

Report of a Visit to Groton Bell Tower

by

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Part One

At the kind invitation of Russell Young, one of the Groton masters for the past five years and Ringing Master of the Groton Tower, I visited the school on Friday and Saturday, October 7 and 8, 1960, for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the art of change ringing.

Groton School has a tradition of ringing which began shortly before 1900 and extends unbroken to the present day. To this fact many plaques on its bell tower walls bear witness, since they contain, listed year by year, some of the most famous names in America who have participated in the ringing of the peal while at the school. (It was most moving to me personally to suddenly see "J. W. Suter," former Dean of our Cathedral, on the plaque of 1908.)

Immediately upon our arrival late in the fall afternoon, Mr. Young ushered me up the winding steps into the tower of the beautiful chapel, and introduced me to the peal of eight bells, the largest of which weighs approximately one-and-a-quarter tons. This peal was cast by Mears and Stainback (better known as White-chapel Bell Foundry) around 1890, and it is fair to say that it is representative of the best of bells which were cast at that time.

My first sight of them was most impressive, for they were balanced all mouth and tongue upwards as we climbed up into their chamber above the ringing room and though at rest they appeared momentarily about to cast off in full flight. (Their energy was more kinetic than static, certainly!) When next I saw them, the following morning at 7:30, they were indeed awesome! The 19 by 19 foot chamber was restless and quaking as the great mouths swept side to side in complete 360 degree arcs, the massive weights in swift-sweeping motion, their metal tongues hurled in cheek at each swing.

The sound was indescribable! As a musician, my life and training has been largely the apprehension, analyzation and organization of musical sounds. Nothing, however, in all that experience had prepared me for the power of that aural assault. It was so loud and so intensively persistent that I felt physical pain at moments, though not continuously. In spite of that, such moments were pleasureable now that I look back on it, and for no apparent reasons other than a sense of all encompassing and enveloping sound -- an expectancy of being washed away completely on an angry sea of it. (Hard to describe.) Leaving the tower, I walked out over the surrounding campus for the next twenty minutes as those bells pealed, and although the intensity was not again the same, (depending on direction of wind or reflected sound from nearby buildings) the same exhilaration and expectancy went with me.

Recollecting this strange emotion some days later, I realize that what I was experiencing in my first encounter with a peal of bells in full cry is exactly what men have always experienced in England where this music has flourished as long as the Anglican Church -- and it may be particularly indigenous to that church and no other. It is in a sense a recreation of the ever-impending and imperious voice of the Church itself, compelling all believers to attention. Its voice cannot be denied.

The bells fall one upon the other in such rapid and never-ending succession as to seem almost simultaneous, yet they are separate. They are several or many, yet they are one. They seem never in the same order, and yet they are all in order. They sing no simple, single tune, yet they sing all tunes. They are at once liturgical and evangelical. They are free, yet united -- organized yet self-moving -- yet each with direction and force of its own.

I realize at this point that I have explained nothing concerning change ringing or the bells themselves. It must suffice to say that whereas my investigation of the carillon these past months has given me a rewarding and fresh musical insight, the sound of the swinging, ringing peal at Groton has given me the greater reward of a revealing religious insight.

Part Two

General notes, and information concerning peals, a summary of my conversation with Russell Young, Ringing Master at Groton and Mr. Edward B. Gammons, organist and Master of Music at Groton School, a member of the American Guild of Carillonneurs, and a carillon pupil of Dr. Kamiel Lefevere, one of the advisors to this committee. (See report of my visit to Riverside Church carillon in New York.)

Mr. Young feels that the ideal number of bells in a peal would be ten, for reasons having to do with what combinations are then available for change ringing. He is recommending that the Groton Peal be renovated, remounted, and increased to that size in the future.

It is my opinion, after listening to Mr. Young explain why, that any peal at the Cathedral should not have a tenor bell more than twenty-five hundred pounds. This bell is a handful for any full grown man, and since it should be considered that a band of ringers at our tower would perhaps consist primarily of students from St. Albans and N.C.S., a bell larger than this would be beyond their strength. (Yes, girls can and do ring changes! Mentally they are as quick as boys and rhythmically as competent. Only the largest bells might be beyond them physically.)

Careful consideration should be given the furnishings and dimensions of the ringing chamber itself. Particularly important is the height of the ceiling, (the floor of the bell room) since the distance of rope travel should be kept to a minimum. The founder can, of course, advise in these matters.

Mr. Young also advises that tower openings for a peal are not necessarily consistent with those of a carillon, and that the advice of Whitechapel Bell Foundry is indispensable in planning the room for a peal of bells.

Bells in peal are tuned differently and should have a different timbre than those in a carillon. Both Mr. Gammons and Mr. Young are in agreement with others of our advisors who have said that, and all agree that if a tower contain both peal and carillon, a different builder be chosen for each.

It is obvious to me that the teamwork and individual skill required for change ringing on a peal of bells implies training in technique and development of character traits most desirable in the physical, mental and spiritual growth of young people. Certainly the boys I observed at Groton gave evidence of a dedication and esprit de corps equaling and perhaps surpassing that of any athletic team. It was a pleasure to watch them at their work and to sense the morale of the group and its dedication to the task. Mr. Young was quite willing to elaborate on this and its importance.

Should a ringing peal of bells be installed at the top of the Cathedral Tower for no other reason than to establish such a lasting training school for twenty of our youngsters each year, the exercise and discipline gained, and the tradition thus established, would justify a million times the initial cost.

Finally, (and initial cost brings it to mind) maintenance of a peal is so small as to be negligible. Bearings greased once every ten years, ropes replaced by the ringers themselves as they wear out, usually every three or four years.

Mr. Gammons spoke to me of Arthur Lynds Bigelow, carillonneur of Princeton and one of the foremost experts on carillons and bells in the world. Mr. Gammons urged that we consult him on any carillon construction, and after reading a book by Mr. Bigelow, I feel we are well-advised. I shall write to Mr. Bigelow in the near future.