

James Platt, of Saddleworth

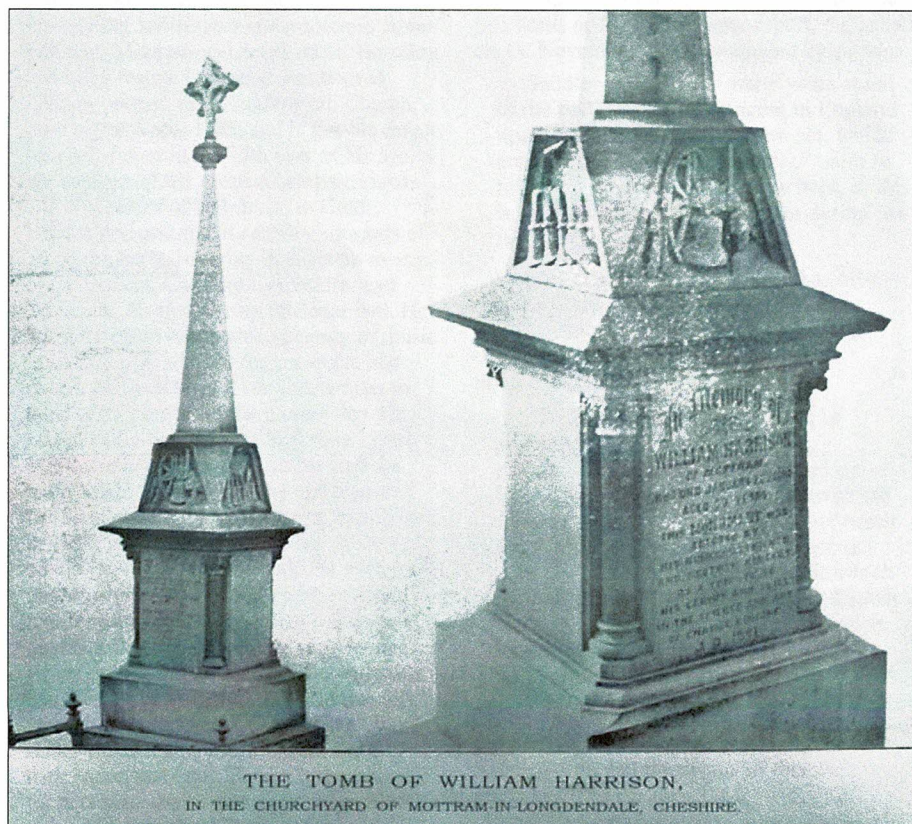
by John Eisel

The modern story of the ringing of spliced Minor begins with the true extents of spliced Minor produced by the Revd H. Law James and his brother, the Revd E. Bankes James, in the early years of the last century. However, the idea of spliced goes back to the eighteenth century, a touch of three-spliced Minor being published in the 1702 JD & CM *Campanalogia Improved*. This consisted of successive leads of Oxford Treble Bob, College Pleasure, and College Treble bob, the Oxford lead bobbed, repeated four times, producing a false touch of 360 changes. This touch was dropped after the 1733 edition, but was certainly rung a number of times. As far as we know, nothing further happened in spliced Minor until the middle of the nineteenth century, when James Platt, of Saddleworth, composed true 720s of spliced Minor. Unfortunately Platt's work was not published, and lapsed into obscurity, so that the James brothers had to start from scratch; had Platt's work been known, then the history of spliced would have been rather different. An identification and assessment of Platt's work as the originator of true extents of spliced Minor did not appear until 1969, when Cyril Wratten published a two-part article in these pages (pp.279 & 300).

In the 1840s Platt was working on innovative 720s of Plain Bob Minor and Treble Bob Minor, as well as Treble Bob Doubles. On 11th March 1849 the band at

Saddleworth, which was one of the leading bands in the area, rang a 720 in three treble bob methods spliced together, calling it Yorkshire Crown Bob, known from a report published in *Bell's Life in London* of Sunday, 18th March 1849 (not *The Era*, as previously believed.) In view of the falseness of Crown Bob, this was an unfortunate choice of terminology, but the term must have been generally familiar. As far as is known the figures have not survived, but Cyril demonstrated that a true extent was possible, and in view of Platt's later achievements it would be surprising if this composition was false. Because one of the methods is a lead end variant of another, we would probably now say that it was in two methods. Cyril also noted a 720 in seven methods, said to have been conducted by William Harrison at Saddleworth and mentioned in passing in a memoir of Harrison, written by Jasper Snowdon, which appeared in *Bell News* for October 1881. The figures of a true 720 in nine methods, composed by Platt, were published in these pages on 23rd March 1923, and Cyril tracked down a MS of this extent, probably dating from the 1870s and written out in full, which was then in the possession of Ken Lewis. James Platt died in 1858, at the age of 74. Cyril's article concluded:

'The story of James Platt's life and work is even now by no means complete. None of



THE TOMB OF WILLIAM HARRISON,
IN THE CHURCHYARD OF MOTTRAM IN LONGDENDALE, CHESHIRE.

The elaborate monument erected in Mottram churchyard to the memory of William Harrison, published as an insert in *Bell News* in 1897 (Photo courtesy Alan Glover)

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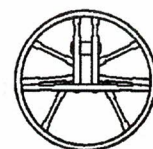
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his notebooks have come to light, and the only records of his doings that have been found have been in small paragraphs in contemporary newspapers. Is it too much to hope that even now some more light may yet be thrown on the man, who, perhaps above all others, deserves to be called the father of spliced ringing as we know it today?

A more emotional account of James Platt's work is given in Karl Grave's book *Forbidden Methods* (2010), together with more personal details, mainly taken from Joseph Bradbury's *Saddleworth Sketches*, published in 1871.

He also traced the history of the MS copy of the extent in nine methods, which was in the handwriting of James Wilde, sen., of Hyde, Cheshire, and passed down through his family, eventually being given to Ken Lewis. Subsequently it was placed in the Chester Diocesan Guild Library, where it was located by Michael Foulds, a photograph being used to illustrate the book.

About the nine-spliced extent Minor, Karl Grave speculated that it was likely to have been composed after the three-method extent, and went on to say:

‘We don’t even know if it was ever rung in his [Platt’s] lifetime. Indeed there is no record extant that it has ever been rung at all!’

New Information

Recently, as part of some work that I am doing on nineteenth century newspaper reports about bells and change ringing, I turned up a couple of reports that clear up certain of the questions raised above, and raise doubts about the complete veracity of Snowdon’s information. The reports quoted below are all taken from the *Huddersfield Chronicle*, which was published on a Saturday.

The information on Platt that was given by Bradbury was taken directly from an obituary of Platt that appeared on 2nd October 1858; this paints a vivid word picture and is well worth reproducing in full.

‘DEATH OF A VETERAN BELL-RINGER.—On Monday last, the remains of James Platt, late of Saddleworth-fold, were consigned to the family vault, in Saddleworth Old Churchyard. Upwards of 150 persons followed the deceased to the grave, many of them being bell-ringers and musicians from Glossop, Mottram-in-Longdendale, Barnsley, and other towns. Deceased was born at Clough-bottom, near Saddleworth Church, on the 21st April, 1785, and began his career as a bell-ringer in the 15th year of his age. He was one of the greatest campanologists and composers of bell-music in Great Britain, and assisted in carrying upwards of 30 prizes for bell-ringing in different towns in Derbyshire, Cheshire Lancashire, and Yorkshire, always ringing the tenor bell. He has left behind him a great quantity of music in manuscript, adapted for six, eight, and twelve bells, and has given instructions to most of the ringers of the present day. He was also fife-major in the Yorkshire Local Militia, and acted as such on the staff for many years. He was founder and leader of the Saddleworth Old Reed Band, established in 1817, and was considered one of the best piccolo [*sic*] players of his day. He was a quiet unobtrusive man, extensively known, and highly-respected for his amiable and social qualities. A muffled peal was rung by the junior ringers during the time the body was being conveyed to the church. He was carried from the church to the grave by the senior ringers, who much lament the loss of their friend and tutor. To testify their respect for deceased, the ringers again assembled around his tomb at the solemn hour of midnight, and rung a muffled peal upon the hand-bells.’

From the context I assume that the ‘music’ referred to above was Platt’s work on compositions in change ringing, but there has been no later reference to his MSS and it is most likely that his papers have been destroyed.

As reported, at the time of Platt’s death Saddleworth had two sets of ringers, and the junior set, like the senior set, was of considerable ability. This set (a word often used in the area instead of band or company) started to practise on the last Monday in October 1851, and 10th December 1851 succeeded in ringing a 720 of Grandsire Bob (Plain Bob). The report, which was published on 13th December 1851, stated that their combined ages amounted to 109.

With practice the junior set continued to develop its skills, and essentially the same band rang a peal in eight methods, seven extents of Treble Bob and one of Plain Bob, at Saddleworth on 2nd January 1858, the report of 9th January 1858 still describing them as the ‘junior company.’ This peal has only recently been added to the Felstead records.

The junior set also entered prize ringing contests, and after winning a prize ringing at Meltham on 22nd April 1862, the report on the ringing, published on 26th April 1862, concluded:

‘The old ringers of Saddleworth have for years been noted for their correctness in ringing, and their composition of bell music. It is gratifying to find that the talent of the old ringers is sustained in their pupils – “the junior set” – as the present ringers are called.’

Later that year, on 27th and 28th October 1862, the band won a prize ringing contest at Silkstone, and the newspaper report, published on 1st November 1862, concluded by saying:

‘Saddleworth has for many years stood in the first rank of bell ringers in England upon six bells; and the present set, which are called “the young company,” seem to follow in the track of their teachers, as this is the third prize they have won during the last year.’

In 1864 William Harrison, a well-known ringer and composer from Mottram-in-Longdendale, moved to Saddleworth, but doesn’t seem to have rung there much. Snowdon tells us:

‘Though the number is about to be augmented to eight, the tower of Saddleworth church only contained six bells, and, although very friendly with the ringers, William Harrison was never much given to practise as a six-bell ringer, the only performance worth noticing in which he took part at this church being a “Crown Bob” in seven different variations, of length (composed by James Platt, of Saddleworth), he conducted.’

Snowdon is quite correct in that Harrison did conduct an extent of ‘Crown Bob’ at Saddleworth, and the details of this were published on 27th June 1868:

‘CHANGE RINGING—On Tuesday last, the Saddleworth junior company of ringers ascended the tower of St. Chad’s Church,

Saddleworth, and rung the imperial crown bob of 720 changes, comprising and composed of nine different methods, namely, British Queen, Oxford, Holmfirth Surprise, New York, London Scholars, Nelson’s Victory, Liverpool, Glossop Delight, New Kirk, and brought them round in 27 minutes. The above peal was composed by the late James Platt, of Saddleworth, and it was his wish that it should be rung before he died, which is upwards of 10 years ago, but it was never accomplished till the above date. The ringers were placed as follows: – Treble and conductor, William Harrison; 2nd, John Holden; 3rd, John J. Mallalieu; 4th, James R. Holden; 5th, Jos. W. Brierley; tenor, Edgar Buckley; weight of tenor twelve cwt. Mr. Samuel R. Brierley, one of the senior company, was in the tower to see that it was a true and complete peal.’

So Karl Grave’s question has been answered – the 720 in nine methods has been rung but it was not until more than ten years after the death of James Platt. Also, Snowdon is quite definite that there was only one performance of Crown Bob in which Harrison took part, and if this was so this report indicates that he (Snowdon) was almost certainly in error in the number of methods included. In the absence of any other information, the claim that Platt composed an extent in seven methods must now be viewed with considerable suspicion.

Harrison’s involvement also explains how the composition came to be in the hands of James Wilde, of Hyde. Snowdon tells us that, before Harrison moved to Saddleworth from Mottram, he had taught a band of ringers at Hyde, which is not too far from Mottram, and so would have known James Wilde, possibly even teaching him to ring changes. Whether Harrison had the figures of the 720 before he moved to Saddleworth is open to question, as I rather suspect that the band at Saddleworth would have kept them quiet while they attempted (unsuccessfully) to ring the 720 in nine methods.

Postscript

James Platt lies in the family vault in Saddleworth churchyard, and his name was added to the grave-slab. To the left of this is sculpted a bell with wheel, in the down position and with a broken rope, while on the right is a broken piccolo, emblematic of his two main interests. Another memorial, of a different sort, is his ground-breaking 720 of spliced Minor in nine methods, a number which was not exceeded until the 1930s, more than 70 years later.

William Harrison died at Saddleworth on 22nd January 1880, and was buried in Mottram churchyard two days later. Such was his celebrity that a subscription was raised to provide a monument over his grave, and this was unveiled with much ceremony on 2nd July 1881. Part of the inscription read:

‘This monument was erected by his numerous friends and brother ringers as a token of his genius and skill in the science and art of change-ringing, A.D. 1880.’