

In 1953, my father, Peter O'Connell was teaching at Groton School in Massachusetts. Shortly before he returned to England for the summer vacation, he was invited to direct Groton's Bellingring Society for the autumn term. His understanding of the rules of bell-ringing was minimal but he decided to acquire as much knowledge and skill as possible during his two months in England. Within days of his arrival, he had made an appointment to see Mr. Hughes at Mears and Stainbank. The Whitechapel Bell Foundry, established in 1570, had cast Big Ben, the bells of St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey and the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia.

I spent two fascinating hours with Mr. Hughes who is related to the original family. He received me in his office – a low ceilinged, panelled room with pictures of bells and cathedrals on the walls. He wore a velvet bow tie and reminded me of one of Dickens' Cheeryble brothers. He was most affable and spoke of Groton with affection. He first went there in 1908 and knew Mr. Sturgis well. He thought the ringing execrable. He took me through the foundry and told me countless stories of bells. He also put me in touch with the most suitable ringers from whom I can learn.

The following evening, Peter made his way to Hounslow to meet John Chilcott *a young, eager and charming fellow and one of the finest ringers in the country.* Mr. Chilcott, a senior ringer at St. Paul's Cathedral, had led a four hour peal for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth just a few weeks earlier. He took Peter to a rural church in Cranford to practice on a bell cast in 1380: *It was here I learnt how little I know. They ring very fast and without calling leads or treble plain leads. I failed humiliatingly but everyone was very nice and encouraging. We finished the evening at the Queen's Head with several pints of bass and some hand bell ringing. The association of churches and pubs is very appropriate for a historian. All historians ought to be bell ringers.*

On Sunday, Peter was invited to the bell tower at St. Paul's Cathedral: *Herbert Langdon led a 20 minute touch of Stedman Cinques. It was beautiful ringing and made our little efforts at Groton seem forlorn.* He subsequently accompanied Mr. Hughes back to his home in Whitechapel for lunch: *a solid, old fashioned English meal with sherry served as table wine. What a wonderful old Londoner Mr. H is! He is the perfect Cockney and has a greater claim than most to that proud title. Not only was he born within the sound of Bow Bells but his family cast them.* Peter was diligent about doing his homework. He listened to bell recordings, lent to him by John Chilcott, studied books with titles such as: *Grandsire – the Method, Its Peals, and History* and at odd moments during the day, he rang hand bells in his head, pleased to discover that he could *ring three or four for a plain course of doubles with great ease.* At the invitation of Mr. Hughes, he returned to the Foundry workshop to spend a day observing the casting process: *I watched Ernie Oliver, whose great grandfather cast Big Ben, turning hand bells. I watched the mould makers, clapper and ironwork blacksmiths and carpenters on wheels (elm, ash and oak) and I learnt a lot of value to me personally at Groton.* Peter rang in many different towers during the course of that summer, including the Norman church of St. Bartholomew The Great in Smithfield, which has one of the oldest

peals of bells in the world. After ringing, the little group retired for a pint at The Hand and Shears, reputedly the oldest licensed premises in the city. In spite of Peter's dedication he felt discouraged: *I feel depressed at my slow progress. There is little improvement in my ringing skills and many disappointments but, I shall peg away and I think cope enough to get things on a sound basis next year.*

Peter never became a particularly fluent bell ringer. The frustration he felt about his own shortcomings bled out and swamped the boys at Groton. He complained of their ignorant and loutish behaviour and within two weeks, Bingham and Keyes had told Mr. O'Connell that they didn't much like bell ringing and were quitting. Peter was undaunted and arranged for the school carpenter to build a cabinet for the hand bells. He also took the clapper bolts to the blacksmith in Ayer for repair and asked him to install steel bars in the ringing chamber in order to secure the tower for the boys. Sometimes practice went well: *the boys are beginning to feel the meaning of rhythm and to sense the enjoyment gained from correct ringing and fast clean striking.* From time to time, they came to his study after supper and rang hand bells *We got through Grandsire Doubles double handed, after a bit of a struggle.*

Douglas Brown arrived at Groton as a third former in the autumn of 1953 and joined Peter's bell ringing group. After graduating from Harvard, he spent a decade building church organs before returning to Groton in 1970. As well as teaching woodwork, Doug was also put in charge of bell ringing. He recalls that in the winter of 1972, my father returned to Groton for a visit and complained about the lack of adult supervision in the chapel tower, something Peter considered to be both irresponsible and dangerous. Doug assured him that safety was not being compromised but Peter insisted on climbing the bell tower to reprimand the boys for their folly. They must have been both startled and mystified by the sudden appearance of this hapless Englishman who clearly had neither the authority to be questioning the rules of the school, nor to be scolding its students for what he considered to be improper behaviour.

My father encouraged me to become a bell ringer and, on a few occasions, I joined him in the bell tower at St. Mary and St. Eanswythe in Folkestone but it felt too much like corporal Maths to me. I either lost control of the rope or lost count of the bell calls. This ultimately allowed my father to reign supreme as our family's most accomplished and experienced bell ringer, a status he assumed with pride.

Peter's friendship with Mr. Hughes endured. The latter sent letters, written on elegantly headed, onion-skin notepaper, sharing news of bells and festivals, offering advice on clapper stays and ringing technique and commiserating with my father on his disappointments: *I am sorry to hear that Groton ringing has not been very successful this past year. We are just as busy as ever. In about three weeks we shall be trying out the new twelve, Tenor 34cwt at St. Giles' Cripplegate. I am going to Liverpool next weekend for a ringing 'do' at the Cathedral to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone.* Times were good for the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and, the following year, Mr. Hughes writes: *We are just piled up*

with hand bell orders for the U.S. and the waiting list is now over twelve months. In 1955, Mr. and Mrs. Hughes visited the East Coast of America and were disappointed to learn that Mr. O'Connell was no longer teaching at Groton.

In December 2016, it was announced that, after 450 years, the Whitechapel Bell Foundry was closing. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Hughes attributed its closure to declining trade. The days of being 'piled up' with orders for hand, church and cathedral bells had long gone. I decided to visit the Foundry before it disappeared and was replaced by an exclusive art gallery or a boutique hotel. The building is, much as I had imagined it – a wooden, butterscotch-coloured store front with Palladian windows and brass signs. Inside, glass fronted cabinets showed old photographs of famous bells, including the '9/11 Bell', cast and gifted to the people of New York on the first anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Centre. The inscription reads *To the greater glory of God and in recognition of the enduring links between the City of London and the City of New York. Forged in adversity, 11 September 2001.* My daughters gave me a bronze hand bell from the Foundry on my birthday that year and I decided to order a second one to gift to Doug when I next visited Groton. When he heard the news of the Foundry's closure, he was shocked and visibly saddened. He told me that two representatives from Whitechapel had come to the school in the Spring of 2016 to service the chapel bells. They had removed the clappers, taken them back to London and returned in the autumn to re-install them. Doug wondered whether the Foundry would continue to service bells even if they were no longer casting them. I asked him when, before 2016, Groton's bells had last been overhauled, to which he replied, without a trace of irony 'Oh, about 50 years ago'. Doug said he thought he might build a frame for his hand bell and I was gratified to see that he liked my gift and that it offered him the opportunity to reflect on memories spanning more than six decades.

Peter may not have been the finest nor the most forgiving of bell masters, but Doug had followed his lead up the chapel tower and, in 1972, he accompanied a group of Groton boys on a bell ringing tour of England. They rang at York Minister and visited the Loughborough Bell Foundry, which, following the closure of Whitechapel, became the world's largest working foundry.

Una Suseli O'Connell
www.unaoconnell.co.uk