

**Bucknell, Ian, *On their shoulders we stand and ring: A social history of bell ringing in the Stroud valleys*, 2025, xii+350pp.**

**£30 plus postage and packing, available from the author – Ian Bucknell**

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For such a seemingly limited subject this is a really BIG book – one of the most substantial, I'd say, on my shelves of titles on bells and ringing. At first sight one might well wonder how there could be so much to say about the history of ringing in a small part of one rural English county with only a dozen rings of bells pre-dating the Victorian era and fewer than twenty today.

Part of the explanation can be found in a single word – PAINSWICK. There is hardly anywhere else in England with such a long, rich and colourful ringing history. Unsurprisingly, therefore, that story deservedly occupies a major part of the book. Stroud, too, has a significant story to tell. As to the rest, the chances of finding a great deal of interest might seem slim and yet this area – roughly within a ten mile radius of Stroud – has proved to be fertile territory for fruitful study.

The over-riding reason why the author has found so much to say is that the study is based on the people who make up the community of ringers – rather than on towers and performances alone. That makes a huge difference. The title of the book – perhaps not immediately self-explanatory – expresses the idea that, as ringers, we owe a great deal to our forebears from whom we have inherited many of our bells and our ringing traditions. This links the past, the present and the future. Thus, this book explores the social history of ringing through time.

So, what's actually in the book? There are 21 chapters, arranged chronologically. The first covers the development of rings of bells in the locality with current details (in a discursive style rather than as facts and figures) followed by facsimiles of the entries for the rings then existing from Ellacombe's 1877 book. Chapter Two gives details of the earliest records of ringing at these towers including, of course, the change-ringing recorded at Stroud and Painswick – the 1722 peal at the former, the impressive series of peals at the latter in the 1730s (including long peals of Caters), fuelled by a classic ringing rivalry between the two bands.

Chapters Three to Five chart the resurgence and decline of the Painswick band through the middle years of the C19th – giving us a fresh and well-written account of one of ringing's greatest stories, now told in full detail. Here, for the first time, are full biographies of the ringing families and individual ringers – well researched and absolutely fascinating.

Next comes a lengthy chapter on Stroud and another that chronicles activities in all the other towers from the C18th into the early decades of the Gloucester and Bristol Association (formed in 1878), whose early years are sketched in Chapter Eight. I was certainly surprised to see just how much material – and how varied – there is for some of the towers, e.g. Avening, Cranham, Minchinhampton and Woodchester especially. Not surprisingly, the author's own tower, Bisley, is also well featured here too.

Chapters Nine and Ten bring us back to Painswick – the revival of ringing there, the rehunging in 1900 and the emergence of key figures who were later to put Painswick firmly on the ringing map again in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the story is interrupted by Chapters Eleven and Twelve dealing with the losses incurred in the Great War and the efforts to maintain ringing through the years of conflict and to rebuild afterwards.

The culmination of Painswick's tragic bid for glory is told in Chapter Thirteen, "*Albert Wright and the peal that wasn't*". This was when Wright's band rang 17,687 changes of Grandsire Cinques in 11 hours and 36 minutes, with 76 year-old James George ringing the tenor single-handed throughout. There is a fine tablet in the tower to commemorate the performance but the word 'peal' is not used as, sadly, the composition was found to be false. Rather than being celebrated for the great achievement that it should have been, the unfortunate band found themselves embroiled in a bitter controversy in which some of the correspondence was vitriolic and highly uncharitable. Again, the author tells the story with fresh insight and gives us a readable and authoritative account of the sad business.

Chapter Fourteen takes us, perhaps surprisingly, to the village of Minchinhampton. Here for a few years in the early 1930s there was a strong six-bell band which rang local peals in advanced methods such as London, Carlisle, 7-surprise and Stedman Doubles. Sadly, it was as short-lived as it had been successful.

The remaining chapters follow the history of ringing in the Stroud Branch decade by decade from the inter-war years, through World War II and onwards to the Millennium. Coverage for the present century – perhaps wisely – must await the attention of a future historian.

While the chapter headings give a fair idea of the contents of the book, there is, in fact, much more. Finding the right way to present the material in a book like this is a challenge for any author. At first sight the order here may at times seem confusing, but on the whole it is very cleverly arranged – the need for ‘flow’ being balanced with the introduction of related topics and themes within the main text. This is dealt with by sub-headings and smaller sections. In addition the book is well indexed so the reader can quickly find the continuation of threads (e.g. the biographies of individual ringers and the ups-and-downs of individual bands) that might seem to have been split across several chapters.

Although the book contains many extracts from original sources, it's no mere ‘scissors and paste’ job – a criticism sometimes levelled at Morris’s *History and Art*, for instance. There is plenty of wider context and a considerable depth of research lies behind the plentiful linking text. There are no references or footnotes though.

The book is extremely well illustrated with images in colour, sepia and black and white. Finding such good images cannot have been easy and one can imagine that some of the originals weren’t of the highest visual quality. The reproduction is certainly very good.

As to presentation, this book really does show what high quality can be achieved nowadays at a reasonable cost with a relatively small print run. It is nicely laid out – the main text in two columns per page throughout – with some full width illustrations to give variety. Quibbles are very minor, but running headers for title and chapter on each page would have been useful. Peal reports are sensibly standardised to modern *Ringling World* magazine format but it’s a shame that many of them are slightly fuzzy.

In the preface, Ian describes how he came to research and write this book – and how the project grew from a very specific investigation to the all-embracing history that it became. It is probably not a book that many people would read from cover to cover. It is, though, one to dip into and find much of interest. If you’re someone who asks questions as you read, you will certainly find yourself exploring all sorts of ‘*rabbit holes*’ – and you’ll find answers. It is, above all else, a book of record that assembles in one place pretty much all that is known about ringing and ringers in the Stroud area.

For me, the account of Painswick would be sufficient alone to justify purchasing this book. Ringers from the area ought to be fascinated by the histories of their own and neighbouring towers. But interest should not stop there. In presenting such a detailed microcosm of ringing life in an area like this Ian has achieved a ‘*first*’. It is the only study of its type – so far. It shows, though, that there is plenty to be discovered and further investigations in other areas would be welcomed. This book, certainly, provides a prototype or model that others could follow.

Are there any particular favourite bits? That’s a difficult question. Any personal selection from a book of this size would be unrepresentative and perhaps not of much interest to others. Yes, that is a cop-out. But if you read the book, you’ll find there’s simply too much to choose from.

Far from being a narrow and over-detailed study of a small area of a rural county this book is much, much more than that. It is a significant addition to the literature of the history of the Exercise and a publishing venture that deserves the support of anyone – to revert to the ‘*hidden meaning*’ of the title – who wants to understand the relationship between the past, the present and the future. As both an historian and a successful trainer of young ringers, Ian has a particular insight across that spectrum which has informed and inspired this book.

Do buy it.

**Chris Pickford**