

Leonard Austin England



19th April 1945 – 27th July 2013

The following appreciation draws from the eulogy given by Len's son Julian, also memories from some of those who have rung with Len over many years.

Len was a larger than life and genial character, and you knew when he was in the room. His strongly-held views on many things tended to dominate pub discussions. He'd always have something pointed to say – he called a spade a spade. People have referred to him as a great English eccentric which he would have liked. In most ways he was a traditionalist. He once said that so far as cars were concerned they should have stopped at the Morris Minor.

Len learnt to ring as a boy in the 1950s in the village of Pilton where he was brought up, He rang his first quarter peal as a young teenager. The bells at East Pennard are only ringable due to his efforts. His father Albert England is believed to be one of the last to ring

on the bells before they were condemned in the early 1900s. Len decided to pick up the gauntlet and raise the £5,000 required rehang the bells in a new steel frame and in 1972 the work was completed and the bells rang out again as they still do 43 years later. He was always proud that this ring, the heaviest five, could be rung by a complete family of Englands, himself, his wife Ellie, his brother Ron, his son Julian and his daughter-in-law Sam.

Len was always on the go. His job in printing meant early starts. His other great pastime was his allotment where he would spend many a productive hour. In the evening you would often find him sat with his head in a book reading about the exploits of a great statesman or noble monarch. He would often quote the works of Thomas Hardy. In the last couple of years he had bought a lap top and attended computer lessons enabling him to catch up with the latest peals and ringing news.

Len was a Somerset man and rang most of his peals in Somerset and the surrounding counties. His first peal was Bob Major at Blagdon in 1967. One of his early peals was the first on the bells at East Pennard. When going to a tower in deepest Somerset, Len would always want to know "how far is it from the Bridgwater turn?" (off the M5) and this seemed to be the centre of his world. It has now become a standard for distance measurement in Somerset. He had a deep interest in local bell history, inscriptions and weights. He did an in depth survey of the 3-bell towers in the Cary branch. One of the last conversations he had with Mat Higby was regarding the weight of Mells tenor – "is 26-2-23 the weight, or the date that Ron Dove rang there? The diameter and note suggests more like 22cwt!"

He was keen on 'good' bells and heavy bells and he much preferred more measured ringing. Len was more interested in quality than quantity. After a suitably slow quarter at East Pennard (over 60 minutes) he told the conductor to send it up with the quote "You can tell that "Huffy" 'twas as good ringin as 'eeev ever dun ere". He would hold forth enthusiastically and at length on the merits of his favourite rings and individual bells, especially East Pennard tenor. He had no time for mini-rings, his opinion was "ah but they baint proper bells". Following his peal at Highbridge, he said that they should be "recast into one". However, he seemed to enjoy his peal at the light eight at Tolland.



He did venture further afield occasionally for a special treat, notably to Abergavenny, Beverley – both the Minster and St Mary's, Birmingham Cathedral, Loughborough All Saints, Inveraray, Leighton Buzzard and Southwark Cathedral. He was happy to ring simple stuff which could be rung well and his leading method was Bristol S. Major. Being no slouch, he also rang twelve peals of London No.3 S. Royal, and several of Bristol Royal. On higher numbers he rang several peals of Surprise Maximus, including three of Bristol. While not a regular tenor ringer, he turned in Wells Cathedral tenor to a peal of Cambridge Royal.

He had several ambitions – to ring peals on all of the heavy sixes – this he achieved with the exception of Brailes and St Buryan. He also wanted to peal all the Bath & Wells eights. Len, with his broad Somerset accent, had the knack of talking to local tower captains in a way that reduced any reluctance to allow peals to be rung on their bells and he became the tower organiser for a project to ring peals on all the 8-bell towers in Somerset. This continued throughout the '70s and onwards as more towers were augmented or became available. On hearing of an augmentation, Len would say: "Ah don't worry, we'll get them". There was also a tale where he spun a yarn after losing a peal telling the locals they had stopped because a lady in the band had become ill and "twas the best thing to do. Now when can we come again?" By the time of his death, Len (together with Peter Bridle, Mick Hobbs, John Hunt and Tony Cox) had rung peals on all the 'proper' Somerset eights, apart from the virtually unringable Walcot, Bath.

From 1986 to 1995 Len was a regular member of the peal band at Barrow Gurney, ringing new methods in the elements and gemstone series, making this his leading tower with 73 peals. Family and work commitments restricted Len's peal ringing from the early 90s, but on retirement he was showing renewed enthusiasm and was arranging a monthly midweek peal re-visiting some of the rarer Somerset towers and sadly, one of these, at West Coker, was to prove to be his last peal. Len rang a total of 414 peals, 15 of which he called. He rang 253 for the Bath and Wells DA. He was elected to the College Youths in 1975, and rang 21 peals with the Society.

When the ringing in a peal was good, Len's head would rock from side to side and he would hum out to the rhythm, the better the ringing got the more his head would rock and the louder his humming. This led to the saying: "the ringing was so good, Len's head nearly fell off". Len arrived slightly late for a peal attempt at the then rare and lumpy eight at Mark. The bells were up and they were ready to start when he arrived so he was left the treble. In the trial rounds he slipped wheel so was relegated (or promoted, depending on how you look at it) to the seventh and a good peal was then scored without further incident. Before a peal at Butleigh (pre-augmentation), Len gave the band a pep talk, maybe a little concerned that 21 Surprise Minor was being attempted. There were some smiles when Len, ringing the treble, managed to drop the tailend part way through. He made a deft recovery and a good peal was scored.

There are lots of good memories of Len – often accompanied by loud banter and raucous laughter! His ringing friends have said how much they miss him, especially his phone conversations when he would lead off about some topic which was concerning him, notably once the fact that East Pennard bells were scheduled to be on Bells on Sunday and he knew nothing about it “and nor did the Vicar!”. Len was a wonderfully engaging man who left a mark on all those he met and who will be truly missed.

JOHN SCHMIDT