in 1980 using metal donated from the treble and tenor at Mickfield. The treble was cast by Thomas Mears of London in 1816 and the tenor by Thomas Gardiner of Sudbury in 1716. This addition allowed the Tower band to ring on a true, lighter eight. Before this, certainly from the augmentation to twelve up to around the second world war, the Tower band always used to just ring the back eight when eight bells were required. The new sharp second weighs 4cwt 2qrs 15lbs and is tuned to G. It was cast and installed by John Taylor & Co. The bell is inscribed Thomas Gardiner Sudbury Fecit 1716. This work was made possible by the kind donations of many people but especially Valerie N. Guise and Mary E. Ridd.

Bells for the Millennium

In 1999 following the generous bequest by Dr Ronald Jones the 5th was recast, and the 8th retuned. Bells 9, 10 & 11 were replaced with bells cast to a heavier weight. The old 9th is going to Australia to form the Tenor of a ring of 8 in the key of F#. The old 10th is hung in the Tower as the ‘passing’ bell and the old 11th is also hung in the Tower as the Sanctus bell.

Curious Tales

Here I have taken the opportunity to detail a number of interesting stories and circumstances that have involved the St. Mary-le-Tower Society. These are passages that may well be incorporated into the rest of the article at a later stage.

- 1. The Death of William P. Garrett:** William (or Bill) Garrett was one of the most esteemed ringers of the St. Mary-le-Tower society. He was the only one to have rung in all six first peals of surprise maximus methods detailed on one of the large peal boards in the tower. However, the circumstances of his death in 1948 are curious. Garrett actually died in the ringing chamber at St Mary-le-Tower. He had intended to ring a peal of Cambridge Surprise Maximus to mark his 100th peal of maximus on the bells and also the 40th anniversary of the first peal of Cambridge Maximus. After around an hour's worth of ringing Garrett set his bell, the third, and simply dropped on a seat and collapsed. A doctor soon arrived but "could only pronounce that he had expired". He was 82 years old and had rung over 350 peals. It is thought his death was due to heart disease.
- 2. In Need of a Stiff Drink:** Robert H. Brundle rang at St. Mary-le-Tower for what seemed like forever. He actually rang in the first peal on the restored bells which was also his first peal. Living to the age of 97, Brundle was, at the time, the oldest College Youth. He died in 1948. Even as he got older he rang for as long as he could. In his obituary there is mention of incidents in his last few years. These entail him ringing hard going tenors to peals and afterwards stumbling from the box and having to be revived with brandy.
- 3. How Not to Catch a Ferry:** The annual Ipswich outing was always an enjoyable affair. However, in 1936 most of the tower ringers got slightly more entertainment than they expected. The outing had been around the Rochester and Maidstone area and the ringers were just catching the Gravesend-Tilbury ferry on their homeward journey. A problem with a ferry ticket delayed the secretary, George E. Symonds, in the office. The ferry however, did not delay and started to move off. Symonds sprinted, apparently well for his age (61), but on reaching the quay head he found the ferry was 8ft away. Luckily the stern swung round and he managed to jump the then 2ft gap onto the ferry. This was much to the delight of the other ringers watching by.
- 4. An Assault on The Ears:** In 1898 the Louvres at St. Mary-le-Tower were bricked up to quieten down the bells outside. The Norwich Diocesan Association and the church authorities praised this "excellent work" that was of "great satisfaction to the neighboring inhabitants". However, a fairly angry letter from William L. Catchpole of the St. Mary-le-Tower Society appeared in the Bell News shortly after the work was completed. Catchpole was distraught that this work had been carried out despite the ringers of the Tower constantly objecting. He states that peal ringing will be very much impeded at the Tower as now the bells are far too loud inside the ringing room. Also Catchpole is very disappointed that the bells cannot be heard at a great distance as he used to be able to stand in Sproughton, 3 miles

away, and easily tell what method the band were ringing. The fact that the Tower bells could be heard within a great distance was also mentioned by R. W. Stannard and G. Lindoff sometime earlier. They were both stood on the sea front in Harwich in 1891 and all of a sudden heard bells ringing. After some listening they soon realized the bells were those of St. Mary-le-Tower and the method being rung was Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus. The following day they both rang for service at the Tower and checked their conclusions with the ringers. They were proved to be correct. This shows the bells could be heard very clearly over a distance of around 12 miles! I'm sorry Mr Catchpole, but possibly the louvres did need to be bricked up...

5. **Phew That Was a Close One:** In 1940 a letter was published in the East Anglian Daily Times. This letter referred to an Ipswich church being damaged by a nearby bomb. Previous to this letter it was broadcast that the church was demolished by the bomb. The letter states "the steeple is quite alright and the clock is still going". Also "the concussion entered the porch and forced the windows on either side outwards, bending the leads". The church was far from being demolished as broadcast. Before this clarification was published George E. Symonds received a letter from the midlands hoping that it was not St. Mary-le-Tower that was damaged. As it turns out, the church in question was St. Margaret's. The article describing these events in The Ringing World is titled "Air Raid Damage at Ipswich: St. Mary-le-Tower Safe". It seems no-one was too worried about St Margaret's being demolished.
6. **A Large Trip:** On Wednesday 16th May, 1894, Mr. Henry Bowell, a long time member of the St. Mary-le-Tower Society, was in the process of rehanging the eight bells of Boxford, Suffolk. It was carrying out that job that Bowell had a serious mishap and fell from the bell frame into a pit. His Son, Alfred Bowell, was fortunately on hand to prevent him from falling through to the floor below, a distance of 25 feet. Bowell sustained two serious scalp wounds and three broken ribs. He was especially lucky that his son was in the tower to help as Alfred had only that day come back to work after a severe attack of rheumatic fever.
7. **Some Do It for Longer:** James (or Jimmy) Motts was one of the most esteemed members of the St. Mary-le-Tower Society. It was mainly due to his and William Catchpole's efforts that the Ipswich men became the premier company in the land. Motts used to ring peals lots of peals having rung around 530 peals by the time of his death in 1923, though he did not keep a peal book so we cannot be sure. One of particular note is the 16,608 Oxford Treble Bob Major at Debenham, Suffolk in 1892, which took 10 hours and 32 minutes. Now Motts was a prolific cyclist and cycled to and from this peal (roughly 14 miles). It is made more impressive by the fact that he cycled it on his 52inch penny-farthing bicycle. He left The Running Buck, Ipswich at 4:15am and arrived at Debenham at 5:53. Motts also famously cycled to and from King's Norton in 1903 for another long peal being 14,112 London Surprise Major. This was an incredible distance of around 170 miles which would take sometime around 15 hours each way! It is likely he did not ride his "52inch machine" for this voyage as later in life he started riding a normal bicycle.

8. **Mistakes Will Always Be Noted:** This little story simply notes that even in the 19th century, people took a lot of pleasure in pointing out other people's mistakes. On 17th November 1887, a peal of Kent Treble Bob Major was rung on handbells at the Halberd Inn. The ringers were James and William Motts and Charles and Frederick Mee. The peal was published in the Bell News and the following week a note appeared about the performance. It stated: "The peal rung at Ipswich by the 'Motts' and 'Mees' was a very extraordinary handbell achievement. It was performed in 'no time' and by 'no society' – If you doubt it, read 'Bell News'." Of course, whoever sent the peal to the Bell News had clearly forgotten to send this extra information and someone thought they'd be funny and point it out. Some things never change...
9. **First the Worst:** So far in this article I have done nothing but praise the St. Mary-le-Tower Society of old, however they have certainly not always behaved in dignified manner. In March 1903 the Sproughton company rang a peal of London Surprise Major on Handbells with each person only using one bell. This was the first peal of London in the county. A month later the Sproughton ringers rang another peal of London, this time at St. Margaret's Ipswich. This was the first peal of London in Ipswich. Interestingly the St. Mary-le-Tower ringers were not best pleased so they published an official complaint in the Bell News stating that the ringing was not good enough and the peal should be withdrawn. There were difficulties before this though. When Charles Mee first wrote for the bells he was refused them as William Motts said the St. Mary-le-Tower ringers wanted to be the first to ring a peal of London in the town. Fortunately, the vicar granted permission for the peal. On arrival William Motts began to tell the band, in "childlike simplicity", that they had no business with the bells of St. Margaret's and they would never have them again for a peal. Motts continued and said he should be ringing in the first of London in the town. A member of the band then offered him their rope but he declined... Now the Sproughton ringers had also noted that there were ten or twelve St. Mary-le-Tower ringers waiting outside on their arrival. They were there to listen to the peal and judge the ringing. The peal was of course still completed in a good style. Charles Mee says in the Bell News that maybe the Tower band should "try and smother their jealousy and help a young band, rather than try and hinder them." Discussions about this peal continued in the Bell News until the Norwich Diocesan Association Meeting later in the year. Several impartial persons were chosen to contact both bands and decide whether the peal should be counted or not. It was decided that although at some times the ringing might not have been perfect, it certainly counted as a peal. The St. Mary-le-Tower ringers then went and finally rung their peal of London at St. Margaret's later in the year. It was published with no footnote so it appears the Tower ringers finally, however reluctantly, accepted the verdict.
10. **An Awful Clanging Noise:** In 1888 a letter appeared in the Bell News complaining of the damage that full circle ringing does to towers. St. Mary-le-Tower was mentioned by name as the tower was having several buttresses rebuilt that year. Also in this letter was a sentence stating that the "clanging of the bells" had "compelled the vicar to vacate his vicarage in the churchyard for a more distant residence." Fortunately, the vicar responded and pointed out he only moved as he

“simply required a larger house.” The St. Mary-le-Tower ringers must have been glad the vicar replied. It wouldn’t look good if even your own vicar is driven away by the sound of your ringing.

- 11. Upstaged:** You might be starting to see a pattern by now. A number of these stories involve correspondence/notes published in the bell news. If you are beginning to get tired of it, I can only apologise. Anyway, on 28th November 1896, the St. Mary-le-Tower Society’s first peal of Double Norwich Court Bob Maximus was published in the Bell News. This, of course, was an incredible achievement. It was however somewhat upstaged by another “colossal feat” achieved on the very same day. For the very first time, the three-ton tenor at St. Paul’s Cathedral had been rung single handed to a peal. The Tower ringers might not have been too happy that their achievement they’d worked so hard for was slightly overshadowed. In the Bell News a note from the editor states: “Messrs. Motts, Catchpole and Co., deserve the congratulations which such a magnificent performance must naturally call forth, but for one man to turn in St. Paul’s tenor, which is three tons two cwt., for upwards of four hours is a remarkable feat of herculean strength, and surpasses any other, in my opinion; of a similar kind.” Dam, looks like the Tower ringer’s performance was beaten on the most featured list that week.
- 12. Verging on Disaster:** This story details a fire in the belfry of St. Mary-le-Tower in 1916. Thanks to the prompt action of the police and fire brigade the fire was quickly extinguished and the damage limited. The story begins on a bank holiday when the Ipswich ringers rang at the Tower with their friends from Coggeshall and had a very pleasant day. At the end of the evening they decided to leave some of the larger bells up. It appears that on the Wednesday night that week, the verger had gone to the top of the tower. As the gas was off he struck a match. When he thought the match had gone out, he dropped it and it fell into the sawdust underneath the bells. Sawdust was used under the bells to quieten them down a little. The sawdust smoldered for a while but eventually burst into flames. It burnt the pulley block and wheel of the seventh, the stay, slider, pulley block and wheel of the eighth, the floor underneath these two bells and the frame surrounding them. Luckily, as the back bells were left up, the eighth rang itself down, alerting people to a problem. It is thought that if the bells were not left up the whole belfry would have been lost.

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