

TROLLEY WHEELS



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Ring in the Old Lament for a Lost Art

THE old showman leaned on his stick. "If some of the vaudeville acts of a few years ago were re-created and put on the stage to-day, they would be a riot," he mused. "Why, if you remember some of the famous families of hand-bell ringers who toured New Zealand, just think how they would catch on. I can think of a dozen whose turns would be counted 'big time' to-day. But it's a lost art."

That rang a bell in our ear. We set out to see if the old art was really lost and, in the end, we discovered in Wellington not only a set of 97 hand-bells but a man who knows all about using them. The bells were in the basement at 22B, cased up. They are not the station's property, but are stored there on the owner's behalf. Formerly they belonged to the Belle-Chrome Family.

And the man who knows how to ring them is John Ambrose, an employee of the Hutt Railway Workshops. We asked him if there was any likelihood, or possibility, of a bell-band being formed here.

"I don't call myself an expert," said Mr. Ambrose. "But I know quite enough to give anyone a start. My father was a

ringer in his young days and my elder brother took up ringing early. He rang his first peal at the age of 14 and during his career (in England) he has taken part in about 70 peals; he was also good on hand-bell change-ringing.

"When I lived in Warwick there was much more opportunity for ringing. There were three churches with bells, two with a peal of eight each, and one, St. Mary's, with the fine peal of ten. St. Mary's was unique in a way as, in addition to a clock striking the hours and quarters, there was an old carillon machine, about 240 years old, which played tunes on week-days and hymns on Sundays, before the bells were raised to be rung for morning service and lowered for the evening service."

Move at Hutt Valley

"Do you know of any group of people in New Zealand who would take up the old art?"

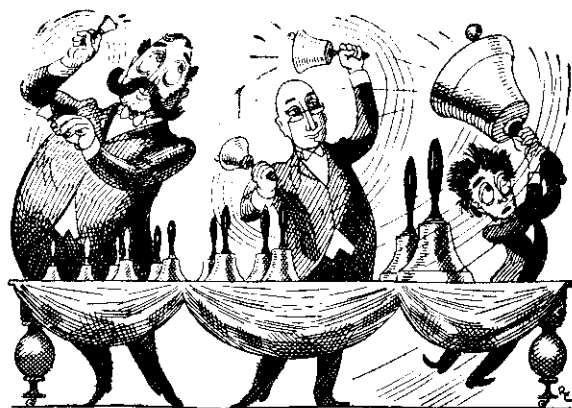
"Well, before the war, there was a move to start a handbell band at the Hutt Valley workshops, but war and other work has kept us too busy. If there was anybody keen enough, I'm sure I could get a band together; I could easily teach the changes. It's the most democratic hobby in the world, you know. I have rung in England with a doctor and a parson, the conductor being a farm labourer. It's complicated. I knew a man who was an expert at mathematics, but who could never figure out change-ringing. But I think it would be just the thing as a hobby for, say, disabled soldiers."

There was an old inn in England, the Swan, in Lavenham, Mr. Ambrose told us, where six days a week men played darts. Led by their conductor, they practised on bells modelled after the fashion of the great bells in the church tower. The clappers were on rigid stalks and moved in whatever direction the impulse of the wrist dictated. Thus a man could ring four of those handbells at once, providing different notes to make up the harmony of the whole.

Good Ale for Good Ringers

And as the tradition of hand-bell ringing rehearsals for the great ringing in the church tower was cradled in the centuries, so was the tradition that good English ale should fortify the ringer. On ringers' practice nights, the conversation went something like this: "Lower your pull"—"Do your dodge"—"Hunt up, lad, hunt up from lead"—and then, "Half of old and mild all round, Gov," with the last injunction the melody ended and six thirsts were gratified.

Hand-bells, though used as a preparation for tower-bell ringing, are, of course, operated in a very different manner. The more ancient among them were made of iron and bronze, and in their time were looked on with deep veneration throughout Britain. (In some cases they were believed to have miraculous powers). Their use can be traced back as far as the reign of Edward the Confessor. The weight usually ranged between three to six pounds and, though to-day they are rung by hand—the hand holding the pliable leather handle — some early



manuscripts show them suspended from an arched framework and struck with a hammer.

Quaint Notation

The printed notation for peals looks, at first sight, like a company's balance sheet, or an exercise in algebra. When the bells are rung on a table, as in stage turns, the performance is technically known as a "rolling course."

The oldest ringing society is the Ancient Society of College Youths, established in 1637, with headquarters at St. Martin's in the Fields, but every county and diocese in England has its



JOHN AMBROSE
"The most democratic hobby"

own society. There is also a Ladies' Guild which, when formed several years ago, had 500 members. These people, however, are concerned mostly with tower bells.

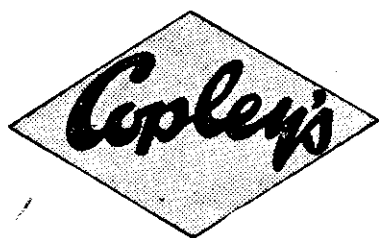
"Please don't stress any expertness on my part too much as there may be other men in New Zealand much better qualified to teach hand-bell ringing," Mr. Ambrose said. "It would certainly be very interesting if this old art were revived."

Plays on the Way

SIX plays are on the stocks at the moment in the NBS production studios and two others are nearly ready for presentation. The latter are *Breaking Point*, by Mabel Constanduros, and *The Seagull Never Sings*, by Ursula Bloom. Those chosen for production shortly are *The Lady Vanishes*, by Ethel Lina White; *One Fine Day*, by Emery Bonett; *The Man Who Could Make Nightmares*, by Victor Andrews; *No Re-Becoming*, by Margaret Lang; *The Tremendous Adventures of Major Brown*, by G. K. Chesterton, and *Poet of Democracy*, by Reginald Kirby.

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