

A Brief History of the Hereford Diocesan Guild 1886 - 2004

The history of the Hereford Diocesan Guild of Bellringers formally begins in 1896 with the actual formation of the Guild, but bell ringing in Herefordshire and around was, of course, taking place before then, in fact some 200 years before then. Obviously there are few records of what was taking place but we are all justifiably proud to have the work of the famous Herefordian, Fabian Stedman, duly recorded and still celebrated today. Fabian Stedman, son of the Vicar of St. John the Baptist, Yarkhill, was both born and baptised there. He died in 1713.

The first record of change ringing in the Diocese was at Leominster in about late 17th and early 18th century; this was closely followed by records of ringing at both Ledbury and Ludlow, others were to follow. The first peal, 5040 changes of Grandsire Triples, was rung at Ross-on-Wye on September 11th in 1738. Hand bell ringing was also taking place at this time.

Other information about the bell ringers is also evident in this period, notably the social side, with ringers' supping' both before and after ringing; this sometimes led them into deep, deep trouble, requiring action to be taken to curb over-enthusiastic behaviour sometimes requiring the intervention of the Magistrates to restore order! Bell ringers remain very social animals, hopefully not requiring such interventions. However, never let it be said that inebriation was the sole province of the Bellringers of Herefordshire, other Diocese in the country were not spared. They too formed themselves into Associations to promote change ringing and better behaviour in the belfries!

The Hereford Diocesan Guild of Bellringers was thus founded on March 2nd 1896. Subsequently, Guild Festivals have been held almost every year; firstly as social gatherings in which ringing and a grand dinner followed by more ringing seemed to be the norm. Later business meetings were added and the election of the Officers was made more democratic, by allowing the Guild Members to vote.

Guild Striking Competitions were begun in 1912 with the presentation of a shield to the Guild by Captain Archibald Glen-Kidston of Gwrnyfed, Glasbury. The last one held for the trophy was in 1914 following the death of Glen-Kidston. It had however brought about the desired improvement in ringing before lapsing as a result of the Great War. The trophy apparently still exists and remains at St. Leonard's, Bridgnorth.

Today a Striking Competition is held annually, with a specially commissioned trophy presented to the Guild by Thomas Cooper in 1976. It is still known as the Thomas Cooper Striking Competition. A further Striking competition involving other Guilds and Associations takes place each year at Tewkesbury Abbey and was first started in 1973. In 1976 the competition became a ten bell one.

The activities of the Guild were suspended during the Second World War with a ban on ringing imposed in 1940; this was lifted in 1943. General and Sunday ringing were greatly compromised during this period by the absence of ringers who were serving in the armed forces and by the fall in membership afterwards. The armistice of 1945 did not release all serving men immediately; they being required in further conflicts.

A further land-mark for the Guild was in the establishing of the Hereford Ringing Course in 1963. George Cousins was instrumental in the formation with Wilfrid Moreton and Austin Wingate. The Course is still running today, still supervised by Wilfrid Moreton, and is acclaimed countrywide; so much so that the popularity of the Course means that applications far exceed the places.

The Guild today is divided into seven Districts, not all of which are actually in Herefordshire. Bridgnorth, Bromyard, Church Stretton, Clifford and Kington, Hereford, Ledbury and Ross-on-Wye. These, the towers and members, can be found in the Annual Report as well as details of Guild and District reports and the number of peals scored. Quarterly information may be found in the Guild Newsletter, the Open Lead, which is now in its 16th year. In 1886 two peals were scored, both at Ross-on-Wye. One hundred years later there were 128; this was however a very special year. The Report for 2004 shows 102.

So what of the Guild in the 21st Century? The next 94 years could see a totally different history taking us into the 22nd, Nothing is cast in stone; there will always be change and regeneration."

Acknowledgements:

Notes from Guild Minute Books

The Early History of Change Ringing in the Diocese of Hereford by John Eisel.

The HDGBR Annual Report Books

Open Lead issue no. 16.

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