

Walter Champion

1918 - 2009



Walter Champion, the tower captain of St Mary's, East Brent, died at the age of 91 on 6th June. Walter was born into a well known local farming family and, apart from the war years, spent his whole life in East Brent. However he was destined not to be the farmer of his generation, having won a scholarship to Weston Grammar School. He started his working life with the agricultural merchants Browns in Highbridge.

At Christmas 1939 he was called up; serving as a Lance Bombardier in the Royal Horse Artillery in North Africa and into Europe after D-Day until 1945. He landed on D-Day+2 and was in the front line operations fighting through France and eventually being amongst the first British troops to cross the Rhine. In Normandy his armoured vehicle was hit and the officer severely injured. He took charge of the situation and his quick action saved many lives. He was mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Croix De Guerre by the French Government.

After the war he was involved in running James' stores in the village. He changed career in 1970 becoming a rent collector with Axbridge RDC and effectually with Sedgemoor DC.

He loved the Church of St Mary's, East Brent. He was baptised here and sang in the choir as a boy. Like his father before him he was churchwarden for over 30 years, as well as being treasurer. He served on the Parochial Church Council right up until his death. He was one of the first laymen to administer the chalice at Communion and continued to do so every Sunday until very recently. I first got to know Walter well through one of his great passions – bellringing. He took on the unenviable task of starting my training; I will always remember his patience and encouragement. He always made light of my many mistakes.

Bellringing was very much a Champion family tradition. Walter began at the age of 18 (he told me his father refused to allow him to start earlier!) and was still ringing over 70 years later. Brothers, Charles and John, joined him. In November 1954 all three were involved in ringing a peal of Grandsire Doubles.

Walter was always full of tales of ringing in his early days: the great characters of those times; the fact that ringers were paid (not much though!); the 6am ringing for East Brent Harvest Home and Easter Sunday morning; and ringing the Old Year out and the New Year in with a slap up supper laid on at the Rectory.

In later years I was always amazed by Walter's agility when clambering over the bell frame and between the bells – well into his 80s. I'm not sure how the paramedics would have got him down if he fell and broke a leg. But he never did. In any case he wasn't one to follow the nanny state health and safety rules if it interfered with living an active life.

He was still ringing until very recent years, and he rang a quarter peal to mark his 70th anniversary as a bellringer. On that occasion the age gap between him and the youngest ringer was over 75 years.

Over the years, Walter and his late wife, Mel, were great company on ringing outings and other events. They were always generous with their hospitality to the ringers, warmly welcoming us into their home on many occasions.

Cooking was another of Walter's talents, learnt in retirement. Many visitors enjoyed his famous 'brandy buns' or the produce of his extensive and well kept vegetable garden.

Only a few months ago I came upon him on a Sunday morning in his kitchen with the mixing bowl in hand. He was always keen to hear the news of ringing in his beloved tower. That scene in his kitchen really showed me much of his determination to remain independent and at home until the end. He did so right up until the week of his death.

I am not alone, as a relative newcomer to East Brent, in experiencing the welcoming kindness of Walter and Mel. I always felt, whether bellringing, church, Harvest Home or whatever, he wanted you to share and become part of those village traditions.

Walter was a true 'gentle-man' in every meaning of the word. He has over these last 91 years been so much a part of the fabric of this village, it is almost impossible to imagine East Brent without him. His gentleness, mild manners, distinctive chuckle and cheeky sense of humour, but above all his kindness, hospitality, cheerfulness, friendship and love, has touched and enriched so many lives. We will all miss him.

Paul Kingdom,
East Brent Tower Secretary

The above is the transcript of Paul's Eulogy from Walter's funeral. East Brent was in interregnum at the time and it was very fitting that Paul should take the service. He did a wonderful job and Walter would have been proud of him. I have an idea that Walter made a mischievous contribution to the service: why else did the organ stop working that morning resulting in the piano having to be used?

The bells were rung before and after the service and burial by Knoll group ringers and friends- there was a lot of Grandsire which Walter would have enjoyed.

A half-muffled quarter peal was rung a few days later by past and present members of the Knoll Group of ringers.

R.B.