

John G Gipson
25th August 1923 – 18th June 2017

The following tribute was read out by Derek Sibson at the *memorial service held for John at [Holy Trinity Church Meldreth](#) on 25th July 2017.*

“Look two, trebles going, she’s gone.”

I wonder how many time I heard John Gipson say that at the start of a peal attempt? It certainly was what he said the last time he rang a bell at Meldreth after the rededication and there is a photograph at the back of the church showing him doing it.

I first met Johnny in 1956 at a district meeting when I was learning to ring and I feel very honoured to have been asked to say a few campanological memories of this illustrious ringer. He was always very kind to me and I counted him as a great friend.

Where do most ringers go after a campanological visit to Meldreth? The British Queen. However, this starts there because that was where Graham John Gipson was born. Yes, his birth was registered as Graham John. But he was adamant that he was never known as Graham John - always John Graham or John G. - at school, in the army or anywhere else.

In 1937 the peal of five bells were installed in a six-bell frame by Alfred Bowell and a local group of five youngsters, average age 14, learnt to ring and joined the Ely Diocesan Association, attending all the meetings nearby and Johnny was one of them. The first peal on those bells was rung apparently by a band from Little Shelford conducted by Albert Hurst who taught me to ring; not quite as long ago as that, I would hasten to add. The next peal on the bells was Johnny’s first peal and included three of the young band assisted by Jack Ward and Reginald Lathbury who conducted. The only other peal on the five bells was a few weeks later and included the other two, again with Jack Ward and Reginald Lathbury. Then the war intervened.

On Johnny’s return from active service he was instrumental in getting the bells augmented to six. The top portion of the tower had been repaired and he suggested to the vicar Conquest Clare, that as the frame was for six bells they should be augmented with a War Memorial bell and this was done in 1950. There is a [recording of an interview with John](#) on Meldreth’s section of the [Cambridgeshire Community Archive](#) where he recalls how the vicar said what a good idea it was and they went to the casting at Mears and Stainbank.

The first peal on the six bells, obviously with Johnny in the band, was on 5th December, and from then until 1968 40 peals were rung; 50% having a first pealer in them. So the bells were put to good use. However, Johnny thought they would be much more use if they were augmented to eight and how right he was!

The 5th became cracked and had to be recast so the opportunity to recast the poor-sounding second was taken at the same time. The bells were hung back in the same frame by Johnny and his helpers. One further peal was rung on the now good six before the augmentation proceeded. Johnny had acquired a disused bell from a cemetery in Cambridge with what he called a good deal when it was weighed and Mears and Stainbank cast the two new trebles from this metal. The wheels were made by Mr.

Newman of Litlington and the necessary new framework was designed and made by John with the third bell hung in the north window and a tower structure for the second above the rest over the fourth. John's engineering skills were thus being used to the full and very successfully as shown by the subsequent use of the bells, with over 2000 peals being rung before any major work needed to be done. John himself rang in over 1600 of them.

During all that time, I never heard of a band being refused except when there was a peal attempt already booked. Whenever I asked for an attempt Johnny always said with a twinkle in his eye, "I shall have to ask the vicar". Whether he ever did I doubt, more likely he just told him but then when you have been churchwarden for as long as Johnny (35 years) it may not be necessary.

Over 1000 different methods have been rung on the bells, John taking part in 925 of them, some of them very difficult. They have been conducted by over 150 different ringers and over 1000 different ringers have taken part. 364 peals were of spliced with Johnny in 262 of them in up to 17 methods. These included Pitman's all the work peals with the whole series 4-9 in a week, not all at Meldreth, and Crosland's first all the work series and his alphabet series: but his favourite method was Bristol as is seen by being the method always chosen for special peals. John was always so accommodating to visiting bands and never insisted on ringing. However, he was such a good and reliable ringer that he was almost always included in the bands if he was free and eligible as a member of the society, as shown by the number of peals he rang there. Only one other ringer has reached 1000 peals on the bells, namely Geoff Pearson, although several have tried and failed! Conducting was not John's forte but he called 26, 21 of them at Meldreth and eight of them Bristol - always Stephen Ivin's composition.

We attempted quite complicated peals of spliced and these produced amusement at times. One particular peal in Crosland's alphabet peals, G to M I think, took a number of attempts and I had forgotten to note the time at the start so when we finished successfully I asked how long was that? Dumps (Don Murfet) immediately replied 2 and a half years! On another occasion, I said 7-8 on the front whereupon Wally Hunt asked "Who with?" These were very happy and rewarding times despite sometimes being frustrating.

By 1998 Johnny was nearing 1000 peals on the bells and with a little judicious arranging he was banned from ringing the second until that peal, and it was possible to coincide it with circling the tower 100 times. For those unacquainted with the term, it means ringing each bell to at least 100 peals. We had a little party afterwards and he was presented with a red book (of This is Your Life fame) containing his peals. Progress continued and ten years later he was approaching 1500 on the bells. However, he no longer felt able to turn in the tenor for a peal so we rang ten peals of triples in various methods to enable him to get 150 on the tenor. The peal of 5150 Bristol was achieved on 5th July 2008 and Johnny had circled the tower 150 times. We started on the next milestone but only got as far as 1669 before events overtook us.

Johnny's last peal was on Friday 18th May 2012. He was in the attempt the following Friday but his legs gave way and he fell over, being caught by the tenor ringer. Thus ended an illustrious peal ringing career.

John was always sure that there were no serious complaints about the amount of ringing but there was one occasion when someone who lived opposite the church told the vicar

that he could accept three lots of ringing in a week but when it got to four, as it had that week, he thought that was a bit excessive!

Another aspect of his bell ringing was his bell hanging skill. Not only had he restored Meldreth and Melbourn to activity but a large number of other towers in the Ely Diocesan Association (EDA) had also benefited from his skills. He also worked on projects out side the EDA in neighbouring counties. Indeed, he went as assistant to Bill Theobald to hang the peal of eight in St. Martin in the Fields, Philadelphia and there is a plaque under the belfry recording the fact.

Over the years John looked after the bells very devotedly and oiled them regularly for the numerous peal attempts. He rehung several on ball bearings but not all the bells. One still on plain bearings was the 7th, when in 2013 those who rang it started to note that it was becoming increasingly difficult to ring. Obviously, the bearing had finally given up so rehanging was going to be required and it was decided that the whole peal should be retuned and rehung with all new fittings on one level. Only the front seven bells were allowed retuning as the tenor was a 1617 bell by Toby Norris and although not listed, we were told by the diocesan bell advisor it was about to be! During the process it was discovered that the bad go of the 7th was not the bearing but a split in one of the main beams under the bell.

Johnny of course was no longer in charge and he did take a little convincing that such major work was required but he came round and took a visible interest in the project coming to see how it was progressing when the bells went away and came back. The last time he rang a bell was at the rededication. Every time Jane and I visited him in Maycroft he would tell us what a nice peal of bells they now were.

One of my abiding memories of my early visits from London for evening peals was Johnny insisting that my car was filled up with petrol from his garage before I left. We used to go to the British Queen for refreshment and food after a peal and Johnny had a standing order for a large bowl of chips which were for anyone to eat. It was sad when the British Queen stopped doing food and we had to look elsewhere.

Many hundreds of ringers have been welcomed to Meldreth by Johnny and his engaging smile. After all, he rang peals with 1201 ringers, 590 of them at Meldreth and there must have been many visitors not ringing peals - if that is possible. He liked to go on ringing tours particularly with the Around Ringers and he was a very proud member of the Ancient Society of College Youths, being elected in 1947 so this would have been his 70th anniversary. He regularly attended their dinners and rang ten peals for them at Meldreth.

For very many happy memories and years of pleasure, we thank you Johnny. May you rest in peace. That's all.