

FEATURE ARTICLE

Wartime bell ringing

During the recent celebrations of the anniversary of VE day, various commentators implied that the ringing of church bells had been banned for the whole duration of the War, with such comments as “bells that had been silent for six years”, thus giving credence to this widely held belief. In fact, church bells were silenced in May 1940 pending an expected invasion of the country at that time. The plan was that bells were only permitted to be rung as a warning to the population if an invasion was taking place. Later, when the threat had passed, people urged the Government to lift the ban. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, eventually did this in 1943.

In East Ilsley we have written proof that bells were rung from 1943. The society has acquired the ringing record of a young teenager covering the years 1943 to 1948 which gives dates and places of wartime ringing and names some of the villagers who took part.

When Thomas Allen arrived in East Ilsley in 1931 to take up his appointment as Headmaster of the village school, his son, Richard, was just 4 months old. The family took up residence in School House next to the school on a hill on the outskirts of the village, where Richard was to spend a lonely and unhappy childhood. He attended his father’s school but outside school hours he was not allowed to leave the grounds of the School or School House and could only play with children invited to the house, and there were no close neighbours nearby. From the age of eleven his education continued at St Bart’s Grammar School in Newbury. Each morning, he would rise at 6.30 am. Having had breakfast, he would walk down to the Square and there catch the bus at 8.00 am, arriving at Newbury Wharf at 8.40 am. From there he would walk through the town to the school.

One local activity he was permitted to partake in was bellringing, and he kept a meticulous record of his progress from 1943 to 1948. On his twelfth birthday, 25th September 1943, Richard recorded that he rang his first rounds, and the following January his first Grandsire Triples on the treble. A year later he had his first lesson on handbells and rang “first rounds of Grandsire Triples on them”.

With the end of the war the East Ilsley ringers embarked on a series of tours to ring in other towers about the country. The first of these on 6th August 1945 was to an area of Oxfordshire including Faringdon, Buckland, Hinton Waldrist, and Childrey. A second tour took place on 7th April 1947 when the ringers visited Appleton, Bampton, Chipping Norton, Clanfield, Shipton-under-Wychwood and Witney. Later, on 26th May, Richard joined the Woolton Hill tour to Romsey Abbey, Alresford, Stockbridge, Wickham, and Wooton St Lawrence in Hampshire.

Moving further afield in 1948 the annual tour went west, visiting Bath Abbey, Chewton Mendips, Cheddar, Wrington, and Wells, St Cuthberts, on 29th March.

Richard's schooling ended abruptly, and he left St Bart's in February 1948 aged 16 having had little time for bell ringing owing to examinations. He started work immediately at Newbury Police station as a police cadet. This involved Richard cycling to Newbury from East Ilsley each day in all weathers.

The family were forced to leave East Ilsley in August 1948 when his father was transferred to a headship teaching post in Wiltshire. Not wishing to join them and seek new employment in Wiltshire, Richard was transferred from Newbury to Wokingham to continue his police work, thus bringing his time in East Ilsley to a close and ending his bellringing activities completely.

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