

Mr. Preston Has Worked For 74 Years Retired At 83, He'll Still Ring The Priory Church Bells

(by C.T. Reporter) August 15, 1952

IT was with sorrow that Mr. George Preston closed the door of number 42, Bridge Street, Christchurch, for the last time on Thursday. For it had been his home for 58 years and now he was leaving it to live in a little house by the side of the river.

Thursday certainly was a momentous day for Mr. Preston. In addition to leaving his home, he was giving up his tailor's business. This week Mr. Preston sat chatting to me in the small garden of his new home, Avon Wharf Cottage, which overlooks the river he loves.

"I am 83," he told me, "and I've been working ever since I was a youngster of nine. My health isn't too good these days, and so I have decided that it's time I retired." However, in Mr. Preston's new home there is a large room with a big table in the centre and a pair of scissors on it, which could if wanted be used as a cutting room ...

Mr. Preston could be said to be one of the true sons of Christchurch, for he was born within sound of the Priory Church bells and has lived here ever since. During all his 83 years those bells have played a large part in his life. He was born in Pound Lane and was one of eight children. Until he was nine he went full-time to the Priory Church School, but he started going half days only when he took on the job of errand boy to Mr. Butler, who used to have a butcher's shop in the High Street. His pay in those days was 3d. a half-day.

SPINE INJURY

It was while he was a lad of eleven that he permanently injured his spine. He broke it while he was pushing a heavy wheelbarrow. "Doctors didn't know anything about fractured limbs in those days," he said. "They told me to wrap flannel round my back, soaked with turpentine, for two months." Mr. Preston did. Now he has a permanently disfigured back. American doctors who examined him during the war described him as a "walking miracle"

He left school at the age of fourteen and went to work for a few months on the railway when the line from Brockenhurst to Bournemouth was being built. He worked twelve hours a day and from 6 a.m. on Saturday until midnight.

It was through Clingan's Charity that Mr. Preston became apprenticed to the tailoring business when he was fifteen years old.

Eventually he set up a tailoring business with the late Mr. Henry Tizzard. He was only 23 at the time and Mr. Tizzard eighteen months older. However, they did well together. They had premises in Purewell first, but later moved to Bridge Street in 1894.

He was married at the age of 26 to Miss Charlotte Sparshott, who died in January, 1941.

Mr. Preston is perhaps better known, not only in Christchurch but in many other parts of the country, as the captain of the Priory bellringers. It was at the age of 17 that he first became interested in bellringing and joined the ringers at the Priory Church

"There were only eight bells then and there was no such thing as change ringing," he told me. The bells increased their fascination for him and he began to study the art of campanology from textbooks.

EXTRA BELLS

Two extra bells were added in 1903 and another two in 1932, making the Priory the only church in Hampshire, except for Winchester Cathedral, to have a peal of twelve bells. However, by 1903 they had started change ringing. Mr. Preston then went on to speak in an authoritative way of the technicalities of Grandsire Triples, Bob Majors, and so on.

He is known throughout the country in the bellringing fraternity and he has rung bells in almost 200 churches in eighteen different counties. This includes Salisbury Cathedral; in his younger days he thought nothing of cycling there and home again. **"I've even rung the famous Bow Bells," he told me,**

and in his home, although not yet on the walls, he has numerous gifts and certificates which he has received in recognition of his services to bellringing. Occupying a prominent position in his sitting room is a Davenport writing bureau. He was given this together with an illuminated address in April, 1937, to celebrate his fiftieth anniversary as a bellringer at the Priory Church. On this occasion an attempt was made to ring 5,280 changes of Bob Maximus, but the ringers failed after ringing 3,000 changes. However, a year later, celebrating the fifty years of service of the late Mr. E. V. Hinton, who died recently, a full peal of Grandsire Caters was rung within three hours thirteen minutes, consisting of 5,039 changes. This was under Mr. Preston's leadership and was a notable achievement.

A NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENT

When Mr. Preston celebrated sixty years of bellringing in July, 1947, he received a letter of congratulation from Dr. Mervyn Haigh, the then Bishop of Winchester. He added: "It is indeed a wonderful record of service and it amazes me that notwithstanding your years and lameness you can still climb the belfry every Sunday."

He has led the ringing at the Priory Church on many memorable occasions, including Queen Victoria's Jubilee. For forty years he was secretary of the Christchurch District of the Winchester Diocesan Guild of Ringers, of which he is now an honorary life member. He also holds life membership of the Salisbury Guild, the Surrey Association, and the Guilds at Oxford, Guildford and the College Youth, London.

When he retired from the Winchester Guild he was presented with a gramophone which still stands in his sitting room.

During his years at the Priory he has met many well-known and interesting people, including Mr. W. J. Jordon, the former High Commissioner for N.Z. On this occasion the Priory bells rang out a special welcome, and afterwards Mr. Jordon spoke to several of the ringers and insisted on being introduced to Mr. Preston.

KEEN FOOTBALLER

However, bellringing has not been Mr. Preston's only pastime. In his young days he was a keen footballer, in spite of his injured spine. He was in the Christchurch football team when they won the Hants Junior Cup for the first time.

He has done a great deal of rowing and shooting, and at one time competed in all the local regattas. He served on Christchurch Regatta committee from its inauguration until 1947.

However, although Mr. Preston is 83 and has lost the use of one of his legs, this does not stop him going out for a short row—which according to him, is to Mudford Beach and back. He has his little boat tied up beneath his sitting room windows.

Asked if he intended to give up bellringing now he had retired, Mr. Preston replied: "No, and I hope it will be a long time before I have to."