

## Addendum No 10 to *Musical Handbells*

### MUSICAL HANDBELLS IN THE USA

In *Musical Handbells* I showed how church-bell ringers took the horse bells developed by the Cor family at Aldbourne, Wiltshire and used them for practicing change ringing, which was evolving at that time for the ringing of church bells. They had then realised that music could be played on these elementary handbells, and began to play the first tunes – probably folk tunes and carols – on social occasions.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the three and four octave sets of the previous generation were being replaced with augmented five octave sets, and musical handbell ringing was very much on the increase in the Yorkshire/Lancashire area of England. However, in the whole of the USA only a handful of churches had rings of church bells, and the likelihood of their ringers having a set of musical handbells was extremely remote. The introduction of musical handbells to the USA is generally attributed to Phineas T Barnum, and the story goes something like this.

Prior to the mid 1840s, whilst on a tour of England with one of his greatest acts, General Tom Thumb, Barnum saw the Lancashire Bell Ringers entertaining in Liverpool. He was very impressed with their skill and musicality, and, recognising that the American public would be similarly impressed, determined to take them back with him to the USA.<sup>1</sup> At this point I ought to note that some previous writers when commenting on this tour have confused it with a second tour which Barnum also arranged with a totally different band of ringers who also went under the name of The Lancashire Bell Ringers!

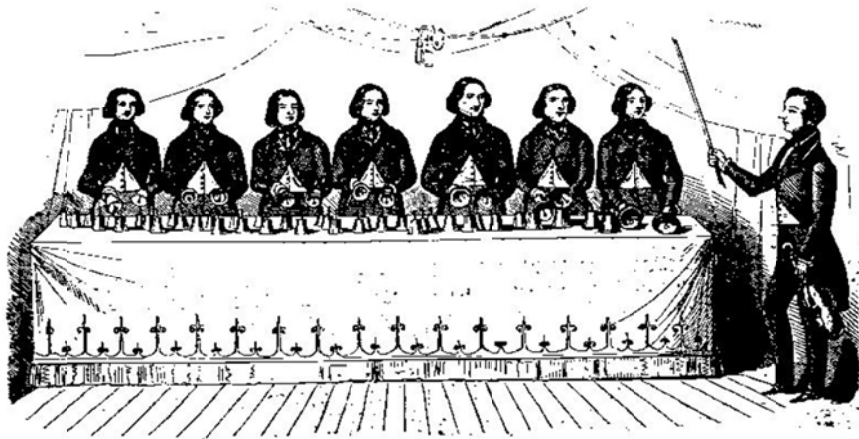
*Ringing in Australia*<sup>2</sup> suggests he signed them up for a ten-year tour of the States in 1850 but I suggest this is in error resulting from this confusion. I think it was nearer 1845-6 that they accepted a twelve-month contract and were asked to fulfil certain conditions. To improve their visual impact he wanted to dress them up and bill them as “Swiss Bell Ringers”, and that to this end they should grow long moustaches and wear Swiss costume. When they objected that they only spoke English, he countered that their Lancashire dialects were so thick that few Americans would be able to understand their version of English anyway! This first tour went ahead, and it was because of Barnum’s insistence that the team were Swiss that the misconception developed in the USA that handbells and handbell ringing originated in Switzerland and not England.<sup>3</sup>

The Lancashire Bell Ringers he engaged at that time was the team illustrated below as performing at the Adelphi Theatre in London in 1843.<sup>4</sup> It had seven ringers and a conductor, whose name was Mr H Johnson, and they played forty-two bells, or just over three chromatic octaves. The account, given with the picture, also mentions that their skill and precision had greatly improved since their first appearance in London some time before, This would indicate that they had been in existence for some years, possibly before 1840. They are reputed to have won one of the ringing competitions which were run at Belle Vue for five years prior to the start of the famous contests in 1855.

Barnum’s “Swiss Bell Ringers” were well received, both in Barnum’s museum and on tour. It is noted in one source that legal complications concerning their nationality arose and brought their tour

to an abrupt conclusion.<sup>3</sup> The same writer notes that Barnum stored their handbells in a cellar in St Louis, Missouri, and that William Peak, Snr, (whom I'll discuss later) realising the value of them as an attraction for his troupe, purchased them.<sup>5</sup>

If the Lancashire Bell Ringers were a professional team touring the halls and theatres of England, one would have supposed they had their own bells. If they were compelled to return to England swiftly, Barnum may have purchased their bells, or perhaps he purchased a specific set for their use in the USA. A further question that arises is "did all the team come back?" Two observations lead me to ask this question. First, after 1855 the Lancashire Bell Ringers did not compete in the Belle Vue competitions. Secondly, a team called "The Campanalogians" were performing in areas of New England during the middle of the 1800s. The article in the Illustrated News of 1843 refers to the Lancashire Bell Ringers by this name as well, so some of the group may have stayed on in the USA



The Lancashire Bell-Ringers, at the Adelphi Theatre in 1843.

But let us move on to 1850. Barnum was in England, and decided to try and repeat his success with another team of handbell ringers. Did he approach the Lancashire Bell Ringers? Were they out of the country, had the old team disbanded or were they unavailable for any other reason? In actual fact Barnum went to Mears Bell Foundry in Whitechapel and asked them to recommend a ringing group to him who would undertake an American tour. They in turn introduced him to one of the leading London church-bell ringing societies of the time, the Society of Royal Cumberland Youths, who passed him on to one of their senior members, Henry W Haley.

Haley was thirty-one at that time, and had been ringing since his teens. A church-bell ringer of exceptional skill, his first sixteen peals had all been lapped on handbells. (Lapping is change-ringing in which the bells are passed from ringer to ringer. See *Musical Handbells*, Appendix II) He worked as a bell-tuner in Warners Foundry and also in their handbell shop, had a keen musical ear and was an accomplished tune-ringer. He accepted Barnum's offer and recommended that he also employed three other Cumberland Youths, William Lobb, Edward W Sawyer and James Hewett. The team was then made up to five with Harry Kent, a skilful handbell ringer but not a church-bell ringer. Barnum negotiated with them a twelve-month tour of the USA, and shortly after that they set sail for the New World.

They opened in New York under the title of “The Lancashire Bell Ringers”, and it is important to realise that this was a totally different group to the previous tour. Unlike the former team, they rang four-in-hand and not off-the-table, and the skill and novelty of their ringing made them a great success with their public wherever they went.

In June they arrived at Philadelphia. Before they arrived, Barnum, the great showman, advertised their coming with this announcement in the local paper, “Cumming’s Evening Telegraphic Bulletin”:

*“Engaged for this week, the celebrated LANCASHIRE BELL RINGERS, the most wonderful performers in the known world, producing by their use of TWENTY BELLS AT ONE TIME, the most delightful Melody, Marches, Waltzes, Quadrilles, Polkas, National and Ethiopian Airs, etc – a prodigy in the science of Music which must be seen and heard to be appreciated. They will appear EVERY AFTERNOON with the whole company.”*<sup>6</sup>

Once again Barnum’s rhetoric and knowledge of human behaviour paid off and the theatre was mobbed with fans wanting to see and hear the “Lancashire Ringers.” This continued throughout their stay, but by the end of the week was to be replaced by a different type of ringing event.

Philadelphia was the second largest English-speaking city in the world at that time, so it was not surprising that there were a number of expatriate English church bell-ringers living there. Some of these rang at Christ Church, where there had been a ring of eight bells in the tower for nearly a century, and they got in touch with the visitors and invited them to join them in ringing the very first three-hour peal in the New World.

One of the local men was Charles Rahill. He was born in Deptford, England in 1826 and learnt to ring on the bells of St Nicholas’s church there. He knew Henry Haley from that period of his life but had moved to Philadelphia in 1847 as a house painter to get more work.<sup>7</sup> He and Haley decided that a peal of Grandsire Triples would be possible and a date and time was set. The editor of the above local paper got to hear of this attempt and put this notice in another section of the Bulletin:

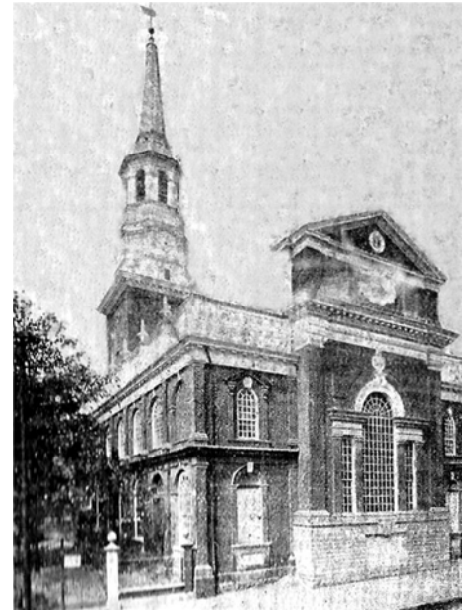
*“The Bellringers are invited to perform on the bells of Christ Church tomorrow morning. They will do what has never been undertaken by any other company.”*

That last sentence would have stimulated the public’s anticipation, especially when Barnum got to work publicising it as well! So, when Sunday morning arrived, a prodigious multitude had assembled that crowded around the church in the streets and on the rooftops. The band consisted of four of the visitors, Haley, who was also the conductor, Lobb, Sawyer and Hewett. Of the locals, there were Rahill, Frederick Wade, who originated from Norfolk, Richard Dodd, who was the steeple keeper at Christ Church, and originally came from Leicestershire, and Thomas Lesage, whose origins I have not been able to trace. They took the precaution of having a ninth man with them; a ringer from Devon named John Davey.

Everything went well for the first two hours of the peal. By then Richard Dodd, who was ringing the tenor, or heaviest bell, was experiencing some discomfort. He was sixty-six years of age, and had lost one leg, and was finding it too exhausting to continue.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, John Davey was close-by and was able to take over and complete the peal, which was concluded after three hours and fifteen minutes.

The crowd outside went wild with excitement. Henry Haley, describing the event some years later, said that the crowd was so dense it would have been physically possible on descending from the belfry to have walked to the road on the heads of them all!<sup>9</sup>

The church authorities erected a special board to mark the event, although this has regrettably been lost over the years. It read:



Christ Church Philadelphia in 1909

*On the June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1850 was rung in this Steeple  
Mr Holt's celebrated ten-part peal of Grandsire Triples,  
Consisting of 5040 changes, in 3 hours and 15 minutes.*

*The performers were stationed as follows:*

***Thos Le Sage, Treble  
Charles Rahill, Second  
Frederick Wade, Third  
H. W. Haley, Fourth  
James Hewett, Fifth  
William Lobb, Sixth  
Edward Sawyer, Seventh***

***Richd. Dodd & John Davey, Tenor***

*This tablet was erected to commemorate the above performance, which  
was executed in a masterly style, and conducted by H W Haley with  
consummate skill, and being the first peal of change ringing in the United  
States of America was duly appreciated by many attentive listeners*

So ended the first peal to be rung in the USA. Haley and his troupe stayed in Philadelphia to the end of June and then continued their tour of the major cities. They arrived back in New York in the spring of 1851 and were preparing to embark for England when Harry Kent fell ill and was taken into hospital where he died. The four members of the Cumberland Youths returned to England, but five years later James Hewett and Edward Sawyer and his family were off on a tour of Europe, but that's another story!

Earlier on in this narrative I wrote about William Peak, Snr and his alleged purchase of The Lancashire Bell Ringers' handbells for the use of his troupe. He and his wife were organist and soloist at a church in Medford, Massachusetts when a famous temperance exponent, John B Gough, employed them to travel around with him to give a brief concert before his lectures. They were so successful at this that Peak decided to build up a concert party of his own. As "The Peak Family"

they brought together a plethora of musical talent, and their members were skilful in the use of the organ, harp, guitar, melodeon, and banjo.

Opinions differ as to when the group first started using handbells. Two biographers imply that Peak had them in 1839 when he organised the troupe – and therefore could not have got them from Barnum.<sup>10, 11</sup> However, as Parry in “*The Story of Handbells*” suggests, the best guide is perhaps when Peak started to describe his troupe as “Swiss Bell Ringers”, but again, opinions differ on this as well! Some excellent photographs of the Peak family appear on a blog<sup>12</sup>, but the quotes and dates in the article are all from after 1850.

So, from the evidence that I have examined, I conclude that Phineas T Barnum launched musical handbells in the USA. Now, one hundred and sixty years later, they are firmly incorporated into the church music of many, many towns and cities throughout the continent. I wonder how many who hear them will reflect on their birth in the Cor Bellfoundry in England in the 1670s?

#### References:

1. *The Story of Handbells*, Scott B Parry, 1957 p23
2. *Ringling in Australia*, Philip Bedford, 1997 <http://www.handbells.org/history/ozbells.htm>
3. As 1.
- 4 *The Illustrated London News*, 13 May 1843 (Quoted in *Reverberations*, Autumn 1979, p69)
5. *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management*, M B Leavitt, 1912 (Quoted in Ref: 1)
6. *The Ringing World*, “The First Peal in America”, C A Wratten, 1976 p572
7. *The Bell News*, “Charles Rahill”, Arthur H Nichols, 1909, p86
8. *The Bell News*,” Letter from Charles Rahill” 1893, p27
9. *The Bell News*,” Musings” 1896, p351
10. *Annals of the New York Stage*, G Odell (15 vols) (Quoted in Ref : 1.)
11. *They All Had Glamour*, E B Marks, 1944 (Quoted in Ref: 1.)
12. Blog: “*Before there was Television*”; The Crushed Tragedian: Wednesday, September 17, 2008

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Two months after completing the above I traced an article in the New York Times of February 22, 1885 about Mr and Mrs William Peak, the seniors of the once famous Swiss family of bell ringers, who were inmates of the Courtland County Poorhouse, near Homer, Syracuse. In discussing their circumstances they mentioned that forty years earlier when getting established they had heard and met the Swiss Bell ringers performing with P T Barnum. The Swiss ringers were anxious to return home, the climate having proved fatal to two of their number, so Mr Peak stepped in and “bought them out”. After three months practice their public appearances with handbells brought triumph after triumph and established the success of their family business.

This would appear to conclusively prove that Barnum was the first to introduce musical handbells to America.