

# THE FORMATION OF THE DURHAM DIOCESAN GUILD OF CHANGE RINGERS

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1870s the move to improve the status (and behaviour!) of ringers led to the formation of the great diocesan and regional associations of ringers, and the main thrust of these was to use the art of change ringing as a means by which this could be achieved. The first of these was the Guild of Devonshire Ringers, established in 1874, followed by the Norwich Diocesan Association in 1875. Next to be established was the Durham Diocesan Association (from 1882, when the diocese was divided into two, the Durham and Newcastle Association) in 1877, and it is the formation of the latter which is the main subject of this essay. At that time change ringing in the diocese of Durham (then covering both County Durham and Northumberland) was very much in decline, and was only practised at a few places within the diocese. The impetus for the formation of the Durham Diocesan Association came from three persons, Johnson E. Hern, of Hurworth-on-Tees, George J. Clarkson, of Stockton-on-Tees, and William Reed, of North Shields (Tynemouth), and the careers of these prior to the formation of the Association will be considered in detail, as well as the state of ringing in the diocese during the 1870s. At times the story will be complicated, because of the co-operation between ringers despite a wide geographical separation.

### Johnson E. Hern

The name of Johnson Hern was important in the development of change ringing in the North East of England, but his contribution could easily be overlooked. He was a native of Dickleburgh, Norfolk, where he was baptised on 15 August 1847. He had three younger brothers, Joel, Judah, and James, and all four brothers became ringers on the five bells at Dickleburgh. I haven't been able to establish exactly when Johnson Hern learnt to ring, but it is known that his brother Joel learnt in 1868. The first ringing that I can trace in which Johnson Hern's name appears is a date touch of 1869 changes in five doubles methods, rung at Dickleburgh on 1 April 1869, reported in the *Norwich Mercury* on 24 April 1869, which listed the five methods, which included Stedman's 'Principal', stated to be 'that most intricate of all five bell peals. This date touch was conducted by Johnson Hern, and his brothers Joel and Judah also took part. The same band rang 5040 Doubles in a slightly different five methods on 21 December 1869, again conducted by Johnson Hern. This was reported in at least three local papers, and the reports in the *Diss Express* on 24 December 1869, and the *Norwich Mercury* on 25 December (yes, the date is correct!), concluded 'on the leaving the Church they were warmly applauded by some of the villagers.'

During the next couple of years I have a few reports which mention the names of Johnson and Joel Hern, clearly still living in Dickleburgh, where the census of 1871 records Johnson Hern as head of a household, with his sister Hazeleponi (there are various spellings of this name) acting as house keeper, with his brother James being part of the household. Johnson Hern was recorded as a gardener, while James was an agricultural labourer. I can't trace the whereabouts of Joel Hern on the night of the census, and he may have been away from home. The reason for the split up of the family was that their father, Edward Hern, had died in 1865.

1872 was a year in which a number of significant events occurred. Firstly, early in the year Johnson Hern, then said to be of 'Saxlingham, Norfolk' was elected a member of the Ancient College Youths. (This probably refers to Saxlingham Nethergate or Saxlingham Thorpe, which are between Dickleburgh and Norwich, rather than Saxlingham by Holt.) Then later in the year, Lucy Jane Colling gave a ring of six bells to the church of Hurworth-on-Tees in memory of her husband Thomas Colling, a member of a local land-owning family, who had recently died. The bells were cast by J. Taylor and Co. at Loughborough and were opened on Thursday 25 July 1872. Several of the members of the band of St. Cuthbert's church, Darlington, raised the bells in peal in the afternoon, and rang some Bob Doubles. After this they adjourned to the rectory where they 'partook of a cold collation... of a sumptuous nature.' This was followed by ringing for service, where the sermon was preached by the Rev. J. T. Fowler, then of Durham, described in *Church Bells* as 'one of the Ancient Society of College Youths.' A long report of the opening appeared in the *Northern Echo*, and this was copied in *Church Bells*, where the names of the ringers were listed, none of which are known to me.

On 8 February 1873 a letter appeared in the pages of *Church Bells*, supporting that weekly paper, and mentioning other matters, which was signed by 'J. HERN (*late of Norwich*)' and was sent from Hurworth-on-Tees. This suggests that he may have been recruited to teach a band at Hurworth, but at present there is no indication of how this came about—County Durham is a long way from rural Norfolk, but the fact that he was a College Youth may have some bearing on the matter. Also the 1881 census records that Johnson Hern was then a domestic coachman, so possibly he may have been employed by the Colling family. He soon made contact with other ringers, and on Easter Monday, 1873, he joined the Ripon and Sharow ringers in ringing a half peal of Grandsire Triples at Sharow. On 26 July 1873 this band, including Johnson Hern, rang 720 Bob Minor at Hurworth-on-Tees, the first on the bells. A report by Johnson Hern appeared in *Church Bells* on 16 August 1873, and in it he said that the Hurworth ringers hoped to be able to ring a 720 soon. On Thursdays there was theory lessons in the schoolroom, and on Tuesdays and Saturday ringing was practised on the church bells. The plain course of Bob Minor was being rung on the tower bells, and a half peal (360) on handbells. A 720 of Bob Minor was eventually achieved on 27 January 1874, and the report of this which appeared in the *York Herald* on 31 January 1874, copied into *Church Bells* on 14 February 1874, went on to say:

'It is hoped that other ringers in the county of Durham, may be induced to persevere in the art of change-ringing, as it is only by intense perseverance and application that this art is to be mastered.'

While this was conducted by Johnson Hern, his brother Joel Hern also took part: he had moved into the area, and remained there for the remainder of his career. Both brothers took part in a peal of Kent Treble Bob Major at Thirsk on Easter Monday (6 April), 1874, part of a mixed band from Ripon, Sharow, York and, of course, Hurworth. The band had first met at Baldersby, where several touches of Grandsire Triples were rung, before moving on to Thirsk.

Progress continued to be made by the Hurworth band, and on 8 September 1874 a 720 of Grandsire Minor was rung, claimed to be 'the first peal in this method rung by a set of Durham ringers.' The composition used was one from Troyte's book, with a call at every lead.



GRANDSIRE MINOR.

720, OR THE WHOLE PEAL.

In six parts; the 1st part by the lead ends.

2 3 4 5 6

. 6 5 2 4 3

S 4 3 6 2 5

. 5 2 4 6 3

S 6 3 5 4 2

. 2 4 6 5 3

. 3 5 2 6 4

. 4 6 3 2 5

. 5 2 4 3 6

S 3 6 5 4 2

S 4 2 3 5 6

Repeat this calling five times, except that in the 3rd and 6th parts, a bob must be called instead of the last Single. The part ends will be as follows:—

1st. 4 2 3 5 6

2nd. 3 4 2 5 6

3rd. 3 2 4 5 6

4th. 4 3 2 5 6

5th. 2 4 3 5 6

6th. 2 3 4 5 6

In this Peal, there is a call made every lead throughout the whole peal. There is no particular observation bell, but the order of the bobs and singles being very simple, can be committed to memory.

Charles A W Troyte 'Change Ringing' Second edition 1872

September 1874 was an active month, as on 19 September the band visited Gainsford, where a 720 of Bob Minor was rung, claimed to be the first 720 on the bells, while on 29 September the band was invited to ring for harvest festival at Staindrop, where various touches were rung. Clearly the band was of local celebrity.

The evidence suggests that, because of this celebrity, Johnson Hern was asked to provide ringers for the opening of the completed ring of eight bells at St. Paul's church, Alnwick. This took place on 24 December 1874, and was widely reported in the local press. Some of the reports say that the band was from Darlington (Hurworth is close to Darlington), but the report that appeared in *Church Bells* on 16 January 1875 stated that the bells were formally opened by the Ripon, Sharow, and Hurworth-on-Tees societies, and the names of the ringers were listed. The ringers had travelled up to Alnwick on Wednesday 23 December, and on the Thursday morning the bells were raised, and 504 changes of Grandsire Triples were rung for morning service, with several other touches of Grandsire Triples and Bob Major later in the day. Certain of the local reports stated that a 5000 had been rung, but the more detailed reports do not support that. The ringers were engaged to stay until 25 December, and celebrated Christmas Day with 'some fine ringing' from 7 a.m. Of relevance to this article is the summary of what was the state of change ringing in the area:

'At present the art is little known further north than Ripon, except what is now being done by Mr. J. E. Hern at Hurworth. We hope other clergy and gentry in this district will endeavour to learn this art, and thus help to remove some of the many gross abuses too prevalent in many towers in this district. While the ringers were *en route* to Alnwick on Wednesday, by permission of the Dean they rang some short touches on the fine peal of eight (tenor, 30 cwt. D) in Durham Cathedral. They had obtained permission to ring at St. Nicholas, Newcastle, but the bells being out of repair they could not ring there, but rang at All Saints' Church a peal of eight; tenor, 10 cwt.'

This is a very telling assessment, although not altogether correct. In 1875 there was correspondence in the pages of *Church Bells* about the possibility of a ringers' guild for Durham and Northumberland, initiated by a letter that appeared 17 April 1875, signed by 'A College Youths in Co. Durham.' (I suspect, but can't prove, that this was the Rev. J.T. Fowler.) The respondents highlighted the state of ringing at the time. Hurworth was evidently the most active tower, while there were signs of improvement at Stockton and Darlington. At Stockton-on-Tees George T. Clarkson had initiated practices about two years previously, to introduce change ringing. The ringers from Darlington had opened the bells at Hurworth, and on 19 June J. E. Hern referred to 'attempts [which] are now being made at St. Cuthbert's and St. John's, Darlington.' At Alnwick the vicar had formed a band to ring the new bells, and it was hoped to proceed to scientific change ringing.

## George J. Clarkson and Stockton-on-Tees

Like Johnson Hern, George J. Clarkson came from East Anglia. He had been born in Chittenden, Kent, in 1854 but within a few years his father became rector of Wyverstone, Suffolk, and at the time of the 1861 and 1871 censuses George Clarkson was living at home, being recorded as a 'scholar'. He is said to have learnt to ring at the neighbouring church of Walsham le Willows, there being only three bells at Wyverstone. In 1872 he moved to Stockton-on-Tees, probably for the purpose of training (he became a patent agent and engineer). There he found what was described as a 'stoney' band, and the two trebles of the ring of six had no stays. If it was wished to set the bells the ropes were tied to strong wooden brackets bolted to the wall, later found useful to hang coats on! Clarkson set about teaching a band of ringers, and on 9 October 1875 ringers from Hurworth and Darlington visited Stockton, Clarkson taking the treble to a 720 of Bob Minor. To round out the afternoon's ringing, the Stockton company rang what was described as 'a peal of plain Bob Doubles', probably a 120. The report in *Church Bells* on 6 November 1875 concluded:

'This is the first time, for upwards of thirty years, that a peal of six has been rung on these bells'

## The situation at Newcastle-on-Tyne

In the correspondence quoted above, nothing was mentioned about change ringing in the Newcastle-on-Tyne area, which was formerly a stronghold of the art, and where a peal of Grandsire Triples had been rung at All Saints' on 1 September 1855. Possibly because the rings in the area were in poor order change ringing had got into the doldrums, and it is no doubt significant that the ringers from Newcastle were not asked to open the bells at Alnwick late in 1874. However, there was still a change ringing band of sorts, and on 30 May 1874 a party of ringers from Newcastle opened the new ring of six bells at Newton church, which had been paid for by Colonel Joicey, of Newton Hall. The report in the *Newcastle Courant* of 5 June 1874 stated:

'A number of peals of Grandsire, &c., were rung in a masterly manner, Mr Thomas Denton, of Newcastle, conducting.'

Thomas Denton had an interesting earlier career. The first record I have of him ringing was when a band from St. Nicholas, Newcastle-on-Tyne visited Durham cathedral on 14



February 1848, when he took part in a quarter peal of Grandsire Triples: the report in the *Newcastle Courant* of 18 February claimed that it was '...upwards of half a century since any change ringing was rung on the above bells.' Thomas Denton called the peal at All Saints', Newcastle, on 1 September 1855, mentioned above. The next record I have is when he was one of a band of College Youths that rang a peal of Stedman Caters at St. Albans on Boxing Day, 1857: two days later he took part in a peal that was rung by members of the St. James's Society at Putney. In all the reports of these two peals it was stated that he was of Newcastle-on-Tyne. He settled in London, and the 1861 census shows that he was following his trade as a printer's compositor. On 24 March 1865 he crossed the great divide, and entered his name in the Cumberland Youths' name book. He moved back to Newcastle within a couple of years: on 3 February 1867 the landlord of the Railway Inn, Trafalgar-street, Newcastle, was buried at All Saints', the *Newcastle Guardian* of 9 February 1867 reporting:

'Mr Cairns was greatly respected and to the society of Bellringers he proved a good friend. Mr Thomas Denton, late of London, chimed the bells on the occasion with great taste and solemn sweetness.'

We may reasonably assume that the Railway Inn was the headquarters of the ringers! I have nothing further on Thomas Denton until the report of the opening of Newton bells in 1874, and it seems that very little was happening in the interim.

Things began to pick up in Newcastle in 1875 and on 15 July the Newcastle and Gateshead Society rang 720 Grandsire Minor at St. Andrew's, Newcastle. The report in *Church Bells* on 31 July 1875 stated that this was the first time this had been rung in Newcastle for sixteen years, and went on to say:

'The Society, noticing in *Church Bells* some few weeks ago, a letter from Hurworth-on-Tees, recommending a Guild for the two counties of Durham and Northumberland, beg to recommend the above to his notice, and hope to report something better very soon.'

## Improvements elsewhere

There was also improvement elsewhere. On 21 September 1875 the ringers at St. John's, Darlington, rang 720 Bob Minor for the first time, and on the same night 720 Grandsire Minor was rung, with the assistance of the Hern brothers, J.E. Hern conducting the 720 from Troyte's book.

The improvement in the art continued in 1876. On 1 February a 720 of Oxford Treble Bob Minor was rung at St. John's, Darlington, by a half-and-half band from Hurworth and St. John's, the first in the method on the bells. This was also stated to be the first rung by a set of Durham ringers for more than 40 years. Then on 12 February another 720 of Oxford Bob Minor was rung at Hurworth, with four local ringers and two from St. John's, Darlington: the Hern brothers took part in both of these. They also took part in an outing to Barnard Castle on 20 May 1876, where a mixed company from Stockton, Darlington and Hurworth rang 1,056 changes of Bob Major, conducted by Johnson Hern. This was perhaps an attempt at evangelising for the art, as the report in the *Durham County Advertiser* of 26 May 1876 concluded:

'It seems a great pity that a set of bellringers cannot be formed here for the avowed purpose of mastering the interesting and noble art of change-ringing: is there no young men willing take the matter up, say members of the choir, &c.? Many cheap and useful books are published on this important subject.'

An interesting performance took place at Hurworth on 16 September 1876, when four of the local ringers, with two from St. John's, Darlington, rang a 720 of Double Stedman's Slow Course Minor. The report in the *Daily Gazette for Middlesborough* concluded:

'This splendid, though very intricate production, has only been accomplished in England once before, upwards of fifty years since, so that Durham county is likely to get a better name in the ringing world than it now has, especially if the clergy will take the matter up.'

Inevitably this was conducted by Johnson Hern, and we may suspect that a much longer report that appeared in the *Lowestoft Journal* on 29 July 1876 was at the very least inspired by him. After eulogising his exertions at Hurworth, details of the band were given, and the report went on to say:

'From information received from large ringing centres this is believed to be the second time only this intricate, though beautiful, method, has been rung in England, and that more than 60 years since. ... There are many fine peals of bells in Durham, but no change ringers. The Hurworth ringers are stimulating them to greater exertions; but it must be a long time before Durham ringers or bells equal those of old Norfolk.'

This was followed by a 720 of St. Simon's Minor by the local band at Hurworth, rung on 16 September 1876. This performance was reported in the *Northern Echo* on 19 September 1876, when it was stated:

'This peal, which is given in "Hubbard's Campanalogia" as a five[-]bell method, was applied to minor by Mr Johnson E. Hern, and conducted by him.'

It is assumed that this was St. Clement's Bob Minor.

There were other developments. On 29 February 1876 a band from the Newcastle and Gateshead Society rang a date touch of 1876 Grandsire Triples at All Saints', Newcastle-on-Tyne. A report in the *Shields Daily Gazette* on 2 March 1876 claimed that it was 'the longest touch of change ringing that has been accomplished in the North of England for 21 years', evidently a reference to the peal of Grandsire Triples rung at All Saints', Newcastle-on-Tyne, on 1 September 1855. This was followed up by a peal of Grandsire Triples which was rung at North Shields on 19 October 1876 by essentially the same band, conducted by Thomas Denton. Widely reported, the *Shields Daily News* the following day went on to say:

'We trust this fine performance in the noble art of change ringing will spur our own society of ringers on until they can perform in a similar manner.'



In this year there is also a reference to change ringing at Bishopwearmouth. I have an intriguing earlier reference to ringing here, taken from the *Shields Daily News* of 15 December 1868:

'The strike of the bellringers of Bishopwearmouth Church has ended in the churchwardens importing a set of ringers from Lancashire.'

There must be a story to be told, but I have nothing further until another report from the same paper of 15 March 1876, which stated that the band at Bishopwearmouth ascended the tower on 13 March 1876 'and rang a peal of nine different grandsires, each grandsire containing 120 changes each, making a total of 1,080 changes in all in the short time of 38 minutes.' It will take further research to verify if any of the ringers came from Lancashire!



An engraving of the church of St Michael and All Angels and St Benedict Biscop, Bishopwearmouth

## William Reed and North Shields

The mention above of North Shields brings another tower into the equation. A ring of six bells had been cast for North Shields by William and Thomas Mears in 1787, the tenor of which was recast by Thomas Mears and Son in 1807. This remained the situation until 1873/4, when the bells were augmented to a ring of eight by the addition of a treble and tenor, the treble being dated 1874 and the tenor 1873. This augmentation was inspired by William Reed, a local solicitor, whose interest had apparently been stimulated by reading *Church Bells*. At the 1874 Easter vestry for Christ Church, North Shields, it was announced that the new bells had been sent off by steamer, but it was not until 12 July 1874 that the new bells were rung, the hanging having taken rather longer than might have been

expected. Although the new bells had been donated, there was much involvement by William Reed, the inscription on the tenor stating that:

‘THIS PEAL OF EIGHT BELLS WAS COMPLETED BY THE ADDITION OF A NEW TENOR PRESENTED BY JOHN STRAKER AND A NEW TREBLE RAISED BY SUBSCRIPTION. HENRY WILLIAM FAWCUS AND WILLIAM REED GOT IT DONE 1873.’

Curiously enough, while the new tenor was dated 1873, the new treble was dated 1874, and was reported to have been given by Colonel Joicey of Newton Hall; this suggests that, possibly, when the new treble was supplied it was unsatisfactory, and the work had to be done again. (A few years later Johnson Hern stated that the 4/6 was recast to become the fifth bell of the ring of eight, but at the time of writing this essay (October 2021) Dove’s *Guide* still lists that bell—now 7/10—as still being the 1787 bell.) The complete ring of eight bells was rung for the first time on 12 July 1874, and the bells were dedicated on 25 July. Subsequently the Tynemouth Amateur Change Ringing Society was formed, but it was a while before anything was achieved, no doubt because of the lack of an instructor. There is a report that, in order to gain experience, William Reed spent a month ringing with the Hurworth company, when he succeeded in ringing a 720 of Bob Minor. Although it seems a little later than I would have expected, the only such relevant 720 I can trace took place on 22 January 1877 when William Reed rang in two 720s at Hurworth, one each of Bob Minor and Grandsire Minor.

## Change Ringing at Morpeth

It was also about 1876 that change ringing was introduced at Morpeth. A long article on Morpeth Clock tower appeared in the *Newcastle Courant* on 23 September 1893, written by John Fergusson, a local resident. The relevant section is given below.

‘Up till about the year 1876 the system known as “change ringing,” invented by Fabian Stedman, does not seem to have been practised in Morpeth. Two miners, who had been change-ringers in the south, and who were known as “Ned and Alf,” were accustomed to come up from Choppington to give the “old hands” lessons. Nothing more, however, than a peal of Bob Minor resulted. Numerous “touches” of Major and Triples (7 and 8 bells respectively) were rung in the change-ringing method by the Morpeth men;...’

Choppington was a colliery at Bedlington. The identities of Ned and Alf have not yet been established, but the qualification ‘in the south’ may mean that they came from the south of the county, perhaps Newcastle-on-Tyne. The 720 of Bob Minor was rung on 5 May 1876, and the report in the *Morpeth Herald* of 13 May 1876 stated that, as far as was known, this was the first 720 that had been rung on the bells. Interestingly enough, the 720 was rung with a cover bell, possibly using the front six bells. I cannot trace any reports of the ringing of Triples or Major, and this may well be incorrect. There is also a slightly later report (*Church Bells* 28 September 1878) which states that the band also rang a 720 of Grandsire Minor on 12 August 1876, but I cannot trace this. (There is no report in the *Morpeth Herald* and I am a bit dubious about the accuracy of the report.) However, on 7 October 1876 the local band rang a 120 of Grandsire Doubles, which was reported in the *Morpeth Herald* on 7 October 1876. In both of these performances the treble was rung by Dr. Frederick Barrow, who moved to Rothbury at the end of the year, on which occasion he was presented with a



silver-mounted walking stick. He maintained contact with the Morpeth ringers, and was responsible for installing a ring of bells at Rothbury in 1893.

## Events leading to the formation of the Durham Diocesan Association

The following report appeared in the *Darlington & Stockton Times* on 7 April 1877, and was copied into *Church Bells* a week later. While lengthy, it sets the scene for what was to come:

'CAMPANOLOGY.—On Monday last, through the liberality of a few of the inhabitants of Hurworth, the bell-ringers of that village (accompanied by Messrs. Overton and Moncaster of St. John's, Darlington,) had a trip to North Shields, and gave a display of change ringing on the bells of Christ Church, Whitley Church, containing six bells, was the next visited, where a peal of Oxford Treble Bob Minor was rung, this being the first peal on the bells. Later on a peal of Grandsire Minor was rung at St. Hilda's, South Shields, Mr. W. Reed, hon. organist, North Shields, and Mr. G. Overton, Darlington, taking part in this peal ringing the third and fourth bells respectively. A capital peal of Kent Treble Bob Minor was also rung on the same bells the next morning, the ringers stationed thus:—Treble, J. C. Thompson; 2nd, H. Thompson; 3rd, Johnson E. Hern; 4th, R. Moncaster; 5th, J. Gaines; tenor, Joel Hern; the peal being conducted by J. Gaines. By boat the party then proceeded to Hebburn, when a peal of Bob Minor was rung on the fine bells of that church; this being the first time the whole revolution of changes were rang on the bells. All Saints', St. Nicholas', and St. Andrew's, Newcastle, were next visited, the Newcastle ringers joining in large force, but owing to the bells being out of repair nothing worthy of notice was done. A meeting was afterwards held to consider the project of establishing a Guild of change-ringers for the diocese of Durham, Mr. W. Reed, solicitor, North Shields, being appointed president *pro. tem.*, the object being to cleanse belfries, reform ringers, and promote the cultivation of the beautiful art of change-ringing, at present so little known in the diocese.—*From a Correspondent.*'

The mention of the object being to 'cleanse belfries' calls to mind Hercules' labour in cleansing the Augean Stables! We may speculate that the 'Correspondent' was G. J. Clarkson. A shorter report appeared in the *Darlington and Richmond Herald*, also on 7 April 1877, which stated that the trip of the Hurworth ringers was 'through the kindness of Mr William Reed, of North Shields.'

One result of this expedition was that *Church Bells* of 14 July 1877 carried a notice that the change ringers of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Hurworth-on-Tees, North Shields, and neighbourhood would be holding a meeting in Durham on 16 July 1877 'for the purpose of forming a Guild for the two counties of Durham and Northumberland, when some influential gentlemen are expected to attend.' I have no idea what was the result of this meeting, but a letter was subsequently circulated, advertising a meeting to be held in Durham on 25 August 1877, for the purpose of forming an association of change ringers for the diocese of Durham. It called attention to the poor condition of many of the belfries in the diocese, and that 'the ringers are anything but what they should be,' and by this support 'join in the good work of removing such a scandal from our churches.' This was signed by George J. Clarkson, Johnson E. Hern, and William Reed.

The meeting duly took place on Saturday 25 August 1877, under the chairmanship of the precentor of the cathedral, and there were ringers present from the Cathedral, Alnwick, Hurworth-on-Tees, North Shields, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and Stockton-on-Tees. William Reed was elected president, the Rev. J. J. M. Perry, vicar of St. Paul's, Alnwick, treasurer, and George J. Clarkson secretary. Rules were drawn up, and a meeting arranged to take place at Durham on 24 November 1877. While the meeting did take place, it was held at North Shields, where ringing took place in the morning, dinner was taken, and ringing resumed in the afternoon. A meeting was then held in the ringing chamber, under the chairmanship of the vicar of Tynemouth, when it was agreed to form a committee composed of representatives of every band in union with the association, and as many clergymen who were willing to join. There were then about 90 members of the association, including a number of clergymen. A service was then held, and ringing in the evening included Grandsire Triples and Kent Treble Bob Major.

It seems likely that the Hern brothers stayed over in South Shields, as on the Monday after this meeting, they, with another of the Hurworth band, two Newcastle ringers and William Reed rang 720 Grandsire Minor at Blaydon, and followed this up with a 720 Bob Minor at Winlaton, *Church Bells* reporting that this was 'the first time a peal of six has been rung at either of these two places.' In the afternoon an attempt was made for a 5040 Grandsire Triples at All Saints', Newcastle, conducted by J. Power, of Newcastle, but this was lost after about an hour because of the poor condition of the bells. The report in *Church Bells* on 8 December 1877 concluded with the stricture:

'WE congratulate Durham on this beginning, but are very sorry to hear that more consideration was not paid to the requirements and wishes of the ringers from a distance as to time of holding the service, which many were unable to attend for fear of missing their trains.—ED.'

The next meeting was held at Durham on 25 February 1878, and this was attended by ringers from Brancepeth, Durham Cathedral, Hurworth, Newcastle, North Shields, Stockton, Willington, and Winlaton, as well as the rector of Hurworth, the Rev. J. T. Fowler, and the precentor of the cathedral. After ringing a few touches of Grandsire Triples at the cathedral between 12 and 1, the ringers adjourned for dinner at the Half Moon, New Elvet (cost 1s.), followed by a service, after which 504 Grandsire Triples was rung. This was perhaps not a good venue for a meeting, the report in *Church Bells* of 9 March 1878 concluding:

'The heavy bells, not being hung for the purpose, are not well adapted to change-ringing.'

Despite this, which implies that the ringing may not have been as good as it might have been, the Dean expressed himself very pleased with the ringing, and invited the Association to hold its annual meeting at the cathedral.

The next general meeting of the association took place at Barnard Castle on 10 June, which about 53 ringers attended, from Barnard Castle, Brancepeth, St. John's Darlington, Durham, Newcastle, North Shields, Hurworth, Stockton, and Willington. Ringing by the local band began early in the morning, until the ringers arrived from Hurworth and Stockton, who



rang 720 Bob Minor. At the dinner (again at a cost of 1s.) a revised list of rules was read out, as was a list of members, comprising 21 honorary members and 88 performing members. Later on an attempt was made for a peal of Grandsire Triples, again conducted by J. Power, but this failed after 1812 changes. At least another 20 ringers took part in touches of Grandsire Triples, causing George Clarkson to claim in a letter to *Church Bells* on 6 July 1878 that:

'The science of Change-ringing is not in such a backward condition in this part of England as some former letters to *Church Bells* would infer.'

As promised by the Dean, the annual meeting of the association took place at Durham on 26 August 1878. Two hours' ringing took place before the usual dinner at one o'clock, followed by the annual meeting. George Clarkson read out a long and not completely accurate report on the progress of change ringing in the diocese, as stimulated by the association, which was published in *Church Bells* on 28 September 1878. William Reed was re-elected as President and George Clarkson as secretary, but added the duties of treasurer to the secretarial duties. Johnson Hern and F. Lees, of Newcastle, were elected vice-Presidents of the association. The report in *Church Bells* on 7 September 1878 concluded:

'The ringers afterwards proceeded to St. Oswald's and rang some touches of Grandsire and Bob Minor. The condition of the Cathedral bells is such that it is extremely difficult to ring changes on them, the 7th and tenor each requiring two men. The St. Oswald bells are also in very bad going order.'

The bells at St. Oswald's were supposed to have been repaired for the occasion!

George Clarkson's published report contains much useful information. So, for instance, it was noted that the fifth bell at Hurworth had cracked, and been replaced 'which is excellent harmony with the other five,...' This seems to have been overlooked in published lists of bells. However, things were not always as they should have been in Durham itself.

'With respect to the Durham branch I am glad to state that they have procured a set of twenty-eight hand-bells, and have succeeded in ringing a course of Bob Minor on them; and now that the St. Oswald's bells are ringable, I hope that they will have the use of them, and in due time ring a 720; but I am extremely sorry to learn that not only do the greater portion of the Cathedral ringers keep aloof from the Association, but that a considerable amount of ill-feeling has been exhibited to those who have joined it, and that they were not only refused the use of the Cathedral hand-bells, but the supernumeraries have been even excluded from the belfry; and I think it is greatly to be regretted that those ringers who hold the honourable position of serving the Cathedral Church should exhibit a feeling of hostility towards an Association which offers to them, as well as others, a means of improvement which has never before existed in this diocese.'

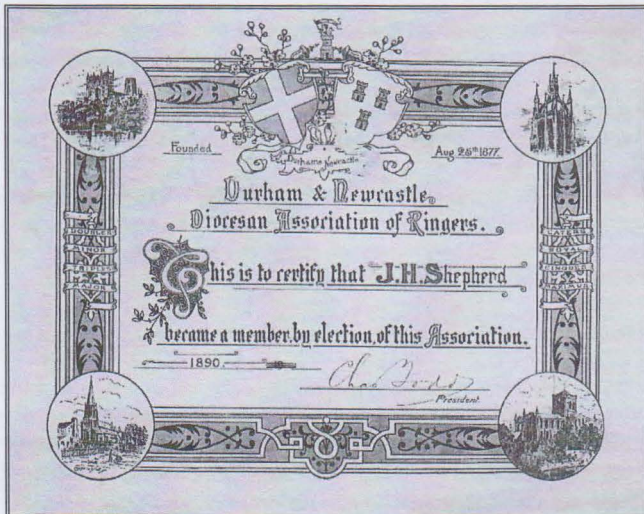
As for the first peal for the infant association, Clarkson had this to say:

'The Newcastle ringers have put the St. John's bells into a ringable condition, and have rung a 720 of Grandsire Minor on them, the first for thirty years, and have also made several attempts to ring a 5040. The North Shields ringers have made

considerable progress in Grandsire Triples, and have not only rung a 1260, but have also made several attempts at 5040, and it lies between them and the Newcastle branch which shall have the honour of placing the first 5040 on the records of the Association.'

In the event it was the William Reed who called the first peal by members of the association at Christ Church, North Shields, on 1 October 1878, the band consisting of seven members from South Shields, and George Overton from Darlington. The report in the *Newcastle Courant* of 4 October 1878 concluded:

'This is the first 5,040 ever rung by the above ringers, and it reflects great credit on them, as the majority have only been two years in the belfry.'



An early membership certificate for the Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Association

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This is a convenient point at which to leave the early history of the Durham Diocesan Association, at a time when it was up and running, and progress had been made, but clearly much more work was needed. To round out the story we need to outline the later history of the three principals in this story.

## William Reed

Firstly, William Reed was so involved with change ringing that in 1878 the bells at North Shields were augmented to a ring of ten, the first in the diocese. The two trebles were donated in memory of the donor's parents, and were opened on Christmas Eve, but I can't trace any publicity in the local papers, and only a later report in *Church Bells*. William Reed served as president of the Durham Diocesan Association, and then as first president of the Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Association, until 1884, when he resigned. After that his



interest in ringing waned, and he concentrated on his other interest as organist at South Shields. He died on 25 June 1918, and was buried at South Shields four days later, when the bells of the parish church were rung muffled to mark his passing. However, he had a lasting effect on the ringing at South Shields, as he had persuaded Joel Hern to move from Hurworth to live and ring in North Shields. The exact date is uncertain, but it is certain that he had moved by May 1879, as on 1 May 1879 members of the North and South Shields bands rang 720s of College Minor and Kent Treble Bob Minor on the bells at South Shields, J. Hern taking part in the latter. Joel Hern had a distinguished career with the Durham and Newcastle Association until his death in 1920, but because of the lack of notice of his interment, there were few prominent members of the Association present at the funeral. Joel Hern had taught the art to his son Edward A. Hern, and he too had a distinguished ringing career, based on North Shields. The family connection with North Shields was broken with his death in 1935.

### George James Clarkson

George Clarkson remained as the secretary of the Durham/Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Association until 1888, and also continued to develop his band at Stockton. We have noted above the band from Stockton which rang Bob Doubles at Stockton on 9 October 1875. Little else was achieved for some time, until a formal society was established in 1877, which rang its first 720 of Bob Minor on 5 June 1878, and the company developed to become a very good six-bell band, which rang a peal in six Minor methods on the bells on 15 September 1883. The range of methods increased to include Surprise methods, and many different 720s were rung, including a peal in seven Surprise methods in 1887. Such was the standing of the company that in 1897 George Clarkson proposed that the bells be augmented to a ring of ten bells, as a Jubilee tribute to Queen Victoria, and this was agreed at the Easter Vestry 1897. This was done by the unusual method of adding four tenors, the smallest of which was donated by Clarkson himself, and donors were found for the other four bells. Because of problems in fund-raising, although the bells had been cast by Messrs Llewelin and James in 1897 the hanging was not completed until the end of February 1899. There were problems with the hanging of the bells, and the first peal was not rung until April 1902, when Clarkson conducted a peal of Kent Treble Bob Royal.

From its position on the border between co. Durham and Yorkshire, it was inevitable that there would be connections with Yorkshire as well as Durham, and in 1898 Clarkson was involved with the setting up of the Cleveland and North Yorkshire Association, and became its first president, a post which he held until he became a vice-president in 1908.

George Clarkson died suddenly on 14 March 1915. At the time his obituary noted that he had done no ringing for some while. It also noted (incorrectly) that his father had been vicar of Walsham-le-Willows, although there seems no reason to doubt the statement that this was where George Clarkson had learnt to ring, before he moved to Stockton-on-Tees.



George James Clarkson's gravestone in Durham Road cemetery, Stockton on Tees

## Johnson E. Hern

After the establishment of the Durham Diocesan Association Johnson Hern continued to develop the band at Hurworth, but early in 1884 he left the parish and moved to Newnham-on-Severn. An account of a presentation made to him on his leaving the village appeared in *Church Bells* on 2 February, and this was copied into the *Norwich Mercury* of 9 February 1884. It certainly wasn't for the ringing that Johnson Hern moved to Newnham as at that time the bells were unringable and one of them cracked, and he continued his ringing career round and about, as the pages of *Bell News* show. He also acted as tutor to the band down the road at Westbury-on-Severn. In 1889 it was decided that something had to be done to the bells at Newnham, and Messrs Warners were entrusted with the work. A new treble and tenor were added, and the old fourth bell, which was cracked was recast. The bells were dedicated on 10 October 1889 and an attempt for a peal of Stedman Triples was miscalled after about 1200 changes, Johnson Hern being one of the band. A successful peal of Bob Major was rung at Newnham by the St. Michael's Juniors, on 26 October 1889, composed and conducted by the redoubtable Bill Sevier, with Johnson Hern ringing the seventh bell. R. T. Hibbert, from East Ilsley, rang the fourth bell in the peal, and this may be significant in the fact that Johnson Hern subsequently moved to Reading. After this Johnson Hern's name drops out of reports in *Bell News*, until 10 January 1891 when it was reported that a 'T. E.' Hern of Reading was present at the dedication of two new bells at St. Peter's, Old Windsor: no doubt that this was an error for our man. During this period he had moved to Reading, probably soon after the installation of the short-lived new bells at Newnham (the whole ring was recast in 1894). During this phase of his ringing career he rang with such notable ringers as the Rev. F. E. Robinson. He lived in Reading until his death in 1913, after a few days' illness. Two of the officiating clergy at his funeral were the Rev. C. W. O. Jenkyn, and the Rev. (later Canon) G. F. Coleridge, and a course of Grandsire Triples was rung on handbells over the grave: in the evening the various rings in Reading were rung muffled.



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