

THE PITSTOWS OF SAFFRON WALDEN

- (a) Bellinging
- (b) Music

by

H.C. STACEY, Town Clerk.

1961

THE PITSTOWS OF SAFFRON WALDEN

(a) Bell Ringing

The name 'Pitstow' is so well known in bellringing circles that any history of Saffron Walden would be incomplete without some record of the family's connection with the Saffron Walden Society of Ringers, the oldest in the country. I am indebted to Mr. Alfred Ernest Pitstow, (now 85 years old) Harold and Leonard Pitstow for their early recollections.

Alfred started ringing when he was 12 years old. John James (a watchmaker and jeweller in King Street) was responsible for winding the Church Clock, and his son, Arthur F. James, arranged to take on this job in the evenings. He and Alfred, who were about the same age, went up into the belfry together and having wound the clock, tied the clappers of two bells and taught themselves at a tender age to pull bells without making noise either to annoy residents or to lead to their discovery.

At this time, the Company could do very little change ringing although Alfred's father, Frederick Pitstow, his uncles, Nathan John Pitstow and Ernest Alfred Pitstow, George Martin, Snr., John Francis Penning (Town Hall Keeper) and Charles Freeman were capable of doing so.

The brothers Nathan and Fred Pitstow several times walked the nine miles to Stansted to get some practice.

A.J. Coe and Wm. Marshall were ringers at this time but neither could grasp and master "change" ringing.

The three brothers Nathan, Fred and Ernest, did not confine their ringing activities to Saffron Walden and its immediate vicinity. With Alfred they toured Devon and Cornwall two or three times with other ringers (notably The Revs. F.E. Robinson and G.F. Coleridge) with the sole object of introducing Change Ringing to a part of the country where the ringers were prejudiced against what they called "Scientific Ringing". The tours were adjudged to have been great successes and local interest was stimulated. On one of these tours the ten bells of Exeter Cathedral were rung in changes for the first time and the performance was remarkable if only for the fact that it was the heaviest peal of bells in the country (Tenor bell weighing 67 cwt.) and the bells being in a bad condition, were extremely difficult to handle.

Another tour undertaken was in Suffolk and Norfolk and this was highly successful as eleven peals each of 5,000 or more changes were rung in nine days, and two of them, one on the ten bells at Aylsham and the other on the twelve at Norwich, were rung on the same day. Feats of this sort are common place to-day but at that time (in the 1880's) the performance was unique.

Soon after Alfred started ringing, he rang for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee of 1887, a peal he remembers because some of the ringers had to take their places in the procession with either one of the Friendly Societies, the Town Band or the Volunteers. So short of ringers were they that Alfred was sent by his father to ask help from two old ringers, James Miller who lived in Freshwell Street and James Bacon (great grandfather of Frank Bacon the fishmonger) who lived in Middle Square. Neither had done any ringing for some years and old Bacon had difficulty in climbing the steps to the belfry without the assistance of Alfred's father.

Alfred Pitstow and Arthur James gradually mastered the art of change ringing and made up the Company of eight who ultimately tackled and mastered the most intricate methods then known to ringers which could be rung in only two other places in the Country - Burton-on-Trent and Bennington. From many parts of the country ringers came to Saffron Walden to get an insight into this kind of bellringing. Nowadays these change ringing methods are common in all parts of the country but Saffron Walden can be justly proud of its ringers for popularising those methods. Nathan Pitstow (who used to live where Alfred resides now, was Managing Clerk in the office of J.T. & Turner Collin, Solicitors of Church Street) became widely known as a Composer of Peals and his name is recorded as such in many belfries. Some of his peals are considered "Classics" and are frequently rung to-day.

Alfred's younger brother, Frederick James Pitstow, later joined the Company and took part in the most difficult peals rung by five Pitstows (Nathan, Fred, snr., Ernest, Alfred and Fred, jnr.) Arthur James, J.F. Penning and Chas. Freeman. Alfred is the only surviving member of the Company which followed in the tradition of those Saffron Walden ringers of the 17th century who distinguished themselves by ringing difficult peals but less intricate. Richard Miller, who lived at Nuts Farm on the Ashdon Road, was the Master and Conductor in those earlier days and his grand-daughter gave Alfred all his ringing papers.

In 1892 when Alfred was only 17, there was a Lady Band of ringers and he taught them to pull a bell. At first there were six - The two Miss Pellys and Mrs. Durrant (three daughters of the Vicar) Margaret, Eva and Flora Nockolds (Flora later married W. Fitzroy Ackland). They were later joined by Mrs. Ford Williams (Curate's wife) and Miss Gayton of The Towers, Swards End.

Several times they rang the eight bells for a service which at that time was held at 2 p.m. They rang as follows:- Miss Gayton (1) Mrs. Williams (2) Mrs. Durrant (3) Flora Nockolds (4) the Misses Pelly (5 and 6) Eva Nockolds (7) and Margaret Nockolds (8). Alfred remembers very well Miss Gayton giving him half-crown each time he attended to teach the ladies and in those days a half-crown was worth having.

A break came in Alfred's bellringing activities when he volunteered for service with Cambs. Volunteer Section of the Suffolk Regiment and spent some time as a Sergeant in South Africa during the Boer War. The Ipswich Section lost their sergeant Lind Alfred was transferred to command it. On his return from the war he was made a freeman of the Borough of Cambridge, was given a Silver Cup by the University, was publicly thanked by the Mayor and Corporation of Ipswich and received an Illuminated Address at a Public Dinner given by the Saffron Walden Borough Council. **

In 1914, just before the war, the eight bells cast by Briant of Hertford in 1798 from the metal of a previous peal, were augmented to make up a peal of 12 and Alfred had the honour of conducting the first peal on them. By this time Nathan had died but two more Pitstows had joined the company - Ernest's two sons, Harold Nathan and Leonard Ernest who were still at the Grammar School.

Harold rang, his first full peal on the Walden bells in 1912 when he was only 15. After serving with the Last Surrey regiment, The Inniskilling Fusiliers, and the Royal Artillery during World War 1, Harold moved to London in 1920 with his firm Watney Combo Reid & Company). In London he rang several peals with notable London ringers at various towers including St. Paul's and Southwark Cathedrals.

Moving to Banstead, Surrey, in 1926, Harold was soon in demand to form and train a local band of ringers and is to-day still leader in this tower. Amongst ringers of both sexes he has trained are his two sons and daughter.

In 1924 Harold was made a supernumerary to the Band of Ringers at Westminster Abbey and later was appointed a principal. In 1943 he was elected Secretary and Conductor of the band - a post he still holds. He has conducted Peals at the Abbey for the Coronation of George VI (1937) Victory Peal (1945) wedding of Princess Elizabeth (1947) Birth of Prince Charles (1948) and the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (1953). For each of the Coronation Peals he was presented with the Coronation Medal and in 1954 was awarded the M.B.E. for services to the Abbey. In the intervening years he has returned to his home town and conducted peals on the 12 bells including the peal requested by the Corporation for Festival of Britain Year (1951).

Alfred Pitstow's companion, Arthur James, who succeeded to his father's business of Watchmaker and Jeweller in King Street, married Ernest Pitstow's sister Annie, and Leonard Pitstow learnt the trade with his uncle Arthur and to-day carries on the same business which has been responsible for maintaining, repairing and winding the Parish Church Clock since it was installed in 1823 at a cost of £240.

** See page 8.

Leonard commenced his ringing interests in 1913 but his progress was halted when the peal was augmented to twelve bells. This new peal was opened on Great Ringing Day, June 27th, 1914 and ringing commenced again, only to be stopped by the Great War.

Leonard joined the Army at 18 years of age in 1917 and served in France in the Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment until the Armistice, when he was moved to the Rhine Army. On being demobilised in 1919 Leonard returned home and rang his first peal of Stedman Caters on Boxing Day of the same year with four other Pitstows including his father and brother Harold. Since then he has rung many peals on eight, ten and twelve bells including one at St. Clement Danes Church in London and several on handbells with other members of the family. Ringing two bells, one in each hand, requires much practice. When Alfred resigned as Conductor of the Bellringers in 1940, Leonard was appointed and still holds that office, ringing for Sunday service each week.

To celebrate the christening of his daughter in September, 1953, Leonard, Mary his wife, Harold, his two sons and daughter rang a special peal on six bells.

With the death and retirement of so many of the old Company of Ringers whose places have not been filled, the bellringing, in Walden is not what it used to be. Nor does one hear on a Saturday night the handbells which the ringers used to ring in the Cross Keys over a pint following a bellringing practice.

Great Ringing Day, which used to be on June 27th (in recent years observed on the last Saturday in June) was an occasion when the bells were rung, by local and visiting ringers practically throughout the day well into the evening. Thomas Turner of Saffron Walden (an ancestor of Nathan employers) by his will made in 1623, left an annual bequest for the eight ringers of those days of £1.13.4 (4/2 a bell - of considerable value then) £1.0.0. for the Vicar to preach a sermon, 6/8 for the Sexton for oiling the bells, for a peal to be, rung on the anniversary of his death - June 27th. There is a tradition that Thomas Turner was once lost in the woods and found his way home by hearing the bells of the Parish Church.

The first peal of which the, Society of Ringers has any record was rung on Christmas Day in 1753. Details of notable achievements on the bells are to be found on nine tablets around the walls of the Parish Church tower.

Pulling a bell is not so easy as it looks and change ringing, says Alfred, is a very difficult to take up because the art is something which one must learn gradually by constant practice. It is difficult too, for one who knows the art, to impart his knowledge to others.

(b) Music

Nathan Pitstow taught himself the violin and later took to the 'cello becoming fairly proficient, playing mainly Chamber music. Being friendly with William and Fred Dewberry, both organists at Cambridge, Nathan often took part in concerts there and at Newmarket. Nathan, too, had a good bass voice and was a soloist in the Church Choir.

Fred Pitstow, snr. was probably the most accomplished musician of the family and was self-taught. He played the violin very well and also the viola. Not many people took to the viola and consequently Fred was invited to play this instrument at many concerts and festivals. He was a talented clarinetist and played with the Volunteer Band under Bandmaster Ginnett, a former Army bandsman who knew little about orchestration. This led to many disagreements between them and ultimately Fred Pitstow left the Volunteers and formed the Excelsior Band. He was followed out by his brother Ernest, Ted Freeman, William Auger, John Coe, George Cox and a few others which so depleted the Volunteer Band that it could not function for a time. When J.G. Bellingham (Town Clerk) who was then Captain of the Volunteers discovered the reason why he was losing his bandsmen, poor Ginnett was sacked and George Badman appointed Bandmaster. The band, however, soon succumbed and the Excelsior took over. George E. Martin who died a few months ago played the piccolo in the Volunteers Band and was the last surviving member. Fred Pitstow's musical ability was recognised when he was appointed by Leys School, Cambridge, to teach string, brass and woodwind instruments, a post he held for several years. This was a remarkable achievement for one who was entirely self-taught, receiving no tuition of any sort. Fred too, was a chorister and for several years sang with the Church Choir at the Handel Festival at the Crystal Palace under Dr. Mann organist of Kings College, Cambridge.

On the formation of the Saffron Walden Musical Society, Fred was its first conductor. When he ceased being bandmaster of the Excelsior Band, he was succeeded by his brother Ernest, who carried on for a number of years. About 1900 Ernest too, gave up and Saffron Walden was without a band.

The Town called a meeting and another band, called the Town Band, was formed and Fred was invited to be bandmaster, which he accepted, holding the position until the 1914 war when so many of the bandsmen joined the Army.

Ernest, who played proficiently the flute and piccolo was asked by some of the old members of the Excelsior Band to reform the band which he did and so the Town had two bands. Asked on one occasion as a boy to play a piccolo solo for the then Lord Braybrooke, Ernest had to be stood on a table.

After the first World War, the two bands amalgamated but the second World War caused the break-up of this band and there is now no band in Saffron Walden.

As a boy in the late 1800's Alfred was a member of the NATS Club, a successful Club formed for boys by Turner Collin. The boys had a drum and fife band, Alfred playing a fife. The NATS gave an annual Nigger Minstrel Concert in the Town Hall Alfred being the Producer and Pianist. For ideas Turner Collin used to take the boys to a London Theatre every year to see a Nigger Minstrel Show there. The Nigger Minstrels functioned for quite a time and when he was older Alfred improvised on the piano for catchy and topical songs.

Alfred Pitstow played the piano and his Quadrille Band at one time was well known in the district. He also played the clarinet in both the Excelsior and amalgamated bands and also in the Cambridge Band under Bandmaster Horlock. In his young days he played the handbells with his father and uncle Ernest, eventually being able to play tunes, holding four bells, two in each hand. Bells retained in the hand were at that time a novelty.

During World War 1 a drum and bugle band was formed and attached to the Volunteer Battalion in the town. Arthur Evenett, who played a cornet in the Excelsior Band was appointed Bandmaster and taught the buglers. Tom Lacey, another bandsman, took over the Big Drum and Alfred Pitstow taught the drummers who included his two sons and the writer. He composed bugle marches to suit the progress of the boys.

Harold and Leonard Pitstow both played under their father in the Excelsior Band, Harold as a boy playing first the triangle and later either the flute or piccolo and for his first piccolo solo in the band he was stood, on a box. At Banstead, Harold has played the flute in several orchestras and in 1932 was appointed Musical Director of the Banstead Amateur Operatic Society, an office he still holds. He also conducts for other Societies; He was taught to play the piano and had tuition from Dr. H. Mahon for the organ. For a time he was organist at Littlebury Church and played for services in Saffron Walden Church and in some of the surrounding villages.

Leonard first played the clarinet as a member of the Excelsior Band but when Harold left Saffron Walden in 1920, he took over the flute and piccolo parts. When the Saffron Walden Amateur Operatic Society was formed in 1923, Leonard played in the orchestra and in 1926 was appointed Hon. Conductor. He is the proud possessor of an ebony baton presented to him by the Society that year which bears 23 silver bands, one being added for each year's production. An illness in 1953 obliged him to resign his Conductorship although he still plays the flute in the orchestra. He was a founder member of both the, Saffron Walden Male Voice Choir and the Music Club and is the present Chairman of the Musical (now renamed Choral) Society in which he sings tenor. He is also a member of the Uttlesford Orchestra.

On their return from the War in South Africa in 1901, Sgt. Alfred Pitstow, Private Arthur Ryan and Private Henry Thomas Lindsell were each presented with an Address of Welcome by the Saffron Walden Borough Council in the following terms:

We, the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the Borough of Saffron Walden, desire to express to those Members of the I Company of the Volunteer Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment now returning from South Africa, our high appreciation of their patriotism and splendid act of duty, in so nobly volunteering, at a time of great national emergency, to go out to South Africa, and then assisted by Volunteers from Canada, Australia, India, The Cape, and Natal, rendered such valuable services to the Empire, in repelling an unprovoked and insolent invasion of British Territory."

(A fourth Volunteer, Fred King, died of dysentery.)

They were given a great Homecoming, being escorted in procession through the town, headed by the Town Band, of which Alfred's father, Fred Pitstow, was the Conductor and the Excelsior Band, led by Alfred's uncle, Ernest Pitstow.

The Three Volunteers were among those granted the Honorary Freedom of Cambridge on 6th May, 1901.

Then the Honorary Freedom of Cambridge was conferred on the Cambridgeshire Regiment on 29th September, 1946, the survivors of the South African War freemen were invited and ex-Sgt. Pitstow attended.

Until late in life, Alfred was an honoured guest at the Suffolk's Reunion and every year up to 1965 he spent a week at Yarmouth with one of his old campaigner friends who died about six months before Alfred.

In the 1890's, Turner Collin, who then lived next his Solicitors office at No. 16, Church Street, ran a Boys' Club called "The Nats" of which Alfred in 1966 must have been the sole survivor. The Nats Club gave a Nigger Minstrel show annually in the Town Hall to raise funds and every year Mr. Collin took the boys to London to visit Maskelyns and then to a Nigger Minstrel show. The boys returned with some of the catchy songs in their heads and Alfred with his gift of improvising, played the tunes on the piano. The boys had a drum and fife band and George Martin, the whitesmith, a flautist, taught the boys.

With the outbreak of the Boer War, Alfred determined to join the Army to serve in Africa and the story he related to me of how he did it with a little deception concerning ability to ride a horse was most amusing. He went to South Africa and some of his experiences he recorded for my Scrap Book (Page 174 No. 3).

My recollections of Mr. Pitstow go back to the First World War when about 1917 the late G.P. Horton collected money on the Corn Exchange and from friends to buy drums and bugles for a Band to be attached to B. Company 3/2nd Volunteer Battalion Essex Regiment. Some 16 buglers and 7 side-drummers were recruited from boys of about 14 - 16, Tommy Lacey (Town Band) taking the big drum. Arthur Evenett (Cornet player in the Town Band) taught the buglers and Mr. Pitstow taught the drummers. When Alfred was satisfied the drummers could beat and roll a little, he drilled us for a simple march without bugles to lead the Company from the Shooting Butts, Beechy Ride, to the Headquarters at 86, High Street. Then, when the buglers were ready, he again composed simple marches for both drums and bugles until the Band in both sections became more proficient. We who were members of that Band, will remember Mr. Pitstow for the pleasure he gave us and the fun of practices with him in the range behind the Drill Hall and in Beechy Ride.

Many people will remember Mr. Pitstow of course, as the Income Tax Collector in the days when there was a local and personal collection.

Alfred played the Clarinet in the Town Band when Walden could boast of two bands - the Town Band and the Excelsior. Like all the Pitstows, he was a good musician and with the other members of that family widely known as a bell ringer. I was glad to record his recollections of bell ringing in an article I contributed to Essex Countryside in 1960.