

WILLIAM LAUGHTON'S "REMARKS ON A RAMBLEING CLUB OF RINGERS "

By F. W. M. DRAPER, F.S.A.

In the Guildhall Library of the City of London is a duodecimo notebook of something over 100 pages, which in the year 1799 belonged to James Wakefield of Romford. The handwriting of this little manuscript book is neat and regular, but the spelling is largely phonetic. The full title is as follows: "Remarks on a Rambleing Club of Ringers, and their performances, giveing an account of all their Meetings from first to last, wherein may be seen the famous Exploits which have bin Done in the art of Ringeing by that worthy body of Men". This record of a short-lived association was put together by a certain William Laughton, who lived in Leather Lane and dated this account there on 10th March, 1734/5.

In spite of its humble standards it is a graphic piece of work and important as a social document and a source-book for the history of change-ringing.

Laughton's title-page is completed by lines terminating in rhymes (if they are designed to rhyme) as naughty as the spelling.

Herein Just fifty tales you-ll find
and each set Down in prose and Rhyme,
not one i-m Shure was writ in Spight,
so Read and Judge 'em as you like.

But this is not the only verse our poet provides. In fact, the bulk of the narrative, the story of the excursions undertaken by the club during its short existence, is told by a poet of whom it may be said that his prose is no worse than his poetry. We shall return to the verse-chronicle later. Meanwhile the dedication to Laughton's fellow member, Mr. George Carbery, makes clear the aims of the society.

To Mr. George Carbery

Sr

You are not insensible (being one of those worthy members your Self) that a Company of us made an agreement to Ring at all the peals of 3-4-5- and Six Bells: within the City of London and bills of Mortality, which we should find Ringable, and to Ring at a different place every time of meeting, if we Should think proper; likewise to Ring a peal, sometimes upon eight Bells, or take a walk into the Country and Divert our Selves with a peal, if our fancys Should lead that way; for which the

117 WILLIAM LAUGHTON'S "RAMBLEING CLUB OF RINGERS"

Snarling Criticks were pleas-d to Call us the Rambleing Club; the first time of this Honorable Societys meeting was on thursday the 29th of November, 1733; and their last on Satturday the 8th of March, 1734/5, when this worthy body of Members broke up after haveing Rung at 35 Different peals of Bells, and Done severall Extraordinary performances in this art; the merrit of which Caused me to write the following pages, wherein I have endeavour-d (as far as my mean Capacity is able) to set forth their praise, tho' perhaps far short of what they Deserve, but that i-ll leave to some more Iudicious pen; and in the meantime begg your exceptonce of this, which if favorably Recive-d at your hands, will lay a perticular obligation on

Sr your most obedient
Humble Servant to Command
William Laughton.

Leather Lane London
Monday the 10th of March
1734/5

The Names of all the worthy Members belonging to the Rambleing Club of Ringers are as follows

Viz

Mr Jerremyeh Gilbert
Iohn Monger
Thomas Clarck
Iohn Dearmor
William Laughton
Richard Spicer
Iohn Chapman
William Nash
Iohn Trebell
Iohn Harrington
Samuel London
Samuel Robins
Thomas Davis
Nathaniel Burross
Thomas Greenwood
Iames Benson
Iohn Hayward
Iohn Pearson
George Carbery
Iohn Rainsdon

Iohn Ward
Iohn Allsupe
Ioseph Bennett
William Eyles
Nathaniel Rippin
Tobias Marshall
Thomas How
Stephen Green
Peter Samson
William Coster
Thomas Smallshaw
Ioseph Murrill
William Thorp
William Church
William Pickard
Daniel Luck
Thomas Rainson
Robert Burchet
Francis Wybourn

od Members

Edward Davis Vic:
Joseph Haynes: Costers Butcher
Thomas Iefferies: Gunsmith in ordinary to the Company in all 42
Members

Davis seems to have been a Licensed Victualler. Coster kept some sort of a tavern. Why a ringing company found it necessary to appoint a gunsmith is not clear.

Several ringing societies were inaugurated within a year or two of the inception of the Rambling Club. The date of the foundation of the City Scholars is unknown, but their first peal was rung in November 1732. The Eastern Scholars began to function in March 1733. Little is known of the origin of these two societies and there is no indication of the nature of the impulse which led to their foundation and that of the Ramblers within the space of a couple of years.

The peal rung by the City Scholars in November 1732 was probably what was known as a "friendly peal", that is, one rung by a party of friends who normally worked with other bands. In actual fact some of the City Scholars were College Youths, while others belonged to the Union Scholars. Later on, in 1738, a casually assembled party calling itself "A Friendly Society", who rang a peal of 6160 changes of Bob Major at St Andrews Holborn, belonged in part to the same two societies and to other London companies. Their names have been found in the lists of their members. I have not examined any lists, but it is in order to facilitate examination and comparison that I have appended the names of the Rambling Club given by Laughton. But I must make the proviso that search in the records of the College Youths will certainly be fruitless.

To judge by Laughton's frequent reference to critics the new society was not universally popular. It was accounted to the Ramblers for unrighteousness that they rang at so many towers.

Snarling Criticks now have at ye
the Rambleing Club has not forgot ye,
for all your Iears they still went on
and practis-d what they first began.
Variety was their Design
't Ring at a diff-rent peal every time.

It seems that the title of the society was first given to them by their ill-wishers, "who were pleas-d to Call us the Rambleing Club". The title fitted, stuck, and was accepted.

The charge of not being contented with one tower and a single headquarters has the appearance of coming from a rival and more orthodox society.

But it may well be that another count in the accusation was that the Ramblers drank too much, and this indictment would have a general origin. To this Laughton made reply:

Tho' I cannot say but now and then
Ringers tippie as mutch as other men,
but their Exercise throws of those Dreggs
which would bring others of their leggs,
that use no Exercise at all,
but set in a house and Drink and Call.

The author's final statement of his case is worded thus: "'tis well known that the first Design of this Clubs meeting was not to affront any Soul upon Gods earth, but onely intended for a little innocent Divertion, to Ring at a few Different peals of Bells; tho' some people has taken it very Hainously, and bin pleas-d to Call names, and endeavour to Redicule folks behind their backs for't; if any returns Should be made em for their Civility, they must e-en take it for their pains, tho I Shall not levil at any person in perticular, but those that have bin Guilty of Sutch good manners, mey e-en take it to them Selves."

One day Laughton had a bright idea. He would tag his interest in writing verses on to his hobby of bellringing. Accordingly, on page 82 of his book, we come upon four stanzas of eight lines each written in a metre a man could declaim or sing as he pulled his rope.

Both Gentle and simple give ear
unto this song I Shall sing,
it is of a Rambleing Club
and the peals they intend for to ring.
Had there not been sutch a Club
the Criticks wou-d want what to say,
but now forsooth they Condemn it
and Cry it is out o' the way.

I need not quote the rest. The scheme is given at the end of the last stanza. "The Tune 35670787 — 65434356 — 66566427 — 78638790 — 07677539—96567678—63572461—23123567. It goes on a Complete peal of 10 Bells."

Taking it all together, it is a strange business, this urge of Laughton's, almost illiterate as he was, to record his unromantic adventures in several hundred lines with very little rhythm and almost without rhyme.

Monsieur Jourdain was surprised to hear that he had been speaking prose all his life. Laughton would have found it hard to believe that he was using the same medium for his verses. He had no suspicion of

their badness, for the number of lines in each stanza is counted and proudly recorded.

The incompatibility of his feelings and their expression can move nothing but laughter, and more's the pity. But, if he had been a poet, his Muse might have permitted him to rise to high poetry as he thought himself once more in Hackney, dipping his line in her Brook and feasting his eyes on her fields as he listened to the bells.

How sweetly a fine peal wou-d tell
or in the Downs, or by the brook,
where various sorts of fish are took,
as pertch or Gudgeon, Carp or eel,
oh! there i-d fish and hear a peal.

The purpose of this notice is not to criticise William Laughton's doggerel, or the restlessness of himself and his associates, or their habits, but to record the means adopted by London free ringers of the early 18th century to ride their favourite hobby and pursue efficiency and convivial enjoyment with equal ardour.

The first tower visited by the band was that of St Benet Fink and here, seeing that this was their earliest undertaking, it is right to quote our author's note in full. "720 Plain Bob at St Bennett Finck on thursday the 29th of November 1733. Jerremyah Gilbert Treble, Iohn Monger 2d, Thomas Clarck 3rd, Iohn Dearmor 4th, William Laughton 5th, Richard Spicer Tenor. We met at Will Costers the Bell in angel ally Little Moor feilds: where I gave 'em a Dish of Whiteings for supper."

On 20 of the 50 visits which Laughton records the Society were regaled in this way by members. Laughton logs such occasions in his methodical way, heading the list with the title: "An Index to the Hangups, or treat-s, which you please": and summing up in the phrase: "In all 20 good Liveings."

However, our concern here is rather with campanology than cooking, to which we shall return later.

The Ramblers visited in all 35 different rings, 2 of 3 bells, 6 of 5, 18 of 6, and 9 of 8 bells. These were St Benet Fink (2), St Olave Hart Street, St Paul Shadwell, the three St Botolphs. All Hallows Barking, St Vedast Foster Lane, St Peter le Poer, St Mary Whitechapel, St Leonard Shoreditch, St Mary Newington, the two St Bartholomews, St James Clerkenwell, St Mary Axe and All Hallows Staining, St Mary Islington (2), Westminster Abbey, St John at Hackney (2), St Mary Lambeth, St

Mary Magdalen Bermondsey, St Andrew Holborn, St. Katharine Cree, St Mary Rotherhithe, Deptford, Walthamstow, Mitcham, Camberwell (2), Christ Church Spitalfields (6), St Dunstons Stepney, Trinity in the Minories, Tottenham, St Lawrence by Guild Hall (2), and St Giles Cripplegate.

On the 3-bell rings they rang Sixes, on those of 5 bells Grandsires, Old and New Doubles, Simonds Doubles and Cambridge Delight, on those of 6 College Single, Plain Bob, Court Bob and Oxford Treble-Bob. On the 7-bell rings they rang Grandsire Tripples and on the 8-bell Bobmajors and Union Bobs—53,228 changes in all.

When, for one reason or another, they were dissatisfied with their performance at a tower, the Ramblers made a second attempt at a later date. Thus, at the visit to Camberwell on August 15th, 1734, "we Cou'd not Ring what we Design-d, the Tenor went so bad", and so they paid another call on October 13th, having no doubt communicated with the officials in the meantime. At their second visit they met at the churchwarden's and rang a Bob Major. Laughton's note runs: "The Tenor of this peal weighs about 7 Hundred and a half, and all the 8 together weigh about 36 Hundred."

They also met with difficulties at St Bartholomews the Less. "We rang there, but then the Tenor Miss-d Wheel when we had Rung Six Doozen and a half, so baulk'd our Design that evening."

It is clear that the Spitalfields ring interested the company exceedingly. They visited the church six times in the obvious endeavour to overcome obstacles it was worth the effort to vanquish. They established friendly relations with the local ringers, who listened to their efforts

and said we Rung 'em very well
and each Distinctly Struck his bell.

Nearly a fortnight later the Rambling Club appeared in Spitalfields again.

We Rung five hundred of bobmaior,
but indeed 'twas not without hard labour,
for five, six, seven went so ill,
that night we Cou-d not have our will.

How different from the Spitalfields bells was the Stepney ring!

Of St Dunstan Stepney now i-ll tell
Sixteen Hundred Rung out very well,
and done at once, no meeting twice,
for the bells were Charming smooth and nice,
not ruff and hard, like Spittle feilds.
What Difference there is between these peals,
for of Stepney Bells, a man may say't,
none e-er went better o' their weight.

The Ramblers stuck to their work at Spitalfields and on 24th and 27th December 1734 rang 720 Cambridge Surprise and 720 Morning Exercise "on the six biggest", both peals "being the first that was Rung there."

It is impossible to go all the way with Laughton. We must pick our path through the record. Even so it is a long one. I will therefore try to choose the notices that have something to tell us about the condition of church or bells in the early days of the 18th century.

On 10th January the party rang at "St Peters poor" in Broad Street, later united with St Benet Fink and St Michael Cornhill, but, says Laughton, "they-re a horrid peal as i-m alive" and the tenor at St Mary's Whitechapel was "an ironsided bitch."

There is no evidence that the visit to St Mary's Newington produced any ringing at all.

We met at the peacock, and drank Laming beer
& never was better diverted I swere
for Simple the Sexton and Alsop his man
ne-er was queerer Cock's, since the world it began.

But St Bartholomew the Great, with its ring of 5, kept the company busy and happy.

We rung upon those little bells
four Diff-rent peals to divert ourselves.

Laughton was not favourably impressed by the bells or the facilities for ringing when the club paid a visit to Westminster Abbey on March 21st, 1734.

Now i-ll mount the Steeple, and tell whats there
an ancient peal of Six i-l swear.
The Tenors dull and melancholy,
the fifth-s as Ranting, and as iolly,
Some o' the others are very Dull,
as bad as the Tenor to the full,
but when the tower is rais-d higher,
they-ll be Recast, and purg-d by fier
and more Bells added to make 'em tenn,
and till that i-ll never Ring there agen.

In the time of Edward the Confessor the west towers had bells, and bells were ordered for the Abbey in 1230 and 1231, but in Laughton's day the steeple was a massive detached tower no more than 60 feet high, which

did not allow the bells to be heard with advantage. This was demolished in 1750, ten years after the completion of the new west towers, in the northernmost of which the bells are rung to-day. Laughton's conditions for a second visit have not been completed, for the Westminster bells number not ten, but eight.

The church of St. Andrew, Holborn, had escaped the Fire, but had been rebuilt in 1686 and refaced in 1704. Laughton found the bells reasonably good if only they had been in tune. The ring would indeed have been bearable, but the Sixth was "as bad as e-er was Swung",

for no kettle, pan, or old Dust tub
e-er made a worse noise by G-d.

The Fire had done no extensive damage to the mediaeval church of St Botolph Aldersgate, with its three gables, but, while the Ramblers found no fault with the bells, they complained that they could not ring without candles and that it was possible, if one looked up, to "see the bells thro' all the floors,"

and should a bell or Clapper fall,
twou-d shurely break quite thro' 'em all.

So unsafe had the church become that in 1790 it was pulled down and rebuilt from the designs of George Dance the younger. Restored after extensive damage in the Second War, it was reopened in January, 1953, as the official church of the ward of Aldersgate. However, the Ramblers rang two Grandsires and an Old Double, although with some difficulty. Yet, despite all hardships, the company fully intended to pay St Botolph's another visit, when Tom Goody promised that "he-d get 'em in order, ay marry would he." This project they never carried out.

The bells at St Katharine Cree, visited on May 29th, were in bad repair. "Nev-r more will I Ring there," vowed Laughton.

A journey to St Mary's Rotherhithe was made by boat. After ringing, the party of 17 adjourned to the Waterman's Arms at Wapping for supper, where Mr Harrington and Mr Saunders gave them two large dishes of beans and bacon, a roast leg of mutton, and cauliflowers. They did full justice to this meal and "clear-d the Dishes very clean."

After supper ended ev-ry man
according to Custome Drank a Dram,
then tould a tale, or sung a song,
and merrily pas-d the time along,
till 'twas a proper time for parting,
and then we all went home, thats Certain.

Perhaps Laughton recited some of his poetry.

And so to St Mary's Islington for a dead peal.

For William Ibbot, we met to Ring,
 a Dead peal at Islington for him,
 'tis the last Respect that Can be shown
 to a Ringer, when he-s Dead and gon.

A Sunday in August saw the Ramblers at Mitcham. The weather was so hot that they made no attempt to ring, but ate boiled beef and bacon and cabbage ("very good fare") at the Stag's Head and afterwards

Beneath a Damson tree we sat
 and the plauges of life forgot.

Another Sunday visit was paid, this time to Tottenham, where the club rang 720 Cambridge Surprise and afterwards drank gin "and eat some gingerbread at a Shop near the Church. We sup'd at the Castle between Newington and Kingsland, at the Palatine house, where our Landlord gave us part of a nice fillet of Veal Stuff-d."

In 1709, says William Robinson in the *History of Stoke Newington* (1820), "four houses were built, near the London Road, for the reception of poor Palatines who fled to England about June 1709 . . . being driven from their habitations, either by the oppressive exactions of the French, or the desolation of their country, occasioned by the calamities of war . . . These houses, with several others adjoining, are still called the Palatine Houses and form a hamlet within the parish." The name is preserved to-day by the Palatine Road, which runs into the Stoke Newington Road from the west.

Holy Trinity, Minories, was destroyed in the blitz. When the Ramblers visited the church, it had been in existence in its new shape for 28 years. One of the walls displayed the Washington shield of the Stars and Stripes. The ropes, the ringers found, were small and cut the hands and moreover they were all without the sally, or piece of woollen material woven into the rope at the place where it is caught by the hand. The difficulty was overcome by the expedient of chalking the ropes, which

show-d us where abouts to Catch
 and stop in Due time at full Stretch.

Perhaps enough has now been said of the activities of the Ramblers on the campanological side. But another aspect of their fellowship, as we may judge from the space Laughton devotes to the matter, was of at least equal importance in their eyes—that of conviviality. They were mighty eaters and, when put to it, drinkers of some capacity.

"We met at the Rising Sun, where Mrs Ward gave us a Shoulder of Mutton for Supper, as we Came home we Call'd at a frenchmans in Spittle feilds, that kept a brandy Shop, where we drank two pints of Brandy, and eat some part of a Could achebone of beef, and Carrotts, and tippled a Gallon of beer." On another occasion "there was in all 24 pounds of meat and 24 men to eat it".

The ringers would gather at the tavern nearest the tower of their choice, sometimes returning after ringing, sometimes moving elsewhere. What they ate and what they drank are carefully recorded by Laughton. "At the Watermans Arms in Milk Alley, Waping, on thursday the 31st of January, 1733/4 we had no Ringing, but good liveing, for Mr Harrington and Mr Saunders gave us a Legg of Mutton and three Ribs of Beef Roisted for Supper".

"After we had Rang the peal, to the George in Houndsditch again, where we had for Supper a Legg of Veal weighed 21 pounds, boyled with bacon and greens, and a Side of Lamb Roisted, with Sallet to eat with it, there was in all 26 of us at Supper . . ."

On occasions Laughton played the host himself. "I gave a Legg and Shoulder of Mutton for Dinner, with Cabbages and pickels, to eat with them." "I gave for Supper two Leggs of pork and a piece of the belly piece, with peas pudding, potatoes, parsnips and Turnips".

Often Laughton sums up his appreciation of the meal with such phrases as: "Charming picking," or "Very good fare," or "most harty food".

On two occasions he gives in full a recipe that has taken his fancy. I will not pause over the "Buttock of Beef Dress'd allamode," for in this case something went wrong in the kitchen and "the liquor was a little over Charg'd with salt, or else the soop would have bin Exceeding Ritch and Dillicate, but the meat was very Rellishing".

But the receipt for herring stuffing for roast leg of mutton deserves mention at length. "Mr Davis gave us for Supper two Leggs of Mutton Roisted and Stuff-d with pickled herrings, which was as fine Eating as ever was eat, the Stuffing was Composed of Pickled herrings, sweet Marioram, penny Royal, time, parsly, onions, beef Suet, Crum's of Bread, Grated Nutmeg, and whites of eggs, the herrings minc-d small, and mix-d with the other ingredients, 3 herrings is enough for a Legg of 12 pounds . . . the Goodnes of this Dish few will believe, without they eat on't, because it has sutch an od sound of herrings".

Before their ring at Tottenham the Ramblers drank 13 quarters of gin at the Hare and Hounds.

I hope I have not concentrated unduly on eating and drinking. Change-ringing is a fatiguing exercise imposing a great strain on the body, which afterwards demands nourishment both solid and liquid. The reader will remember how prominently the beer consumed by the ringers figures in the churchwardens' accounts of our old churches. Laughton's final word on the subject is that

there-s nothing like Ringing of a peal
to prepair a Stomach for a meal.

MIDDLESEX PARISH CHURCHES SURVEY

(Addenda et corrigenda)

The following amendments should be made to entries in the survey report published by the Society as Vol. 18, Part II, of the *Transactions* :

- 9 (St. Thomas, Acton Vale) and 36 (St. Mellitus, Hanwell) *for* (A. Blomfield) *read* (Blomfield & Sons).
 - 37 (St. Thomas, Boston Road) *before* Chapel *add* N.E.
 - 44 (St. John the Evangelist, Dyson's Road) *for* W. Bellcote *read* Bellcote over Chancel arch; *for* 1926 *read* 1906.
 - 46 (St. Mary, Fore Street) *for* red brick *read* stock brick.
 - 60 (St. Peter, Grange Park) *after* Font *delete* and Cover and Altar rails; *add* Font Cover from St. Paul, Tottenham (No. 176).
 - 73 (St. James the Great, Friern Barnet) *for* Porker *read* Bacon.
 - 75 (St. John the Evangelist, Friern Barnet) *between* 1850 *and* from *add* timber.
 - 94 (St. Lawrence, Little Stanmore) *add* Hatchments: nine.
 - 96 (St. Anselm, Hayes) *after* red brick *add* and stone.
 - 97 (St. Jerome, Dawley) *before* Aisles *add* passage; *for* N. and S. Transepts *read* N.E. Chapel.
 - 104 (St. Alban, Golders Green) *after* Tower *add* with low spire; *after* brick *add* with stone dressings.
 - 113 (St. Alphage, Burnt Oak) *before* J. E. Dixon-Spain *add* C. Nicholas and.
 - 137 (King Charles the Martyr, Potters Bar) *for* brick *read* red brick with stone dressings; *add* Bell : one.
 - 138 (St. Mary the Virgin & All Saints, Potters Bar) *for* red brick *read* yellow limestone; *after* Altar cross *delete* (Lady Chapel); *add* Not complete.
 - 152 (St. Andrew, Chase Side) *for* brick *read* red brick with stone dressings.
 - 199 (St. Mary, Harefield) *after* Hatchments *add* : nine.
 - 229 (St. Michael, Wood Green) *delete* (J. S. Lee).
- Additional references: ET (*Ecclesiastical Topography*, 1807-11), Nos. 1, 10, 14, 21, 31, 34, 38, 41, 61, 63, 77, 89, 92, 94, 100, 112, 114, 118, 123, 135, 136, 140, 145, 162, 163, 167, 179, 185, 190, 195, 200, 201, 209, 212, 235, 237; NCI (*New Churches Illustrated*, Incorporated Church Building Society [1936]), Nos. 37, 96, 97, 103, 104, 113, 143, 196, 219.