

The Bellman's Tale - Part 2

(In the first part of Michael Berning's account, we read of Mrs Mary Shaw's memories of the bells, recorded by her in Grocotts Penny Mail in 1918. The story continues with pen pictures of some of the characters involved)

The original eight bells were first rung on 17th April 1879 and on 23rd, a Ringing Club was formed, probably made up of the men mentioned by Mrs Shaw in her articles.

They were Thomas Sheffield, his 'popular' brother George, A E Nelson, the 'stalwart' R W Nelson 'who does not know him', the 'genial' Lindsay Eddie, Val Davies 'by no means the ninth part of a man', W Schardt and Daniels 'whose Christian name I have forgotten.'

Albert Edward Nelson (1842-1902) and his brother Richard (1837-1906) were southern Irish brothers who came to Grahamstown via Lancashire in 1862. Both were in business locally - AE ran the Cathcart Arms Hotel and a soap factory. They were both heavily involved with volunteer Military activities especially in the Grahamstown Volunteer Horse Artillery and both served long terms on the City Council including serving as Mayor. AE served for three terms the first starting in 1895 and RW for one (1888). They were also Cathedral parishioners and served on the Select Vestry (parish council) and as Churchwarden. RW was a supporter of his fellow Irishman Dean F H Williams in the great Bishop Merriman- Dean Williams dispute as was also his brother. RW Nelson acted at times as a sub-editor on the *Eastern Star* newspaper. They were aged 42 and 37 when the ringing club was formed.

The brothers Thomas (1847-1904) and George (1849-1916) Sheffield came to Grahamstown in 1860 from Kidderminster in Worcestershire and entered the printing and publishing industry rising to their own firm, T & G Sheffield printers and publishers, and their own newspaper, 'The Eastern Star' (1871 onwards). Neither seems to have been involved with the military and Thomas had to decline service on the City Council though he was active in the fraternal world of freemasonry and friendly society. Both men were active in the affairs of the Cathedral. Thomas, who was a long serving member of the Select Vestry, being the more active. The brothers were strong supporters of Dean Williams and 'the old Church' though Thomas was later to be Churchwarden of St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg. The Sheffields left Grahamstown in the period 1887-9 and moved to the brighter lights of the new Goldfields - taking their newspaper with them where it continues as The Star. They were aged 30 and 32 when the ringing club was formed and probably too young to have learnt ringing in England.

Lindsay Atkins Eddie (1845-1913) was Cape born - at the military post where his parents were serving - and does not seem to have studied abroad. His obituary describes him as a 'soldier, doctor and scientist.' In the first capacity he was a member, like the Nelsons, of the Grahamstown Volunteer Horse Artillery and succeeded AE Nelson as commander of the St Aidan's College Cadet Corps, an associated unit. Eddie was a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society and probably shared AE Nelson's interest in 'the working of mechanical apparatus.' He served on the Cathedral Select Vestry for at least 13 years, fellow councillors being both Nelsons and Thomas Sheffield. In August 1879 he spoke at

a parish meeting in support of the position of the Dean. Both Thomas Sheffield and AE Nelson also spoke at the meeting. He was 34 when the ringing club was formed.

Val Davies - George Valentine Davies - was born about 1852 and worked as a tailor & clothier and lived or worked in Hill Street and Cradock Road in the 1880s. He was a Cathedral parishioner - married there in January 1877 (by Dean Williams) and having at least one child baptized there (in 1879 by Dean Williams). He probably had professional connections with the other tailor (& outfitter) in the club - William Schardt. Davies would have been about 27 when the club was formed.

William Schardt seems to have been the old man of the group and probably born about 1821 - unless there was a younger man of the same name. His connections seem to have been with St Bartholomew's rather than the Cathedral. He had a child baptized there in 1879, was a 'sidesman' (i.e. parish councillor) there in 1886 and remarried there in 1889. Other members of the club also had St Barts connections. Thomas Sheffield married there in 1870 and Lindsay Eddie in 1873. Schardt was not a man of blameless reputation by contemporary standards. His child Barbara was baptized with the note by the Rector (Rev CHL Packman) that 'the parents names not declared - believed to be William Schardt and - Langely'. William and his wife stood as sponsors (godparents) though and the baby took Mrs Schardt's name. His business was on the corner of Hill and High Streets which may have been a reason to join rather than just experience the ringing! William could have been over 50 when the club was established.

Of the remaining member, 'Daniels', little can be said with any certainty on present evidence as the surname Daniel(s) was common locally.

It is probable that this club broke up in the late 1880s. The Sheffields left for the Goldfields. William Schardt was living in Port Elizabeth in 1889 and the Nelsons were very heavily involved in civic matters. Dean Williams, who had so much to do with the tower and bells - and it seems the ringers - had died in 1885 and the preoccupations of the Cathedral changed. Unfortunately Mary Shaw was not there to record what did happen as she and her husband left for Cape Town at much the same time. Thomas Sheffield is probably the only local ringer to rate an entry, though a poor one, in the 'Dictionary of South African Biography.' He was included for his contribution to journalism and his book 'The Story of the Settlement' (1882, 1884 & 1912). George Sheffield was probably the only local ringer to be an MP - he was a member of the Transvaal Legislature between the Anglo- Boer War and Union. RW Nelson must have been amongst the few ringers who could have rung a bell bearing his own name - inscribed on the tenor bell as he was a churchwarden in 1878 when it was cast. He was also involved with the construction of the tower itself as Secretary of the Public Clock Tower Committee. It was to RW Nelson that Richard Ryall sent the message in 1878 which both announced the dispatch of the bells from London and concluded with what remains in a sense their mission statement: "May the ... ring of these bells ring in such reforms and changes as will benefit all the people in South Africa and may they send forth their music as an indication of great prosperity, much happiness and lasting peace to all who hear them.'

And with those words ringing in our ears, we say, "Amen" to that.