

Chapter 5

Handbells

Hand bells are thought to have been developed by ancient Vedic civilizations situated in the Indian Subcontinent, such as the Harrapan and Mohenjodaro civilizations. Sets of handbells can be used either to ring tunes, where the handbell clapper is set to strike more heavily on one side of the bell, or for change ringing where the clapper is evenly balanced.

In England the development of the handbell is credited to Robert and William Cor, brothers who ran a foundry at Aldbourne in Wiltshire between 1696 and 1724. They originally made decorative bells for horses, but for reasons unknown they began tuning their bells more finely to have an accurate fundamental tone, and then fitted them with hinged clappers that moved only in one plane. Hand bells can weigh as little as 200g or upwards of 8.2kg.

Handbell sets used by change ringers have the same number of bells as in the towers, generally six to twelve tuned to a diatonic scale. For change ringers this allows them to practice their ringing away from local churches, although by tradition two handbells, one in each hand, are normally rung by a single individual adding to the complexity of ringing methods.

The exercise of hand bell ringing is sometimes referred to as tintinnology (small bells) while the ringing of church bells is known as campanology (large bells).

Roger Smith – itinerant ringer

Bartholomew Fair was a prominent London fair established under a charter granted by Henry 1 to raise funds for the Priory of St Bartholomew in Smithfield. It was first held in 1133 and ran until 1855 when the City authorities stopped it to suppress the debauchery and public disorder caused. While the charter permitted a three day event it had evolved into a two week festival before being shortened to only four days in the 18th century. The fair had previously commenced on the 24 August, but with the change to the Gregorian calendar in 1753 the start date was moved to the 3 September. The fair continued after the Dissolution around 1536 as a trading event for cloth, as well as a pleasure fair. It drew crowds from all classes of English society and had an international reputation.



The above print of Bartholomew Fair (34.5cm by 27.0cm) shows an itinerant handbell ringer (thought to be Roger Smith) engraved by the artist William Henry Pyne (1769-1843) who was commissioned to write and illustrate *The Costume of Great Britain* by William Miller. It is known to have run to at least four editions 1804 (but not issued until 1805), 1808, 1819 and 1825. This print can be found in two different versions - first with a small footnote 'Published by William Miller, Albermarle Street, Jan'y 1 1805 No 10' while the other variety appears without the footnote

One of the entertainers at the fair is thought to have been an itinerant handbell ringer called Roger Smith. He was a native of Norwich and a weaver by profession, but an injury to his sight caused him to become a professional musician. He constructed a belfry near Broad Wall, Lambeth containing eight bells from which it is said he made a tolerable living. However, he was forced to leave as a consequence of 'some building improvements'. Thereafter he took up performing on eight, ten and twelve handbells playing tunes and singing. As shown in the print he sat to perform with two bells attached to his hat, two bells in each hand, a bell on each side guided by a string, together with a further bell on each knee and one on each foot.

The *Norwich Mercury* (13 December 1760) carried an advert calling the curious to see the noted Frankling, the celebrated ringer, perform tune ringing on handbells. The description matches that of Roger Smith and mentions performances at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden and the Haymarket. It gives his address as the Castle Inn, Market Place, Norwich. This could have been somebody that Roger Smith knew, but if it was Smith it suggests the prints illustrated may have been produced some years after the event.



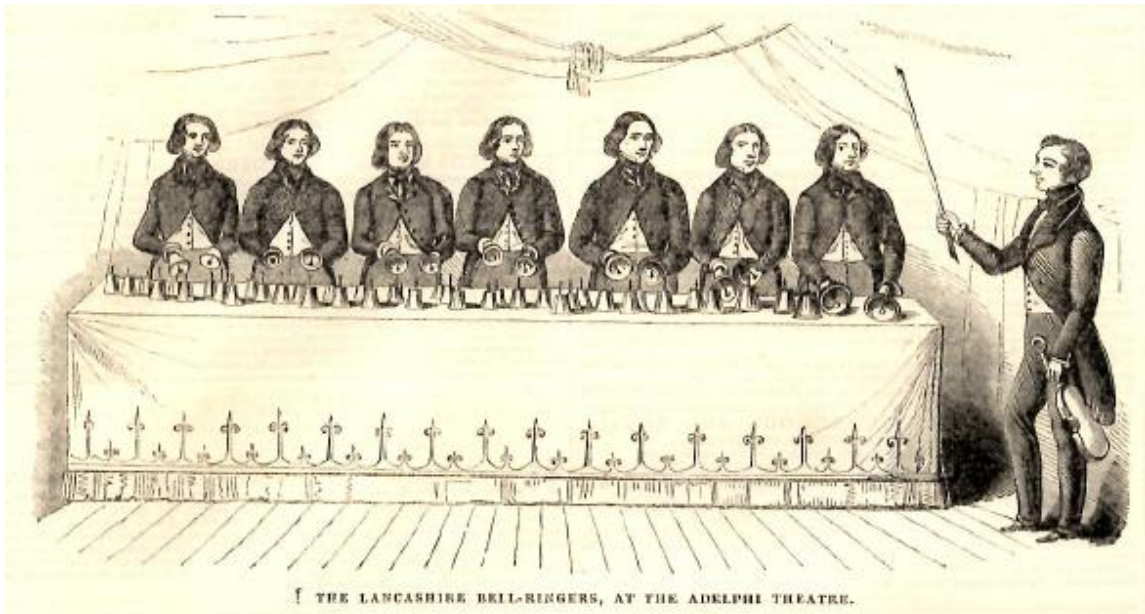
The above print shows Roger Smith published on November 15 1804 by J Parry of 5 Bentinck Street, Soho (17.2cm by 11.4cm). A smaller version (11.0cm by 8.0cm) was later used as an illustration in *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair* by Henry Morley (page 439) published in 1859 (or page 342 in 1892 edition)

Lancashire Hand Bell Ringers

A famous group of handbell performers in the 19th century were the Lancashire Hand Bell Ringers. Several members of the group are reported to have had strong Lancashire accents which may have given rise to the billing that accompanied their performances. They performed with forty-two bells comprising of three octaves and a fourth, which enabled them to perform the most difficult overtures, waltzes and quadrilles. Their conductor was Henry Johnson.



This cover from a music score (22.5cm by 28.0cm) is almost identical to the woodcut from the *Illustrated London News* of 1843 (see below) which may have been drawn as a copy from it at the time



The Lancashire Bell-Ringers at the Adelphi Theatre, London (15.5cm by 8.0cm) from *The Illustrated London News* (13 May 1843 page 330)



Part of a wood engraved billing poster (16.0cm by 11.0cm) showing the Lancashire Bell-Ringers - thought to be dated circ. 1840

In 1850 Phineas Barnum, the show man, had the idea that a tour of the USA by a handbell tune ringing band would be profitable. He approached the Whitechapel Bell Foundry who he thought might be able to supply him with suitable ringers. They referred him to the Cumberland Youths and as a result a number of ringers were recruited for the trip. Barnum decided to brand them as the Lancashire Bell Ringers, which was unusual given the band

based in Oldham established in 1841 already used that title. The Oldham group by then had already established their reputation as reported in *Bell's Life in London*, 30 April 1848:

.... rung in honour of the celebrated Lancashire Bell Ringers, who have returned to their native town, after an absence of above three years, during which time they have visited the United States, France and Spain.

Tours to Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA took place between 1843 and 1868. It is possible Barnum was simply trying to cash in on their celebrity status. However an extract from the autobiography of Barnum (1855) recounts that having heard in 1844 about their performances in London, a meeting was arranged in Liverpool to book them for a tour of the USA. A condition of the contract was they were to grow moustaches and dress in a fashion to pass them off as the 'Swiss Bell Ringers'. The group objected on the grounds they spoke only English, but later accepted the arrangement on being assured the American audience would not know the difference because of their strong Lancashire accents. Perhaps the initial tour branded them as the 'Lancashire Bell Ringers' but they later changed their name.



Poster for the Swiss Bell Ringers while on tour in USA. Date unknown



Programme or poster cover. Date unknown

The trip to New York in March 1850 on the vessel *American Congress* lists five members of the band as musicians these being Edward Sawyer (aged 32), William Low (correctly Lobb, aged 31), Henry Williams (correctly Henry William Haley, aged 31), Henry Kent (aged 40) and James Hewitt (correctly Hewett, aged 31). Their concerts were well received and many newspaper reports of performances can be found. A poem, the *Isle of Loch Awe* by Philip Hamilton published in 1855, was also written praising their performances. They appear to have been willing to dress for the occasion as shown by the illustration above taken from a poster showing them performing in sailor costumes.

Poland Street Temperance Handbell Ringers

A newspaper extract from 1871 reports on a musical performance given to soldiers at the Tower of London. Between the various tunes short addresses on temperance and other kindred subjects were delivered. It goes on to say that Mr Miller, presumably the leader of the group who lived at 53 Richmond Terrace Clapham Road London SW, together with his comrades were all temperance men. Earlier in the year they had been invited by Queen Victoria to perform at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight on the birthday of Princess Beatrice.

ASSEMBLY ROOMS,
BELL STREET, HENLEY ON THAMES.
TUESDAY EVENING, THE ROYAL NOV. 28TH, 1871.

CHORUSES.
SONGS. DUETS.
RECITATIONS.

TUNE PLAYING.
MERRY PEALS.
CAMPANOLOGY.

**POLAND STREET
TEMPERANCE
HAND-BELL RINGERS**

CONDUCTOR
D.S. MILLER

H. HAVART R. HOPKINS
C. J. HAVART W. SKINGSLEY

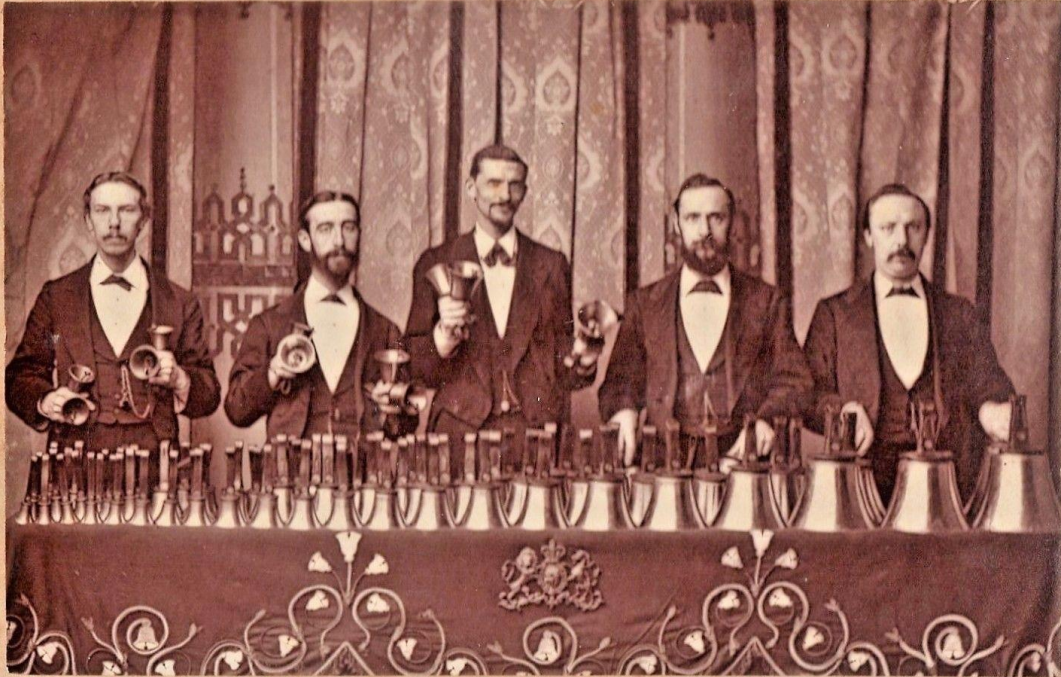
AS THEY APPEARED
BY ROYAL COMMAND
OSBORNE HOUSE
BEFORE
HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN
And the Royal Family.

WITH THEIR SPLENDID PEAL OF FIFTY SWEETLY TONED BELLS.

WILL GIVE THEIR POPULAR, TEMPERANCE, MUSICAL, RECITATIVE, AND
CAMPANOLOGICAL ENTERTAINMENT,
As given by them with marked success at Crystal Palace; Royal Polytechnic; Queen's Concert Rooms, &c., &c.
Under the auspices of the Henley Temperance Society.

ADMISSION:
Front Seats, ONE SHILLING. Second Seats, SIXPENCE. Tickets to admit 6 to
Front Seats, FIVE SHILLINGS.
Doors open at 8.15. To Commence at 8.15. p.m.
FOR FURTHER PARTICULARS SEE SMALL BILLS.

Poster from the *Johnson collection*, source unknown, circ. late 19th century



THE ROYAL HAND-BELL RINGERS (POLAND STREET, LONDON). [OVER.]

NINE TIMES HONORED  BY ROYAL COMMAND.

THE ROYAL HAND-BELL RINGERS,
 POLAND STREET, LONDON,
 WITH THEIR CARILLON OF 120 BELLS,
*As before their Majesties the King and Queen of Denmark, on board the Royal Yacht,
 off Cowes, August 19th, 1878.*

PERFORMERS :

(1) MR. A. G. PRITCHARD.	(2) MR. J. H. WILLIAMS.
(3) MR. D. S. MILLER, CONDUCTOR, 53, Richmond Ter., Clapham Road, London, S.W.	(4) MR. H. HAVART.
(4) MR. H. HAVART.	(5) MR. W. J. HAVART.

The Band has also had the honor of appearing on two occasions before
Her Majesty the Queen and Royal Family, at Osborne and Windsor Castle.
 T.R.H. THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS OF WALES, ON FOUR OCCASIONS, SANDRINGHAM,
 MARLBOROUGH HOUSE, CHISWICK, AND COWES.
 HIS MAJESTY THE KING OF THE BELGIANS; THEIR MAJESTIES THE KING AND QUEEN OF GREECE, ETC. ETC.
And are the only Campanologists who have attained these distinctions.

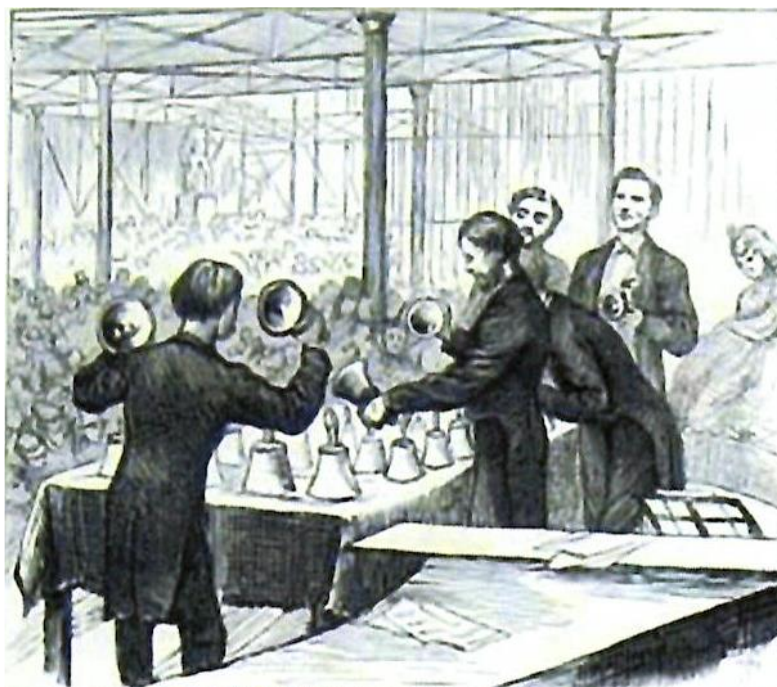
WOODBURYTYPE FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY H. P. ROBINSON, TUNBRIDGE WELLS.

Royal Hand Bell Ringers Poland Street on board Royal Yacht off Cowes - Postcard from 1878



Poland-Street Temperance Handbell Ringers (17.0cm by 10.8cm) from *The British Workman* (February 1871 page 76).

Further examples



Handbell Ringers (7.5cm by 6.5cm) from *The Graphic*, 3 August 1872 page 92



The delights of Christmas – A Serenade by Hand-Bell Players (8.7cm by 15.0cm) from *The Graphic* (28 December 1889 page 796)



Ringling in the New Year – An Old Devonshire Custom drawn at Tavistock by Wal Paget taken from *The Sphere*, 4 January 1902 page 5 (22.0cm X 30.5cm)

This near full page print carried the following poem by Alfred Tennyson as a footnote:

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go,
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
The year is going, let him go,
Ring out the false, ring in the true.



The Hand-Bell Ringers (11.3cm by 15.1cm) thought to be from the series of children's books written under the title *Our Darlings* edited by Thomas John Barnardo (J F Shaw) (circ. 1900s page 76)

