

Tom Phillips 1906-2008

"He never said a bad word about anyone." It's an epitaph to be proud of, and one often expressed by our band at Backwell, Somerset about its longest serving member, Tom Phillips, who died on June 9th at the great age of 101.

Tom had a measured approach to life – his core qualities were loyalty to his family, to his church and parish, and to his twin loves, the choir and the tower, both of which he served with distinction.

Tom was born in the parish on October 25th and christened on December 9th 1906. His mother's two brothers, Fred and Phillip Blake, were ringers at the tower, and following the usual pattern Tom joined the choir in 1915 and when Fred taught him to ring he added tower membership in 1921. In those days the ringing was pretty static, one man to his fixed bell, and only candles for lighting.

Better news downstairs, where he married his wife Edith, also a choir member, in 1932. For a short time they lived in Bristol. Tom was able to expand his ringing repertoire with the late Sid Riches at St Werburgh's and the Bristol ringers of the pre-war era, and recalled ringing at the later bombed-out towers at Temple and St Nicholas on Bristol Bridge.

Tom and Edith returned to set up home in Backwell where their daughter Joyce was born in 1936. Things were changing on the ringing scene as the old generation passed on, and before long he was elected tower captain and secretary, a post he held until 1977.

The band had rejoined the Bath & Wells Association in 1936, and in 1938 the Rector of the day was instrumental in augmenting the bells from six to eight. But the war intervened soon after, and it was not until 1950 that the first peal on the new eight was rung, with Tom ringing the 2nd to his first peal, Grandsire Triples, conducted by the Branch Ringing Master, Herbert Knight. This was closely followed by his first of Stedman Triples in 1951. He rang only three other peals in the tower, including the writer's first, Plain Bob Major in 1957, but his *piece de resistance* was his first of Surprise, Yorkshire Major in 1975, at the age of 68, which epitomised his enthusiasm for new challenges, which he never lost.

He rang the last of his many quarter peals at the age of 85, continuing as an active member of the band on a reduced scale into his 90s, and on one occasion we savoured the experience of the oldest and youngest ringer (Steve Cox) with an age difference of around 80 years, ringing together for Sunday service.

Tom was a keen member of the Chew Branch for many years; he had a special friendship with Len Derrick, tower captain at nearby Nailsea, and in earlier days the two towers combined for Sunday ringing, and with friends, for many tower outings in and around Somerset.

72 years membership of the Bath & Wells was eclipsed by no less than 93 years in the choir, which earned him a place in the Guinness Book of Records.

It was fitting that his funeral was more a celebration of his long life of service to the community. The choir sang one of his favourite anthems, and he left the church for the last time to some fine ringing on the back six before his ashes were interred in the churchyard with his wife, who had predeceased him in 1991.

For us all the end of an era - "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

JOHN BRAIN