

## JAMES BARHAM AND THE LEEDS YOUTHS

### 1. THE BEGINNINGS

The early years of the 18th century saw the spread of change ringing from the original centres of London and Norwich. At these places ringing societies such as the College Youths had already been in existence for many years, but now small local societies began to spring up across the country.

In most cases the only remaining traces of such bands are the occasional peal board, and it is unlikely that few companies survived for very long. Ringing, and more especially peal-ringing, being essentially a team affair, it needed little more than the loss of one or two members to break up a company. If one of these losses happened for some reason to be the leader and conductor, then the break-up could all too easily become permanent.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of a capable and enthusiastic leader in any ringing society. However numerous and capable a company's members, without a natural leader it will soon lapse into mediocrity or even break up completely. Examples are legion. In Sussex Thomas Lintott led the Horsham company from 1777 nearly to the end of the century, and with his passing a decline soon set in. In the following century there was a similar story at Painswick in Gloucestershire, with the local band under William Estcourt; and there have been many such cases in more recent times.

In general a new leader was more likely to appear in a town society—hence the long history of the College Youths and the St. Martin's Society, the Cumberlands and the Norwich Scholars. But the movement to the towns and the inevitably larger populations there—the two factors that combined to provide the new leaders—were by definition absent from the countryside. It follows from this that in almost any rural society that survived for any appreciable period there will be found one member, normally the conductor, whose story runs like a strong and unbroken thread through the varied tapestry of the greater part of the society's history. And when that thread is broken, even though the society may survive briefly, as it were driven by its own momentum, the end of the tapestry is near.

The Leeds Youths are a prime example of such a society. Here the thread was provided by James Barham, who took up ringing about 1743 while in his late teens, quickly came to lead the company he had joined at that time, and 70 years later was still ringing with the society. During his time the society rang nearly 120 peals in Kent and neighbouring Sussex; before his arrival and after his passing it rang scarcely a dozen. Its feat in ringing 40,320 Bob Major in April, 1761, has ensured it a special place in the history of the Exercise. But its story is an interesting one, and worth recounting. . . .

### THE LENHAM SOCIETY

Although the Leeds Youths Society was not formed as such until the December of 1751, its origins can be traced back to the last quarter of the previous century, to the year 1688 and to the village of Lenham.

By the end of 1688 James II had abdicated and fled, and the "Glorious Revolution" was sweeping across the country. By the autumn the King's pro-Catholic policies had caused considerable dissension, and one cannot help suspecting that the traditional ringing on Nov. 5 that year, commemorating King and Parliament's escape from the Catholic's Guy Fawkes' plot of 1605, may have been conducted with more feeling than usual, even if the ringers themselves were unaware that William of Orange was that same day landing at Torbay.

In Kent the churchwardens of St. Mary's, Lenham, "allow'd ye Ringers Gunpowder Day" the sum of 2/6 (roughly £4 at today's values) for their work that day. The entry in the parish accounts is the first clear reference to a band of ringers in the town, although there had been three bells in its church tower since the beginning of the century and a fourth had been added only two years previously.

Lenham itself, lying some nine miles from Maidstone, just off the modern A.20, was at that period a growing market town. Today it is a quiet village, its old market house in the square converted into shops, but in the 18th century it was to become a flourishing centre, with two markets a week and a twice-yearly fair. And the tower of its parish church was the true birthplace of the Leeds Youths.

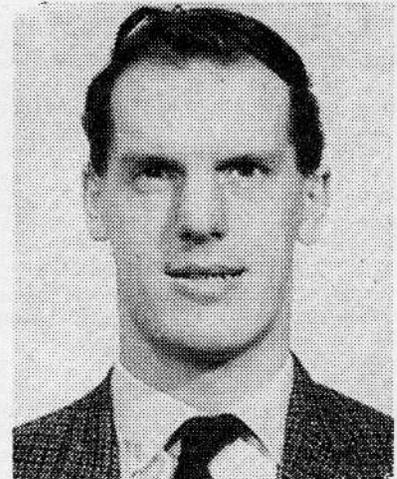
From 1688 its ringers received regular payments from the churchwardens for ringing on special occasions—for the proclamation of William and Mary in February, 1689, and their subsequent coronation, "att ye victory over ye ffrench" in 1704 (that would have been Marlborough's first great victory, at Blenheim), "att A Day of rejoicing" in 1712.

In 1709 Richard Phelps had cast two trebles to add to the old four, and the 1712 ringing would consequently have been on the six. At this time there were barely a dozen rings of six in the county, and the only rings of eight were those at Deptford and Dartford. In the light of this, and the absence of any donors' names on the new trebles, it seems likely that the Lenham ringers may perhaps have been in some degree responsible for the work, and would consequently have been a keen and energetic band.

### CHANGE RINGING

During the next 20 years change ringing must have begun to spread into the county from neighbouring London. Records of ringing at this time are sparse, but the gradual increase in the number of sixes and eights tells its own story. In 1720 Richard Phelps cast a new eight for Wingham, in 1724-25 Samuel Knight cast an eight for St. Mary's, Dover, and another for Canterbury Cathedral in 1726-28, and in 1731 Phelps cast a ring of eight for Greenwich.

The following year at the latter place, a local society calling themselves the Kentish Youths rang a peal of Grandsire Triples "in the eighth month of their practice," and were probably responsible for starting the public appeal that led to the addition of two new trebles in 1734. The same year Phelps augmented the old six at Wye to eight, and here too the local men soon scored a peal. This was Grandsire Triples



Mr. Cyril Wratten, who, as reported last week, has produced an article (in several sections) from James Barham's peal book, and the first part is reproduced on this page.

in 1736, the same year that Phelps cast yet another Kent eight, this time Gravesend.

Then, in 1742, Phelps' successor at Whitechapel, Thomas Lester, cast a ring of eight for Harrietsham, a village barely a mile from Lenham. There could not have been much of a local band there, for their neighbours, by now styling themselves the Lenham Society, almost immediately transferred their activities to the new ring.

Although no record remains of the Lenham Society's performances as a six-bell band, they must have been not only very enthusiastic—witness their prompt transfer to Harrietsham when the new bells were hung—but also very proficient. Within a year of the move they had rung a 6,720 of Oxford Treble Bob, following it three months later with a 6,720 of Bob Major. These peals were rung in March and June, 1743, respectively.

The band was a mixed one. Thomas Barham and John Hunt were barely 20 years old; Abraham Barham was seven years their senior. Then there were John Free-land and Samuel Grayling, both in their early 30's; Henry Tilby, 12 years older still; William Hunt, who may have been John's brother or, perhaps more likely, his father; and others whose names are now lost but were probably older men and long-standing members of the band.

About this time, i.e. probably in 1742 or 1743, another member of the Barham family started to learn to handle a bell. James Barham had been born in 1725, and was probably a younger brother of Thomas and Abraham. Since his father (also named James) may also have been a ringer, it was perhaps inevitable that he should have taken up ringing. What was certainly not inevitable, however, was that he should prove to be a safe and competent ringer, an able conductor and, what was more important, an energetic and inspiring leader. These combined attributes, coupled with a remarkable longevity which would enable him to continue ringing into his 90's, were to ensure that the old Lenham Society should become the leading rural society of the century.

(To be continued)