



Eighteenth Century Birmingham Bell Ringers: A Genealogical Perspective

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Abstract: By the end of the eighteenth-century the St Martin's Youths of Birmingham was one of the leading bell ringing societies outside London, as it remains to this day. The handwritten peal books in the Archive of the St Martin's Guild, its modern successor, provide a record of the peals rung by the society from 1755, but little was known of the eighteenth-century ringers themselves beyond a few anecdotes contained in the oral history for a later period. Genealogical records and techniques allowed a fuller understanding of the lives of the ringers to be disclosed, informing a new narrative of the history of ringing in Birmingham and the place of the ringers in Birmingham at a significant period in the town's history. The article shows how niche sources can be combined with genealogical and other sources to provide insights into the lives of members of an eighteenth-century society.

Introduction

The focus of the study is the ringing records of a group of bell ringers in Birmingham, the St Martin's Youths, up to September 1800. The ringer John Day (1825–1902) published his *Recollections* in 1895, essentially amounting to "the codification of an oral history" of the society covering the period c. 1780–1860.^{1,2} Based on his memories of the "eminent ringers who helped make the St. Martin's Youths of Birmingham famous" he related descriptions and anecdotes about men he knew during his own lifetime and other stories he had been told by others from a previous generation of ringers.³ Three eighteenth-century ringers, William Hassall (1774–1853), Samuel Lawrence (1763–1825) and Joseph Riley (1776–1834) were the subjects of dedicated vignettes in *Recollections*; some other eighteenth-century men were mentioned to greater or lesser extents. Of several he said, "... as far as I can trace, nothing at all is left to show what they were like," which until now has been more generally true of this generation of Birmingham ringers.⁴

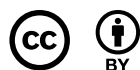
The study was initiated in support of a broader historical project about the Belfry and Ringing Tradition at St Martin's, Birmingham.⁵ The aim was to use genealogical sources and techniques alongside ringing sources to discover more about the early pioneers of the art of change ringing in Birmingham. The article considers them as individuals, as a group and in the context of their time, place and chosen pastime. It has developed as a study in its own right and it is a valuable contribution to the history of the St Martin's Youths.

The article summarises the high-level findings, provides an overview of the eighteenth-century ringers and analyses information derived from different sources and records. Technical terms, such as the names of change ringing methods, are mentioned but the article does not require specialist knowledge on the reader's part. Place references are to Birmingham, Warwickshire, unless otherwise stated.

The Development of Bell Ringing in Birmingham

'Change ringing', based on mathematical principles, began in the seventeenth-century and involves the skilful control of swinging church bells to produce continuous and non-repeating sequences or 'changes'.⁶ By the early eighteenth-century 'peal ringing' developed, that is, long performances of change ringing containing at least 5,000 changes, usually taking more than three hours.⁷ The first known 'true and complete' peal was performed in Norwich in 1715 and peals remained as relatively rare events throughout the eighteenth-century.⁸ Successful peals were often recorded in specially bought peal books and significant peals were sometimes commemorated on peal boards, hung in ringing chambers and churches. Ringing societies emerged and began keeping records of their members.⁹

St Martin's is the original parish church of Birmingham and stands in what was the centre of the town. There is evidence that by the early seventeenth-century it had an established tradition of ringing;¹⁰ there was a ring of six bells by 1682, made up to eight by 1706.¹¹



Birmingham's population grew rapidly in the eighteenth-century, from 15,000 in 1700, to nearly 25,000 in 1741, to nearly 74,000 by 1791.¹² As the population grew a new church, St Philip's, was founded at the top of a hill and consecrated in 1715. The number of rings of bells in and around the town also increased: eight bells were installed in St Philip's in 1727, and 10 by 1750, when a new ring replaced the original bells that were reported to have been "untuneable and some unfit for use."¹³ St Martin's increased its ring to 10 bells in 1758, and another two bells were added in 1771, making a ring of 12, a great rarity at that time.¹⁴ St John's Deritend, another old Birmingham church dating from the fourteenth-century, was rebuilt in 1735 and a new ring of eight bells was installed in 1776.¹⁵ Saints Peter & Paul in Aston, near to but outside of Birmingham, had five bells, which were replaced by a new eight in 1775.¹⁶

The St Martin's Youths became established as the leading change ringing society in the wider Birmingham area and, as a provincial society, was considered to have rung "an unusually high proportion of their eighteenth-century peals ... on ten and twelve bells."¹⁷ The Society's first recorded peal was rung at St Philip's on 16 September 1755. The first 13 peals by the St Martin's Youths were rung in Birmingham, after which the band began ringing peals at more distant towers, such as Coventry (1780), Bewdley (1782), Kings Norton (1785 & 1786), Solihull and Warwick (1786), and Burton upon Trent (1800).¹⁸

Method

Peal records and other ringing-specific sources were used to identify the names of the men – and they were all men – who rang with the St Martin's Youths in the eighteenth-century. Between September 1755 and September 1800, the St Martin's Youths rang 41 peals. These are mainly recorded in two peal books that were transcribed from records held in the tower in earlier times but that are now lost.^{19,20,21,22,23,24,25} Each peal record includes the date of the peal, the method rung, where it was rung, how long it took, the ringers' names and the bell they rang (usually identified by a number) and, often, the names of those who composed and/ or conducted the peals. The number of ringers in the band depended on how many bells were rung, usually between eight and 12, and sometimes heavier bells were rung by two men (Figure 1).²⁶ The peal records identify 75 ringers.

Several other records were referred to as additional name sources for eighteenth-century Birmingham ringers and include the names of men who were not listed in peals. About 20 Birmingham ringers were elected to the London-based Ancient Society of College Youths (ASCY) during its visit to Birmingham in 1786 – most do not appear in peal records (see later); another 10 Birmingham men were elected to ASCY between 1771 and 1798 (in addition to the 1786 intake).^{27,28} Eleven Birmingham subscribers were listed in *Clavis Campanologia* (*'Clavis'*), a book on change ringing published in 1788.²⁹ For the period up to 1800, 98 ringers were identified from all ringing sources, with some names recurring across sources.

Genealogical and other sources were used in order to identify the ringers. Church records, directories and newspaper records for Birmingham in the eighteenth-century are generally good but are of their time, often lacking the detail and context that allows for reliable identification and linkages, particularly for those with relatively common names or where there were several 'same name' individuals in Birmingham at the time. The process was necessarily iterative and, in a few cases, unrelated ringers were associated in records in ways that helped to confirm their identity (see later).³⁰ Other contextual information was also found in ringing histories, archival catalogues, newspaper sources and local history sources for Birmingham. The surviving *St Martin's Youths' Account Book, 1804–38* (*'the Account Book'*) is a pocket book that was used as a register and cash book and for keeping notes. It gives name and date information for band members, including references to some men who had rung in the late eighteenth-century; it also makes occasional references to illness and deaths and alongside other sources was a useful corroborative document.^{31,32} The "... eccentric but ingenious artist" James Bisset (1761–1832), well known to Birmingham local historians, joined ASCY in 1786 and his memoirs provide rich contextual detail and corroborate the information for a small number of ringers (notably his memoirs make no mention of bell ringing).^{33,34} Of those named in ringing records, 69 per cent were fully or partly identified, including 10 men who were identified as 'visitors'.

Who were the Eighteenth-Century Birmingham ringers?

Mid eighteenth-century Birmingham was at the fulcrum of scientific, industrial and cultural change. It was already the third most-populous town in England and well on the way to becoming "the first manufacturing town in the world".³⁵ Place of origin, family connections and occupations were used as a starting point to gain a collective sense of the ringers and their place in Birmingham at that time. Of 49 men whose birth place was known, the majority originated from Birmingham (43), with a few others coming from the nearby counties of Staffordshire (2), Shropshire (1), Worcestershire (1) and Cheshire (1), and one from Scotland (1). This broadly resonates with other studies of Birmingham's population at around that time that suggest that in the eighteenth-century migration into Birmingham was mainly from within 15 miles of the town, with few people coming from further than 60 miles away.³⁶

Family Connections

Five family groups were identified among the ringers, comprising 20 men who are known or, based on our information, are assumed to be ringers: the Bellamys, the Brookes, the Pecks, the Mackenzie and Kendal brothers, and father and son, the Wortons (Figure 2).³⁷

On Monday Sept: 16th 1755 .

A
Compliat Peal of
FIVE THOUSAND and FORTY
BOB MAJOR
was Rung at
S: PHILLIP'S
BIRMINGHAM.
By the Society of S: Martin's Youths
In Three Hours and 37 Minutes.

<i>John Thompson</i>	1
<i>Joseph Thompson</i>	2
<i>William Thompson</i>	3
<i>John Archer</i>	4
<i>Abraham Fletcher</i>	5
<i>Samuel Brooke</i>	6
<i>Humphrey Pick</i>	7
<i>Andrew Peake</i>	} Tenor.
<i>William Smith</i>	

Figure 1. St Martin's Youths Peal Book, 1755-1880 – Peal, 16 September 1755.

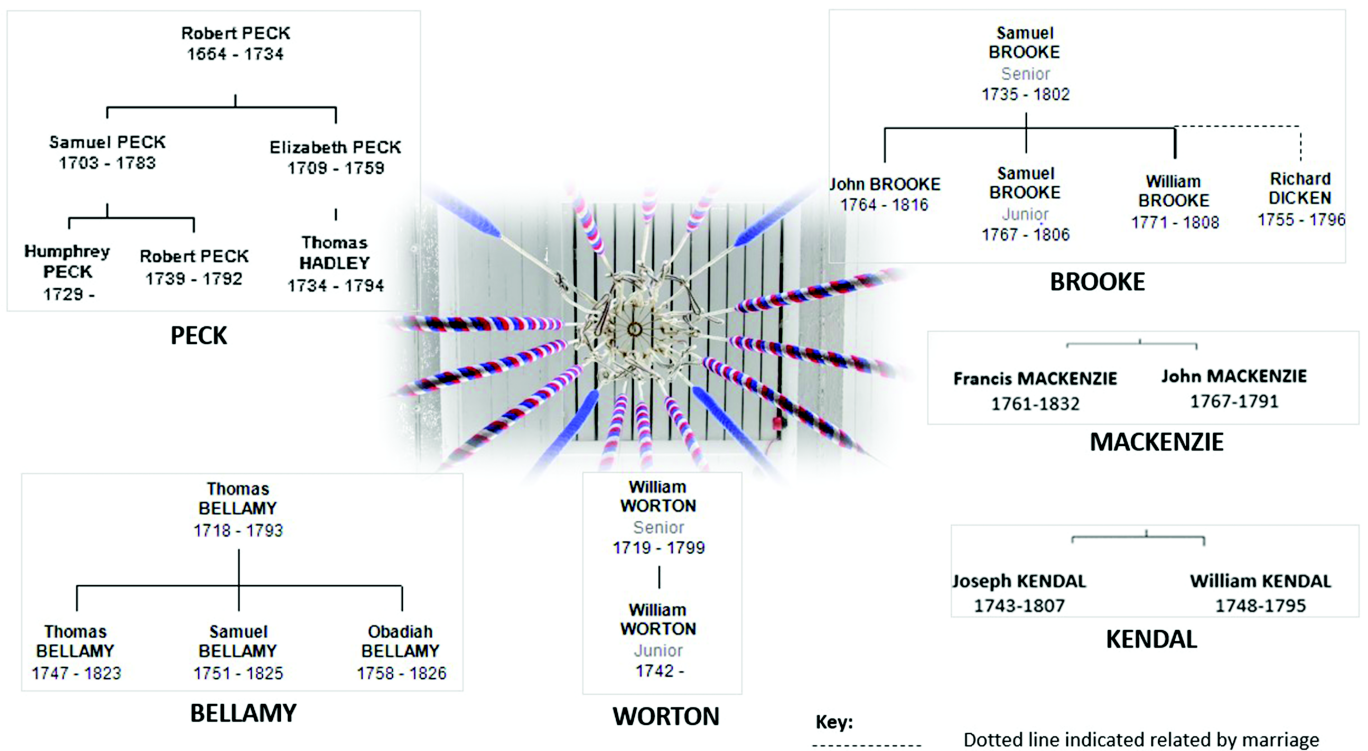


Figure 2. Birmingham Eighteenth Century Ringers: Family Groups.

Bellamy

- The Bellamys were businessmen. Thomas Bellamy senior's (1718–1793) public house, "known by the Sign of the Bell, in Edgbaston-Street", was the venue of a meeting held in 1774 to discuss how the St Martin's ringers might prevent the churchwardens from removing the new treble bells from the tower;^{38,39,40,41} he does not appear in ringing records but his role in the meeting and wider family associations bring him within the sphere of the ringers. His sons, Thomas Bellamy junior (1747–1823), Samuel Bellamy (1751–1825) and Obadiah Bellamy (1758–1826) were elected to ASCY in 1786, along with two of their apprentices (see later).^{42,43,44,45,46,47,48} Thomas senior was a publican until about 1780 when directories and newspapers mentioned "Thomas Bellamy & Son", japanners of Edgbaston Street, which were references to Thomas's senior and junior.^{49,50,51} The japanning business was continued by Thomas junior and later became a shared enterprise between the brothers.⁵² The driving force in the family appears to have been the second son, Samuel, who began working life as an engraver/ die sinker.^{53,54,55} In 1777 he took out a patent for the decorative stamping of plated metals, considered to have been significant in the trade at that time.^{56,57} From the 1780s Samuel was also involved with his brothers' separate buckle making and japanning businesses, with several separate enterprises operating under the Bellamy name from what appears to be Samuel's premises at 53 Moor Street.^{58,59} The brothers later opened a japanning showroom in Freeman Street.⁶⁰ James Bisset rated the Bellamys as among the chief button, buckle and japanning manufacturers in the town and named them in a list that included Henry Clay, known as 'Japanner in ordinary to His Majesty and to His Royal Highness the Princes of Wales'.^{61,62} Obadiah set out as a toy maker and then became a button maker; in later years he was a clerk to a mill and, more latterly, appeared to have been employed in the family japanning business.^{63,64,65} "Oby Bellamy" was afforded a full page in Bisset's memoirs, and Bisset related how Obadiah's beautiful singing voice led to him "... becoming a constant frequenter of Taverns, & Ale houses ... which ultimately tended to the ruin of his Business ..."⁶⁶

Brooke

- The Brooke family comprised five ringers. Samuel Brooke senior (1735–1802) came from Madeley, Shropshire, and his peal ringing career with the St Martin's Youths lasted from 1755 until 1782.^{67,68} He was elected to ASCY in 1786 and subscribed to *Clavis* for six copies in 1788, presumably so that he could sell them on to other ringers. Samuel accumulated several occupations, beginning as a short cutler (1760), then becoming a publican and victualler (1770) and ultimately adding the role of parish clerk at St Martin's (1782), living in Moat Row throughout.^{69,70,71,72} His oldest son John (1764–1816) worked in the Bellamy's paint shop as a young man, alongside James

Bisset,^{73,74,75} later he set up as an independent painter and gilder before becoming a lottery agent and a dealer in tea, coffee and wines.^{76,77,78} He joined ASCY in 1786. The middle son, Samuel Brooke junior (1767–1806), was a stationer and was elected to ASCY in 1798 but does not otherwise appear in ringing records.^{79,80,81} Youngest son, William Brooke (1771–1808), rang his first peal and was elected to ASCY in 1789, before moving to London where he was a lottery agent, married and rang fairly regularly with ASCY from 1792–1808.^{82,83,84,85,86} Samuel senior's eldest daughter, Mary (1765–1818), married the ringer Richard Dicken (1755–1796) in 1788.^{87,88,89,90} Richard was a neighbour in Moat Row and a wealthy builder.^{91,92} He was elected to ASCY in 1786 and subscribed to *Clavis*.

Peck

- The Peck family had a long-standing connection with St Martin's. Robert Peck senior (1664–1734) was a blacksmith and a sexton at St Martin's.^{93,94} He came to the attention of the authorities in 1724 for "... *the insolent behaviour ... [of arranging for a band to ring] the bells on ... pretence of a wedding ... believe[d] to be a mark of [his] disaffection to the government.*"⁹⁵ His son Samuel Peck (1703–1783) was the father of the peal ringers Humphrey Peck (b. 1729) and Robert Peck junior (1739–1792) and it seems very likely that he was a ringer.^{96,97,98,99,100} Humphrey rang in the first three peals in Birmingham between 1755–1768; he was a 'Toyman', making small decorative objects, and was later described as a smith.^{101,102} Robert junior was a jobbing smith and rang in three peals between 1773–1776.¹⁰³ The ringer Thomas Hadley (1734–1794) was related to the Pecks through his mother, Elizabeth Hadley, née Peck (1709–1759) – she was Robert Peck senior's youngest daughter and Humphrey and Robert junior's aunt.^{104,105,106,107,108}

Kendal

- Joseph Kendal junior (1743–1807) and William Kendal (1748–1795) were part of a large family of jobbing smiths/ blade makers, based in Deritend.^{109,110,111,112} Their father, Joseph Kendal senior (1715–1764), was a blade forger and owned property in Deritend, Yardley, Aston and Kings Norton.^{113,114} Joseph junior, the eldest son, succeeded to his father's business and property and was listed in directories variously as a smith, maker of knife blades and pinking shears and he appears on jurors lists between 1782–1806 as a blade forger, hammer maker, whitesmith, bit maker, cutler and steel toy maker;^{115,116,117,118} he joined ASCY in 1786. His younger brother, William, was apprenticed as a short cutler to Samuel Brooke (above) in 1760, but does not otherwise appear in occupational records - possibly as a younger son he was eclipsed by his older brother.¹¹⁹ William rang in five peals between 1773–1786.

Mackenzie

- Francis Mackenzie (1761–1832) and John Mackenzie (1767–1794) were brothers.^{120,121,122,123} From 1785–1789 John rang 10 peals and Francis rang in three. Little is known about them (see later for more about John).

Worton

- Father and son, William Worton senior (1719–1799) and William Worton junior (b. 1742), were smiths and church chime makers.^{124,125,126,127,128} William senior joined ASCY in 1772 (the second known Birmingham member) and William junior joined ASCY in 1786 and subscribed to *Clavis* in 1788. William senior made a set of musical chimes at St Martin's in about 1761 and it is presumed that they were repaired by William junior in 1797.¹²⁹ The Wortons also carried out work in Coventry and Warwick and the family business continued in Coventry for several later generations.¹³⁰

Four other groups of 'same surname' people might be related but it has not been possible to connect them through records. John Thompson (b. 1739), Joseph Thompson (1732–1816) and William Thompson rang together in the first peal in 1755;^{131,132,133} Joseph and William also rang in later peals. John and Joseph are partly identified, but William's identity remains elusive among an array of same-name men in Birmingham at the time. Other potential family groups are men with the surnames Smith, Wilson and Newman: an association of surname and shared ringing history strongly supports the idea that they were related but is insufficient by itself to form firm conclusions.

Occupations

Occupational information was found for 55 per cent of the ringers. More than 50 distinct trades or jobs were recorded and 28 men had more than one occupation, of which 17 held two or more distinct occupations concurrently. Of first identified occupations there were 15 metal workers, five toy makers, four engravers, three book keepers and three men with parish roles (Table 1). Many ringers worked in family businesses and the records indicate that 14 ringers worked in their father's occupations, mainly in metal work trades, and the sons of at least four ringers continued their fathers' businesses into the next generation. The information resonates with the description of Birmingham in the eighteenth-century as "*The City of a Thousand Trades*", including the concentration of metal workers.¹³⁴

Table 1. Birmingham Eighteenth-Century Ringers – Primary Occupations (Simplified).

Occupation	No
Metal Worker (a)	15
Toy Maker (b)	5
Engraver/ Die Sinker	4
Book Keeper	3
Parish	3
Artist	2
Victualler/ Publican	2
Baker	1
Brush Maker	1
Builder	1
Clock Maker	1
Factor	1
Farmer	1
Firework Maker	1
Gun Maker	1
Japanner	1
Jeweller	1
Lottery Agent	1
Organ Builder	1
Stationer	1
Weaver	1

Notes:

Shows first recorded occupation.

(a) Metal Worker includes: Brass Caster, Brass Founder, Smith, Sword Blade Forger, Short Cutler, Plater.

(b) Toy Maker includes: Toy Maker, Buckle Maker and Button Maker.

Sources: Marriage registers, burial records, death notices, directories and *Day's Recollections*.

Joseph Neale (1723–1814) was mentioned by Day as “... a very old man, and ... the last survivor of the men ... present at the opening of *St. Martin's bells in 1758*”.^{135,136,137,138} He was concurrently a self-taught firework maker, beadle and town crier and he staged firework displays at the Vauxhall Gardens in Birmingham, counting the industrialist Matthew Boulton among his customers.^{139,140,141} His 1801 price list included ‘a *Wheel, call'd The Globe & Punch Bowl*’, which cost £1 11s. 6d. (c. £114 in 2022 prices).¹⁴² In August 1809, when he was 86, an advertisement for one of his displays stated that “... for this Night only, [*Joseph Neale will*] walk about the Green with three Vertical Wheels running round on the Top of his Head.”¹⁴³

James Bisset (1761–1832) reinvented himself many times.¹⁴⁴ He was born in Perth, Scotland, and came to Birmingham in 1776 to join his older brother in his warehouse. He quickly realised that, having no head for numbers, he was not suited to the work. As he enjoyed drawing his brother apprenticed him to the japanner, Thomas Bellamy (see earlier).¹⁴⁵ Bisset's job was to paint flowers, insects and other decorations on 1,700 boxes a week. Afterwards he became a miniatures painter, inventing a way of painting on the inside of convex glass that attracted the custom of Catherine the Great.¹⁴⁶ Bisset went on to produce medals, sell pictures, become a collector and, in the 1790s, opened a shop and museum on New Street.¹⁴⁷ In 1800 he published the first edition of his *Magnificent Directory*, which had elaborate copperplate engravings and was intended to be “... both useful, elegant, and ornamental”.^{148,149}

Apprenticeship records provide a different perspective to other occupational information as apprenticeships were also potentially lucrative for apprentice masters. Jeweller Thomas Hadley took on nine apprentices between 1759–1764 for fees of variously between £20–£52 (£3,000–£7,000, 2022 prices).¹⁵⁰ Bisset was said to have taken on apprentices for fees of 200 guineas (about £25,000, 2022 prices).¹⁵¹

Parish Roles

Ten ringers had parish roles of sorts, such as parish clerk, sexton or churchwarden, usually as well as other jobs (Table 2).^{152,153,154,155} Some roles were passed down in families, for example, Samuel Peck (father of peal ringers Humphrey and Robert) followed in his father's footsteps as sexton at St Martin's after Robert senior died.¹⁵⁶ Samuel Brooke senior was appointed as parish clerk when his nephew, the previous incumbent, moved to Wolverhampton; his son John later became a sexton at St Martin's.^{157,158,159} It is no surprise that these roles were sometimes held by ringers since sextons and parish clerks were often responsible for making the tower available for ringing.¹⁶⁰ The roles were remunerated and Charles Bingham (1763–1840) mentioned that the amount “seldom exceeded twenty Pounds per Annum” (about £1,500, 2022 prices), implying that the additional income might have been a small incentive to post holders.^{161,162,163}

Table 2. Birmingham Eighteenth Century Ringers – Parish Roles.

Name	Parish Role	Dates
Robert PECK snr (1664–1734)	Sexton, St Martin's	to 1734
Samuel PECK (1703–1783)	Sexton, St Martin's	1734–1783
Joseph NEALE (1723–1814)	Beadle, St Martin's	1780–1814
Samuel BROOKE snr (1735–1802)	Parish Clerk, St Martin's	1783–1802
John BROOKE (1764–1816)	Sexton, St Martin's	1802–1816
Benjamin BAYLISS (1767–1828)	Grave Digger/ Beadle, St Philip's	1800–1801 (a)
Obadiah BELLAMY (1758–1826)	Sexton, St Martin's	c. 1816–1826
Charles BINGHAM (1763–1840)	Sexton, St Philip's	1814–1840
William MARTIN (1766–1849)	Vestry Clerk and Sexton, St James's Ashted	1799–1849
William NEWMAN (1754–1814)	Beadle, St Bartholomew's Chapel	1787–1814 (b)
Alexander SANDERS (1756–1837)	Beadle, St Martin's	1797–1837
Thomas HADLEY (1734–1794)	Churchwarden, St Martin's	1781

Notes:

Sexton: Responsible for church and churchyard maintenance, digging graves and ringing bells for specific occasions.

Beadle: Responsible for ushering, making reports and assisting with religious functions.

Parish/ Vestry Clerk: Assists clergy.

Churchwarden: Responsible for the fabric of the church and keeping accounts.

(a) Date shown in Directories but Day infers that Bayliss's tenure in the role was longer.

(b) Obituary in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* states Newman was 27 years Beadle of St Bartholomew's Chapel. Dates assume he died in post.

Sources: Marriage registers, burial records, death notices, directories and Day's *Recollections*.

The 1791 Riots

Three ringers had walk-on parts in the Birmingham Riots in July 1791. In the disturbances rioters attacked and/ or burned four dissenting chapels, twenty-seven houses, and several businesses. The riots started in reaction to a banquet held in sympathy with the French Revolution at Dadley's Hotel on the afternoon of 14 July 1791.¹⁶⁴ James Bisset was vice-president at the dinner, where he sang a song he had written for the occasion. He said that nothing occurred during the event that gave rise to any pretext for the later disturbances and, although he was the last to leave the hotel, he heard nothing about the riot until late that night.¹⁶⁵ In the evening, after Bisset had left and even though all the guests had gone, crowds gathered in front of the hotel and broke windows and damaged furniture. Then they moved to the New Meeting House in Moor Street, which was burnt down, and then destroyed the Old Meeting House in Worcester Street.¹⁶⁶

That evening Joseph Neale was returning from a firework display and came across the rioters while they were burning the New Meeting House. He was also the custodian of the town's fire engines in his capacity as parish beadle and rioters threatened to destroy both him and the engines if he brought them out. Later that evening some gentlemen came to his door demanding he take the engines to the Old Meeting House and, as he did not then have the keys, he referred them to Samuel Brooke senior; Brooke in turn informed the men that he was forbidden from delivering the engines without an order from the churchwardens. The gentlemen returned later with a written order and the engines were fetched but in the event Neale was then ordered to take them back as by then they were of no use and he would have risked his life to use them.¹⁶⁷

The Younger Peal Bands

Birth year (where known) was combined with peal records to calculate the age of the ringers in each peal. Although some age data is missing, a combined average age can be inferred for each peal band over the period. The results show observable differences in the inferred average ages of peal bands and analysis allows inferences to be drawn about how ringing developed in Birmingham in the eighteenth-century (Chart 1).

Several trends are highlighted in the chart:

- The trend line for the first three peals shows an average age increase of 12 years over a 13-year period, reflecting the 'Natural Ageing' of the core group of men taking part.
- An interrupted run of 14 peals rung by younger bands between October 1785 and October 1793 ('Younger Peal Bands') (see later).
- Two peals by older peal bands in March and September 1800, where the average age of the ringers in the peals was about 41 ('Oldest Peal Bands').

The 'Younger Peal Bands' peals took place between October 1785 and October 1793 (Chart 1). Peal ringing requires teamwork, numeracy and concentration and there is sometimes a perception that the change ringers of the past needed to be very experienced in order to ring successful peals.¹⁶⁸ The inferred average ages of the *Younger Peal Bands* range from 19.6 years in October 1785, to 24.2 years in December 1789 (also consistent with natural ageing), and suggests that these young men picked up change ringing reasonably quickly.

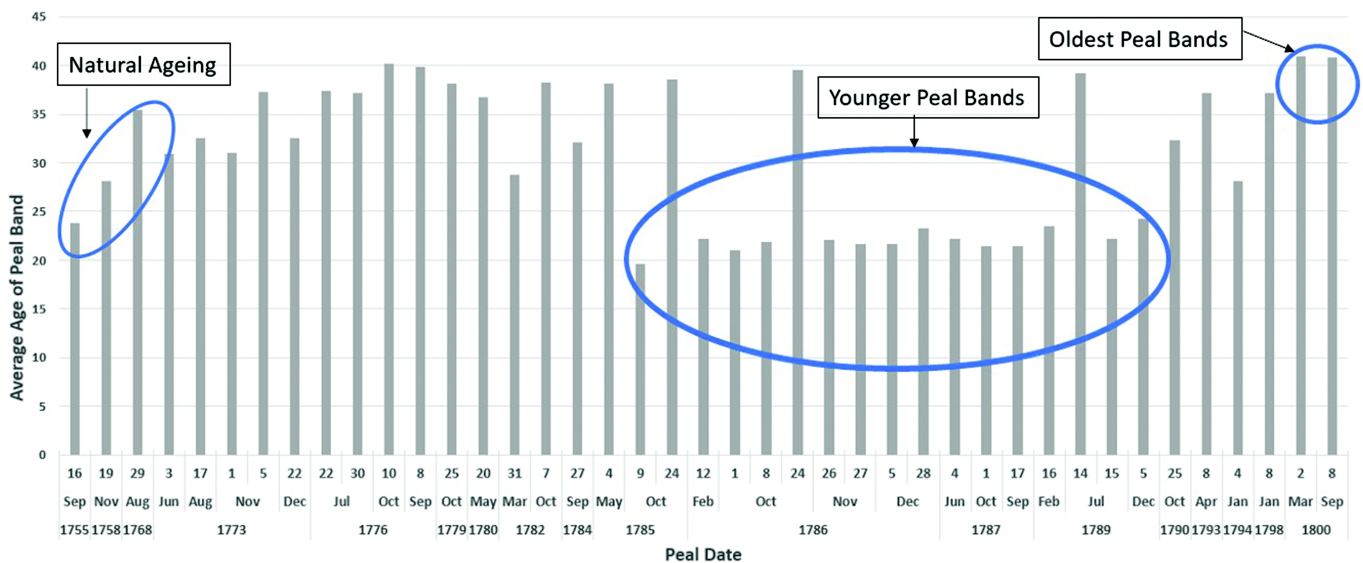


Chart 1. St Martin's Youths - Average Age by Peal, 1755–1800.

William Bennett (1759–1833), a brass caster, was the only man to ring in each of the 14 peals and was consistently the oldest participant.^{169,170} Bennett's attendance and relative seniority may imply that he convened the peals although, as with several other participants, the October 1785 peal was his first recorded peal. John Black (1767–1791), John Mackenzie (1767–1794) and Charles Shuter (1768–1812) rang their first peals when they were about 18 and between them rang in, composed and/or conducted most of the *Younger Peal Bands'* peals.^{171,172,173,174} Shuter was a sword blade forger;¹⁷⁵ Black and Mackenzie's occupations are unknown. Presumably they had a strong grasp of mathematics but quite probably they had received only a rudimentary mathematical education. Shuter rang his first peal when he was 17 and was distinguished in 1790, aged 22, by composing and conducting the first peal of Stedman Caters outside of London. Despite these feats Day says he never "... heard anyone speak of him as having known him".¹⁷⁶

Inferences can also be drawn about the quality of relationships outside of the tower. John Black married Elizabeth Wright in 1788 and the witnesses were John Mackenzie and the ringer William Newman (1754–1814).¹⁷⁷ Black died in June 1791 and, three months later in September 1791, Charles Shuter married Black's widow; this time the ringer Daniel Veisey (1741–1831) was a witness.¹⁷⁸ Taken together they imply that there were close friendships between the men.

Black and Mackenzie died prematurely, aged 24 and 27 respectively; Shuter died in 1812, aged 44 and, despite his early promise as a composer and conductor his last recorded peal with St Martin's was in April 1793. He was elected to ASCY in 1797 and last mentioned in the Account Book in 1805. The analysis poses the question of whether, had Black and Mackenzie lived longer, and had Shuter continued to ring peals with the St Martin's Youths, ringing history might have developed differently.

The Ancient Society of College Youths (ASCY)

ASCY played a leading role in developing change ringing and during the latter half of the eighteenth-century it vastly increased its membership, particularly among 'country members'.¹⁷⁹ The Birmingham jeweller, Thomas Hadley, is the first identified Birmingham man to have been elected as a member of ASCY in 1771. It seems possible that, particularly before the Birmingham Assay Office was established in 1773, he may have had business connections in London.^{180,181}

ASCY visited Birmingham in October 1786 and during the visit twenty Birmingham men were elected to ASCY, of whom 14 are not in peal records.¹⁸² Nine other Birmingham men were elected to ASCY in 1789 and 1798.¹⁸³ Ten of the 19 men elected to ASCY in 1786 were connected outside of ringing, through family, occupational and/or social networks, suggesting a wider sense of community among the ringers (Figure 3).

Eight Birmingham ASCY members came from two families (also see Figure 2):

- The Brookes: Samuel senior, his son John and future son in law, Richard Dicken, were elected to ASCY in 1786; youngest son William was elected in 1789; Samuel junior was elected in 1798.
- The Bellamys: Thomas junior, Samuel, and Obadiah were elected in 1786.

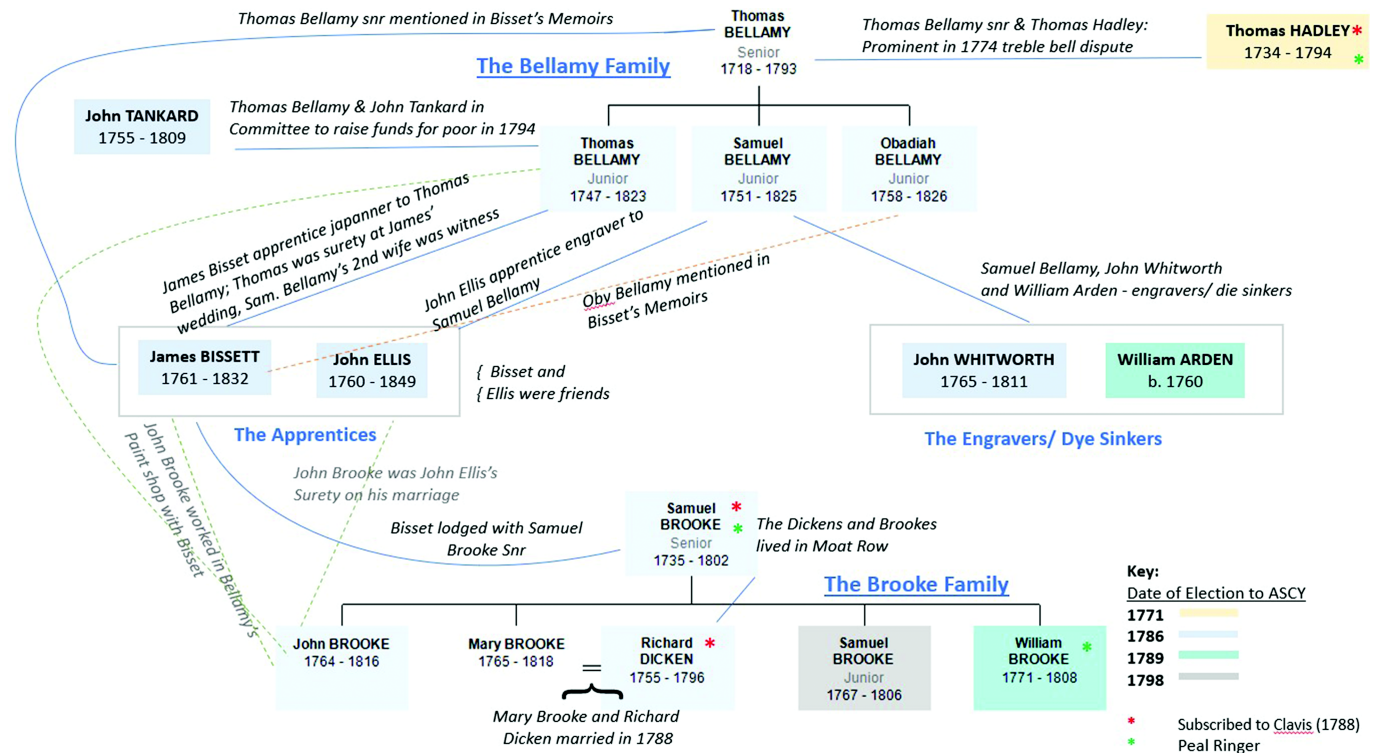


Figure 3. Social Networks and Connections between Birmingham Ancient Society of College Youths Members, 1771–1798.

Other connections were occupational and social:

- The Apprentices: James Bisset and John Ellis (1760–1849) were respectively apprenticed to Thomas Bellamy junior and Samuel Bellamy.^{184,185,186} Bisset’s brother lived opposite the Bellamys in Edgbaston Street and Bisset described Thomas Bellamy as his brother’s friend. Bisset and other apprentices lived with the Bellamys who took good care of them including, it seems, involving them in ringing.¹⁸⁷ When Bisset married in 1787 his surety was his old apprentice master, Thomas Bellamy, and one of the witnesses, Elizabeth Batty, later became Samuel Bellamy’s second wife.^{188,189} Bisset described his fellow apprentices as “... pleasant young gentlemen, and very agreeable companions & acquaintances...” and he mentioned Ellis as a particular friend.^{190,191} John Brooke, Samuel Brooke senior’s oldest son, also worked in the paint shop with Bisset and Ellis and when Ellis married in 1784, John Brooke was his surety.¹⁹²
- Lodgers: Bisset lodged with Samuel Brooke senior after his apprenticeship “... at the rate of seven shillings per week. Whilst I continued with Mr Bellamy, my old master, I was only charged six shillings ...”¹⁹³ This infers a link between the Bellamys and the Brookes, although as a publican, it may have been normal practice for Brooke.
- Engravers/ Die Sinkers: Samuel Bellamy, John Whitworth (1741–1795) and William Arden (b. 1760), were engravers and die sinkers and elected to ASCY in 1786.^{194,195} Birmingham had more engravers than any comparable town at that time and it is more than likely that the men knew each other through business.¹⁹⁶
- Committee Men: John Tankard (1755–1809) was a merchant and in 1794 he sat on a committee convened to relieve the distress of the poor with Thomas Bellamy junior.^{197,198,199}
- Tower Business: Thomas Hadley was the spokesman for the ringers at the meeting held at Thomas Bellamy senior’s public house in September 1774 to consult on the proposed removal the new treble bells from the tower by churchwardens.²⁰⁰

Among the men who joined ASCY in 1786 were Michael Woodward (1753–1832), an organ builder/ music seller based in Bull Street, and the chime maker, William Worton junior.^{201,202,203,204} Possibly Woodward and Worton’s association with ASCY had a commercial dimension - Worton’s entry in *Clavis* in 1788 stands out as one of several tradesmen whose names were capitalised, presumably as a form of advertising.

Demographic Observations

Genealogical and other information from the study was used to generate a range of demographic analyses, allowing a more granular understanding of the ringers, as individuals and as a group. The results are of general interest but should not be over-generalised as data is incomplete.

Birth Years and Age at Death

Birth dates ranged from Joseph Neale, born in 1723, to William Hassall, born in around 1775.²⁰⁵ During the second half of the eighteenth-century life expectancy was about 37;²⁰⁶ however, of the ringers whose age on death was known, nearly 65 per cent were aged over 60 when they died (Chart 2).

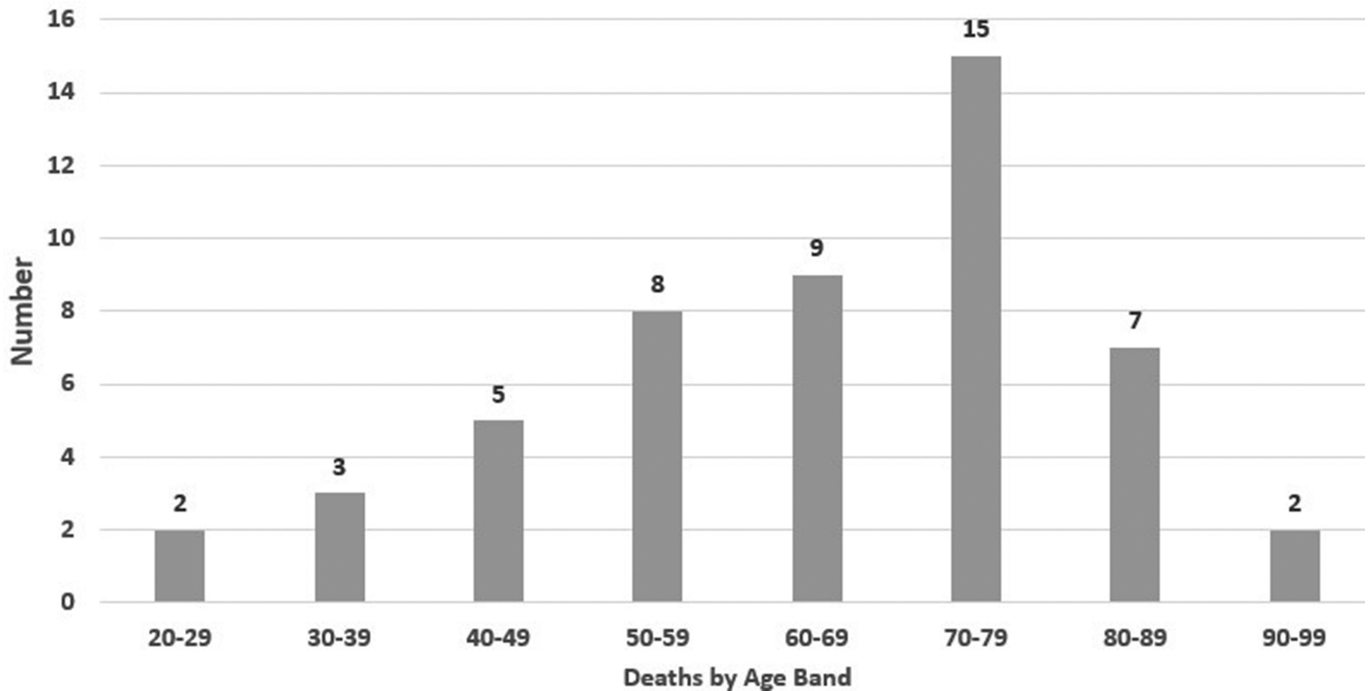


Chart 2. Birmingham Eighteenth Century Ringers – Age on Death.

Fifteen men were aged between 70–79 when they died; seven were aged between 80–89 and two – Joseph Neale (91) and Daniel Veisey (90) – were over 90.²⁰⁷ Several men continued to ring in peals with St Martin’s after they had reached the age of 60 (Table 3).

Table 3. Saint Martin’s Youths - Peals Rung by Men Aged Over 60.

Names	Duration of Ringing Career	Peals Rung Aged 60+		Years Between Last Peal and Death	Last Mention in Accounts Book
		Date	Age		
St Martin’s Youths					
Daniel VEISEY (1741–1831) (a)	1768–1816	1802–1816	61–75	15	1824
Joseph NEALE (1723–1814)	1758–1789	1789	66	25	1808
Alexander SANDERS (1756–1837)	1782–1825	1816–25	60–69	12	1830
William BENNETT (1759–1833) (b)	1785–1821	1819–21	60–62	12	1833
Visitors (c) – Peals rung with the St Martin’s Youths					
James DOVEY - Stourbridge (1746–1827)	1776–1823	1814–23	68–77	4	
Stephen HILL - Coventry (1747–1826)	1776–1819	1807–19	60–72	7	
Samuel LAWRENCE - Shifnal (1763–1825)	1786–1823	1823	60	2	

Notes:

(a) Listed in the Account Book as “Ill” from Mar 1822– 18 Apr 1824.

(b) Listed in the Account Book as “ill” in Oct 1828.

(c) ‘Visitors’ were men known to have been permanently based at other towers who were identified as having rung in Saint Martin’s Youths’ peals.

Daniel Veisey was 75 when he rang his last peal with St Martin's. The oldest members of the St Martin's band stopped peal ringing more than 10 years before they died, although the *Account Book* confirmed that they continued as band members after their peal careers ended. Interestingly, a number of visitors, that is, men who are known to have been permanently based at other towers and rang occasionally with the St Martin's Youths, continued to ring in St Martin's peals when they were aged over 60. Samuel Lawrence of Shifnal, Shropshire, rang his last peal with St Martin's when he was 60, only two years before he died; James Dovey of Stourbridge, Worcestershire, rang his last peal with St Martin's about four years before he died, albeit that the St Martin's peals he rang in his last 10 years were all relatively close to home at Bromsgrove (1816), Dudley (1819, 1820), and Stourbridge (1820, 1822, 1823). The fact that these visitors had enduring relationships with St Martin's implies something about the standing of the band at the time.

Social Standing

A range of sources were used as proxy indicators of the ringers' social standing in Birmingham:

- Jurors Lists: An annual return of persons aged between 21 and 70 qualified to serve on juries was made to Quarter Sessions. The qualification was possession of freehold or copyhold land to the value of £6 per annum.²⁰⁸ Nineteen men were identified on jurors' lists.
- Hair Powder Certificates: Powdered hair and wigs were associated with status in the eighteenth-century. Hair Powder Duty was introduced in 1795 and an annual certificate cost one guinea, hastening the near death of hair powder.²⁰⁹ Ten men were identified on hair powder duty returns.
- Probate, Wills and Property Ownership: Probate deals with a person's estate after their death and occurred in fewer than 10 per cent of English households before 1858.²¹⁰ The value of an estate is an indication of the deceased's financial standing, although estate values are inconsistently stated in probate documents; wills also sometimes described the land and buildings included in estates. Probate documents were found for 14 men. Thomas Hadley made cash gifts alone of £5,500 (worth c. £560,000 in 2022) and listed unvalued freehold and other property.²¹¹

'Social standing' information was found for 24 men (Table 4):

Table 4. Birmingham Eighteenth Century Ringers - Proxy Sources, Social Standing.

Names	Gent/ Esq	Juror	Hair Powder Duty	Probate	Will £ ^(a) ^(b)	Property Owner
John ARCHER (1725–1777)	Gent	√	–	√	NK	√
William ARDEN (b. 1760)	–	√	–	–	–	–
Obadiah BELLAMY (1758–1826)	Gent	√	√	√	£16,000	√
Samuel BELLAMY (1751–1825)	–	√	√	√	£36,000	–
Thomas BELLAMY Snr (1718–1793)	–	√	–	–	–	–
Thomas BELLAMY Jnr (1747–1823)	–	–	√	–	–	–
James BISSET (1761–1832)	Gent	√	√	√	NK	√
John BROOKE (1764–1816)	–	√	√	√	£1,500	–
Samuel BROOKE Snr (1735–1802)	Gent	–	√	√	£12,000	√
Samuel BROOKE Jnr (1767–1806)	–	–	√	–	–	–
James DEAN (1765–1811)	–	√	–	–	–	–
Richard DICKEN (1755–1796)	–	√	–	√	£86,000	√
John ELLIS (1760–1849)	–	√	–	–	–	–
Thomas HADLEY (1734–1794)	Esq	√	–	√	>£560,000	√
Joseph KENDAL (1743–1807)	–	√	√	√	–	√
Alexander SANDERS (1756–1837)	–	–	–	√	£128,000	–
Charles SHUTER (1768–1812)	–	–	–	√	£12,000	–
John TANKARD (1755–1809)	–	√	√	√	£92,000	√
Joseph THOMPSON (1732–1792)	–	√	–	√	£227,000	–
Daniel VEISEY (1741–1831)	–	√	–	–	–	–
John WHITWORTH (1741–1795)	–	√	–	√	–	–
Erasmus WILSON (1753–1809)	–	√	–	–	–	–
Michael WOODWARD (1753–1832)	–	√	√	–	–	–
William WORTON Snr (1719–1799)	–	√	–	–	–	–

Notes:

‘–’ indicates no information found for the individual in data set.

(a) Values given in 2022 rounded prices using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator.

(b) ‘NK’ indicates probate occurred but no value stated.

Four men were inconsistently referred to as '*gentleman*' in records: John Archer (1725–1777) was listed as "*Gent (late Baker)*" on Jurors Lists between 1772–1776, when he ceased to be listed on them as a baker, although his will indicates that his baking business had continued;^{212,213} Samuel Brooke senior was only referred to as '*gentleman*' in his daughter's marriage allegation, but not otherwise;²¹⁴ Obadiah Bellamy's will described him as a '*gentleman*', but during his lifetime he seemed to have been described by his occupation;²¹⁵ Bisset seems to only have been termed '*gentleman*' after he moved to Leamington Spa.²¹⁶ Hadley alone was referred to as '*Esq*', and then only in *Clavis*, otherwise he was identified by his occupation. He set out as a jeweller, later diversifying as a buckle chape maker and merchant.^{217,218,219}

'Social standing' information is inconclusive, but it provides context about the standing of some men and adds colour, for example, by reminding us that at that time some men wore powdered wigs. Combining this information with occupational information (Table 1) tends to support the idea that many of the men broadly achieved their standing through their own efforts.

Conclusions

The project builds on the work of others, most notably, Richard Jones, who has been instrumental in preserving and sharing the history of the St Martin's Guild. The study grew out of a request to research the names of a few eighteenth-century Birmingham ringers and has become an in-depth study of the men who rang in Birmingham at an interesting time in the town's history. Combining ringing and genealogical sources has brought new insights to the early history of the development of change ringing in Birmingham.

The article is high level but, even so, it conveys the breadth and depth of the findings and a sense of the eighteenth-century Birmingham ringers. Birmingham smiths, the Pecks, provided three generations of Birmingham ringers including sexton Robert Peck who in 1724 used the bells to make loud protest about the Government. Founder member of the St Martin's Youths and parish clerk, Samuel Brooke senior, came from Madeley, Shropshire, providing another generation of ringers, and his youngest son, William Brooke, went on to ring with ASCY in London. The ringers included metal workers, toy makers and engravers giving a sense that they were very much part and parcel of the eighteenth-century "*City of a Thousand Trades*"; they also included the self-taught firework maker, Joseph Neale and artist, James Bisset. The roles of Bisset, Neale and Brooke in the 1791 Birmingham Riots place the ringers within Birmingham's wider local historical context.

Close analysis of peal records by age revealed the '*Younger Peal Bands*' who rang 14 peals in just over four years at a time when peals were still rare, challenging a perception that successful peal ringers of the past were older men. In the 1780s, several newspaper references to peals rung by young bands in other places seldom included names, so it is difficult to clarify exactly what was meant in terms of age. What does seem to be unusual about the '*Younger Peal Bands*' phenomenon in Birmingham is the number and quality of peals that it rang.²²⁰ Genealogical sources made it possible to draw inferences about the quality of relationships between ringers. John Black, John Mackenzie and Charles Shuter rang their first peals when they were about 18 and between them, rang composed and/ or conducted most of the '*Younger Peal Bands*' peals. In 1788 Mackenzie witnessed Black's marriage and, later, Shuter married Black's widow. Black and Mackenzie died relatively young in their mid-20s, and Shuter rang his last peal with the St Martin's Youths in April 1793, aged 26. Perhaps ringing history would have been different had Black and Mackenzie had lived longer and Shuter had continued ringing peals.

Some ringers had occupational and social connections. The Bellamys, businessmen with interests in japanning and engraving, were elected to ASCY in 1786, as were their apprentices, James Bisset and John Ellis, and as was John Brooke (Samuel Brooke's son) who worked in their paint shop; engravers John Whitworth and William Arden also joined ASCY, and were most likely connected through business with fellow engraver, Samuel Bellamy. Many ringers were long lived and, of those with age information, nearly 65 per cent were aged over 60 when they died, compared with average life expectancy of 37 in the latter half of the eighteenth-century. Joseph Neale and Daniel Veisey lived beyond 90 – Veisey rang his last peal aged 75. The records also provide a sense of the financial and social standing of some men, for example, Thomas Hadley, the only ringer known as Esquire, made cash gifts alone of £5.5k (worth c. £560,000 in 2022) in his will, which also listed freehold and other properties in nearby towns.

The research demonstrates the value of using niche sources to enrich the narrative about an eighteenth-century social group. By-products of the project include a database of peals between 1755–1823, a supporting genealogical annex and several supporting research notes. Other material will be made available in due course.

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