

## Remembering James Barham and the Leeds Youths

Leeds, the small village a few miles east of Maidstone just off the old turnpike to Ashford is internationally known and admired for its beautiful moated castle, once a favourite royal retreat for King Edward 1st and Queen Eleanor before becoming for many years the seat of the Culpepper and Sackville families, and now a national monument. Within the village itself, Leeds is probably equally known for its fine church with a squat tower of massive proportions and for the endless stream of heavy vehicles on the B2163 that often use the winding narrow streets of this picturesque place as a cross-country short cut when avoiding Maidstone. 250 years ago one would have witnessed another local icon that achieved national celebrity status – the Leeds Youths Society of Bell-ringers under their illustrious leader, James Barham.

James was born in 1725, the third son of James senior who was probably a ringer on the old six bells at nearby Lenham tower. Like his elder brothers Thomas and Abraham, he was introduced to the tower at an early age and learnt to ring with the Lenham Society in 1742/3. He rang his first peal on the newly installed bells at Harrietsham in 1744 at the age of 19 and went on to ring 112 peals over the next 69 years during which time he built up and led a team of ringers whose expertise and prowess was unsurpassed in the provinces. They rang the opening peals on many of the new rings of bells in Kent churches (and two in East Sussex) and rang eight long peals of over 10,000 changes culminating in a peal of 40,320 changes of Bob Major on the bells at Leeds on April 7th and 8th 1761 – a feat which involved 27 hours of continuous ringing by a relay of 14 ringers for the eight bells and this has never been surpassed in time duration.

Up until 1751 the number of bells that hung in the big tower at Leeds is unknown, but is unlikely to have been more than five. In that year they were taken down and made up to ten, with the four smallest new bells given by The Hon Robert Fairfax of



The November 2001 peal band.

Leeds Castle (where James is said to have been employed as a gardener or groundsman). It seems likely that the historic tower clock, by William Gill of Maidstone, was installed at the same time, thereby rendering the sundial on the south wall of the tower redundant. The maiden peal to test out Robert Catlin's new bellframe and to commission his bells (cast in London) was rung on November 2nd 1751 and consisted of 6480 changes of Plain Bob Caters, the first peal ever rung in this method.

James Barham continued ringing 3-hour peals well into his eighties and his last recorded ringing was during July 1817 in his 92nd year. He died six months later and is buried in Leeds churchyard to the east of the high altar. His grave is marked by a stone that records the great performances of a ringing career spanning 75 years. On Thursday, November 1st 2001 ten members of the Kent County Association gathered and successfully re-enacted the first peal of 1751. Meeting at 4.30pm, after some had been delayed by heavy traffic, short interviews were given to BBC Radio Kent and photographs were taken by the *Kent Messenger* before the door was locked and the attempt got under way. Three hours and 57 minutes later an identical peal of 6480 changes of Plain Bob Caters was brought round using a musical variation of what is believed to be the original composition. As in the 1751 peal, it was performed by an all-male band drawn from the six districts of the Kent County Association. The Radio Kent live broadcast unit remained on site to record the opening ringing, which was used as a background to the broadcast item featured that evening and the following morning when the successful result was announced.

The ten bells of Leeds (now also immortalised in the name of a local inn) have needed very little repair over the last 250 years, such was the good work carried out at

that time. Two of the older bells were recast in 1909 by Alfred Bowell when the fittings and frictional parts of the installation were replaced, but the other bells are original and the massive oak bellframe dates from 1751 although it probably incorporates older timbers. Now, after over 90 years of use, the time cannot be too long delayed before the bell fittings are replaced once again and the bellframe and supporting trusswork strengthened. The tenor was cast in 1612 by Joseph Hatch, bellfounder from the neighbouring village of Broomfield. It is of fine tone and has probably seen more use over the last 400 years than any other bell of the same age – well over 1,400,000 recorded changes in over 260 peals since that great occasion of local celebration on a November day 250 years ago.

*So now, brother ringers of every degree,  
With your bells and your bottles be merry  
and free;  
Then fill up your glasses, for here my song  
ends,  
Drink a health to brave Fairfax and Martin  
and friends.  
Hi Derry down, ring away, Derry down day.*

(from a contemporary 18th Century ringers' song about the Leeds Youths)

### KENT COUNTY ASSOCIATION

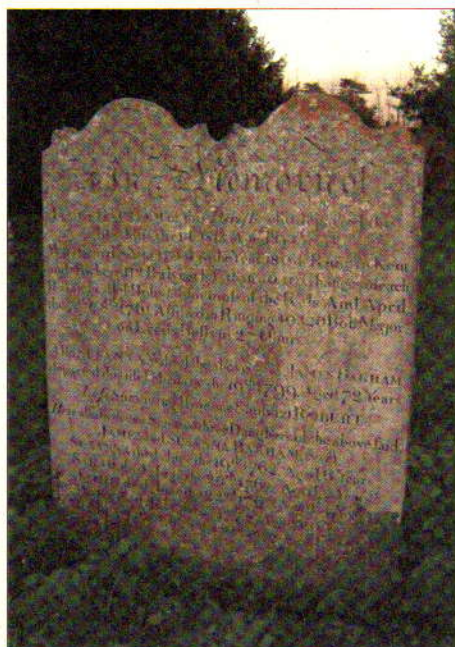
LEEDS, Kent, St Nicholas  
Thursday November 1 2001 3h57 (17)

#### 6480 Plain Bob Caters

Comp. B Annable (arr. P R J Barnes)

- |                          |                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 Phillip R J Barnes     | 6 Frank W Lewis        |
| 2 Dickon R Love          | 7 Richard H Edwards(C) |
| 3 Alan L Andrews         | 8 Nicholas J Davies    |
| 4 Rhian N Bagshaw        | 9 Philip H Larter      |
| 5 Canon David W Grimwood | 10 Thomas M Barlow     |

At the invitation of the parish to honour a peal of 6480 Plain Bob Caters on November 2nd 1751, the first peal on the bells and the first ever in the method, and to celebrate the life of James Barham and 250 years of bellringing tradition at St Nicholas, Leeds.



James Barham's grave in Leeds churchyard.