Sonning Deanery – changing practices

1 Hasn't it always been like that?

If you have never known anything else it's easy to imagine that things have always been done the way they are now. An obvious example is ringing before church services, which within our lives has been a widespread part of the fabric of ringing, but was almost unknown until around 150 years ago. Before that ringing was a mix of secular sport and public entertainment.

Another example is the custom of regular (usually monthly) ringing society practices where members can meet and ring together. Most societies are less than 150 years old and many of them held such practices from the outset, advertising them in *Bell News*. So I was surprised to find this was not true where I ring. The local society ran for several decades without holding any regular ringing practices.

The Sonning Deanery Society was formed in 1880, and it became a branch of the Oxford Diocesan Guild, which was founded the following year. Nearly 30 years later, at the 1910 AGM, there was a discussion about the desirability of setting up '*monthly combined meetings at Branch towers for peal*[1] *ringing and general practice*'.

By the following year '*11 meetings had been held in different parts of the Branch for combined practice*' and they had been '*most successful and in many ways helpful to those who attended*'.

The language makes it clear that this was a new idea, not just refining how an existing activity was organised. And spelling out the purpose as '*for combined practice*' suggests that the idea of doing such a thing wasn't obvious, which it would be now.

That made me wonder: What happened before then? And why would you set up a ringing society that did not encourage its members to ring and practise together?

2 Background

To answer those questions we need to suspend modern assumptions and think back to a different era. The Sonning Deanery Society (and the Oxford Diocesan Guild that subsumed it) were products of the Belfry Reform movement, which created similar societies across the whole country. There were a few ringing societies already but they were based in London and other centres of ringing and catered for a tiny elite rather than for the mass of ordinary ringers. The Reform was driven by the clergy, who largely controlled the societies that they set up. By enrolling all the ringers in an area with their towers brought '*into union*' it was easier for the clergy to exert their influence on ringing and align it with the Church's objectives.

Notably, the decision to form the Sonning Deanery Society was not taken by ordinary ringers, but by a motion of the Deanery Synod: '*That the Bell-ringers of the Deanery be incorporated in a Society for the encouragement of Change Ringing*'. The committee set up form the society consisted of five clergymen and two lay ringers, one of whom also a verger so effectively part of the church establishment.

The explicit objective in the motion was change ringing, which was the overt aim of Belfry Reform, but it was a means to a somewhat wider end, that included reforming ringers' behaviour (which was probably not as bad as they portrayed it, but history is written by the victors). They also wanted to suppress ringing of which they disapproved, which included rounds ringing (ie not methods). They wanted all ringing done for the glory of God not for payment. Introducing ringing for church services diverted ringers' energy towards the church and away from other forms of ringing. It also made it harder not to attend services since they were already there.

The Society's constitution divided ringing members into '*change ringers*' and '*probationers*'[2]. Initially two thirds were probationers[3]. No doubt a few probationers were new learners but most would have been established ringers who had never rung methods. They might have been quite skilful at ringing a bell but they were deemed inferior until they mastered the newly imposed art of change ringing (if they ever did)

Of the seven towers in the Branch in 1881 two had no change ringers at all, and three only had one. Just two towers had more than one: Wargrave and Wokingham St Paul. So in practice the task of 'encouraging change ringing' meant introducing it from scratch in most places, which would be no mean feat.

The Society (and the Guild) seems to have focused on tower bands rather than on individual ringers. For example reports don't have an alphabetical list of members as most organisations might do, but lists of towers with ringers attached to each. Anyone not linked to a tower was listed separately as 'unattached', but unattached ringers were probably discouraged.

That view seems to have been widespread and long lasting. For example in the 1930s, half a century after the onset of Belfry Reform, there was correspondence in

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[1] That can't have meant 'peal' in the sense that we use it.

[2] There were also quite a lot of Honorary members who didn't ring. They were clergy and local gentry who supported the society by paying a significantly larger subscription than ringing members did.

[3] No membership records survive from 1880, the earliest are for 1881 when it became a branch of the ODG.

The Ringing World about whether unattached ringers should be allowed to ring peals, and a proposal in Kent that the Association should not admit unattached ringers. A 1945 editorial decried the existence of unattached members: '*A territorial association does not exist for itself. It is essentially a federation of parochial bands, and its main object is to assist those bands to carry out their local duties and activities*.' That all helps explain the early mindset within Sonning Deanery.

3 Early focus

To establish itself the society had to gain credibility. There would be no pre-existing structure linking ringers across the area, though some ringers would have known ringers from other towers, so the Society targeted tower leaders, through whom they could influence the ringers, virtually all of whom were attached to a tower.

The task of converting so many ringers who had no previous experience of change ringing was best tackled in small groups that could practise regularly,which made the tower band and its weekly practice a natural unit to work with.

The proportion of change ringers increased from one third to two thirds within a couple of years, but it then stalled, and several towers still had no change ringers. In 1885 the secretary complained that '*reports from the leaders of the several belfries did not tell of the progress in Change-Ringing which he had hoped and looked for*' and he reminded ringers not to forget that '*one of the chief objects of the Guild was also "to cultivate the art of Change Ringing"*'.

The Guild hired instructors who visited towers to help them progress, but they were thinly spread. The secretary was not entirely negative though, commenting that '*great improvement had taken place in the tone of the ringers themselves, and the condition of the belfries*'.

A decade on, more still needed to be done, and in 1891 someone suggested that '*3 or 4 experienced ringers might visit neighbouring towers. to help them advance change ringing*'. Perhaps they recognised the inadequacy of occasional visits from an instructor, and it was still focused on tower practices. In 1893 the AGM included '*a few words ... as to the simplest method of instructing beginners in the art of change ringing*', no doubt also aimed at tower captains.

Hiring instructors seems to have been contentious. In 1894 one of the founders sent a letter saying: '*Probationers down from 27 to 20 and change ringers up from 54 to 64*' with '*Not a farthing spent on instruction*'. The minutes of the same AGM record: '*appreciation of the time belfry leaders spent in instruction*' and '*urged the importance of the continuance of systematic instruction, with all possible pains & diligence from both leaders and men*'.

With all this emphasis on developing ringers within each tower the only evidence of collective ringing appears to have been before the meetings, quite possibly in the form of service ringing since meetings were normally accompanied by a service. There were annual meetings (held in Wokingham until 1970) and quarterly meetings, maybe also held in Wokingham because in 1898 the Committee Meeting considered '*holding ringing meetings*[4] *at different towers*', though whether or not they did I don't know.

By the turn of the century over 90% of members were change ringers (97% in 1904). The founders goal was achieved, so time for new ideas. The Chairman was still a priest but the Secretary had been a layman since 1893.

4 Combined practices

At the 1910 AGM there was a discussion about introducing '*monthly combined meetings at Branch towers for peal ringing*[5] *and general practice*', and (as ever) a '*special committee was set up to further the idea*'. So thirty years after its foundation the society hit upon an idea that we would consider obvious, to provide regular opportunities for its members to ring together.

It was clearly successful because the following year: '*11 meetings had been held in different parts of the Branch for combined practice. These had been most successful and in many ways helpful to those who attended*'.

In subsequent years there were 12 practices a year, and they were every 4 weeks[6]. AGM minutes include details of all practices in 1912 & 1913 with: date, place, how many attended, how many towers they represented and the methods that were rung (see Appendix).

Several of the practices included methods rung on handbells. Whether that was standard 'two in hand' ringing or whether it was rung with one bell each is not recorded.

Some practices had '*Tea provided by the Vicar*' (probably not in person) and one practice '*failed because of bad weather*' when only four people turned up.

The practices were organised by a '*Combined Practices Committee*' (which as pointed out by the 1926 minutes record was '*separate from the Branch Committee*') but it's not clear who actually ran the ringing. The Branch

[4] When I began ringing (60 years later in a different part of the country) a 'ringing meeting' was primarily ringing, often with tea and sometimes with a business meeting. But here I assume it refers to the quarterly (and possibly annual) meetings, accompanied by ringing.

[5] That could not mean peal ringing in the normal sense.

[6] Leaving a thirteenth slot in January for the AGM

had no ringing master until 1957 so perhaps the host tower foreman or the secretary ran the ringing.

Over the years some monthly practices were replaced by '*branch meetings*' where the ringing was split before and after tea and a service. Maybe they were similar to AGMs with an hour of ringing before the service and more ringing after the meeting until 9pm.

In 1939 the Committee recommended a one year experiment switching from quarterly to bimonthly meetings, with combined practices in the intervening months, but that doesn't seem to have happened because they held quarterly meetings in March and June and cancelled one in September, and they held ten practices.

After the war, the four week practice cycle changed to monthly. Initially they were on the first Saturday but in 1956 that changed to the third Saturday. What prompted the change, or why it had to be '*for a year as an experiment*', is unclear but it was confirmed the following year and has continued ever since.

5 Attendance

There are few records of how many people attended the practices. Most reports are couched in vague terms like '*well attended*' or '*poorly attended*' but a few figures were reported. World War I came a few years after Combined Practices started but after the war practices were reported as '*held at nearly every tower*' and mostly '*successful*' or '*fairly well attended*'.

At the 1932 AGM it was noted that average practice attendance had reduced but that those who did attend were keen, and after discussion it was agreed to hold 4 of the practices from 7pm to 9pm on Wednesday evenings. (That was shorter than Saturday practices, which were 6pm to 9pm.) Attendances weren't reported but they seem to have been popular because in 1934 the Committee proposed holding 8 practices on Wednesdays and 4 on Saturdays.

Over the years the number and type of events was discussed several times. In 1933 the Committee proposed a half yearly meeting instead of quarterly meetings[7]. In 1935 combined practices were '*well supported*' and in 1937 they were '*fairly well attended*' but in 1938 it was proposed to discontinue them because of '*poor support by members*' and just hold quarterly meetings (in March, June & September[8]). But after a '*useful discussion*' it was agreed to retain them and advertise them in *The Ringing World* to attract ringers from outside the Branch.

That must have been successful because that year there were '*Combined Practices held in in every tower*' attended by '*around 300*' (238 by Branch members). With 12 practices that is an average of 25 ringers (20 members) per practice – definitely not 'poorly attended'.

After the wartime ban on ringing was lifted in 1943 there was a quick recovery with six practices before the April 1944 AGM, all of them '*well attended*'. But enthusiasm seems to have waned because the 1945 AGM was told of '*poorly attended*' practices, with a proposal to revert to just quarterly meetings. The report doesn't say how many practices there were, and they weren't advertised in *The Ringing World*.

Maybe someone made a connection between attendance and advertising because notices in *The Ringing World* resumed after the AGM.

Two years later 13 meetings were well attended but the next year there was a '*lack of interest by many members in monthly practices*'. Does that mean attendance had dropped off again or was it merely recording the fact that even a very well attended practice would only account for a small fraction of the membership? Either way, the next year's practices were '*well attended*'.

For the next couple of decades practices were generally reported as '*well attended*' or '*fairly well attended*' but there were variants: 1948 – '*lack of interest by many members in monthly practices*', 1951 – '*average attendance 29*' (excluding summer meeting), 1953 – '*well attended in the early part of the year but dropped off later*', 1958 '*average attendance 29*', 1959 – '*well attended on the whole but many experienced ringers were conspicuous by their absence – they are not pulling their weight*'. 1960 – '*Discussion on how to make practices more attractive*'.

1980s attendance reports include: averages of 22 in 1980, 26·5 in 1982 and 30 people '*quite common*' in 1987.

But all was not well – in 1984 '*there have been only a few new faces at Branch Practices*' and '*insufficient to ring at a 6-bell tower for 1/3 of practice*'. This evoked a responses from older members that '*history was repeating itself*' and that there had been '*apathy for the last 40–50 years*'.

Practice attendance continued to cause concern. In 1993 it was said to go in cycles: too few attend, leading to an appeal, which increases attendance, followed by disillusion because too many attend, leading to fewer attending, and so on.

In the decades around the Millennium, an average of 15 was reported in 1995 and 12 in 2006. Since then Saturday practice attendance has varied between 9·2 and 14·4 with an average of 11·2, but by then the Branch was also running other practices, see later.

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[7] ie one instead of three between AGMs.

[8] December was presumably omitted because the AGM was in January.

6 Time

For over seventy years combined practices ran from 6pm to 9pm. A few were longer, for example in September 1930 the practice was from 4·30 to 6·00 and from 7·00 to 9·00. The break was presumably for tea but it must have been very quick. The December 1939 practice was '*from 2·15pm until dark*' (presumably to comply with blackout restrictions).

There are no records of how many ringers were present for the whole practice but in the days when many ringers cycled or went by public transport there would have been an incentive to get as much ringing as possible in return for the time spent travelling. So it seems likely that a significant number would be there the whole time even though some came for only part of the practice.

If many ringers were present for the whole practice, then with twenty or thirty attending they would be sitting out for more touches than they rang in, especially at a six bell tower. With a ground floor or balcony ring (and maybe at some others) some of the time not ringing could be outside the ringing room, so the practices would function as social events where members from different towers got to know each other.

The 1984 comment about having too few to ring for a third of the practice (presumably the first hour) prompted the observation that '*six to nine did seem rather long*' and it was agreed to shorten practices by an hour, to run from 7pm to 9pm.

But if a lot of ringers did turn up (see the 1987 comment above about 30 being quite common) that made it hard to give everyone a fair turn, so in 1989 it was suggested to start at 6.30 and run to 8.30, but with the option to continue until 9.00 if needed. But that didn't happen.

In 2001, after more agonising about poor attendance the practices were shortened even more to an hour and a half, from 7·30 to 9·00. There was also an offer to help the host tower ring a quarter peal before the practice, but only one band accepted the offer, and the idea died.

In 2005, still concerned about attendance, it was suggested that since people often did other things on Saturday evenings, moving the practice to a different time of day might enable more people to attend. To try find the best times the start time was varied for a couple of years, with a mix of 10·30, 2·00, 4·30 and 7·00 starts.

The experiment was inconclusive, with both well attended and poorly attended practices at each time, but one preference did emerge – people who don't like driving in the dark wanted winter practices to be in the morning. Over the years early afternoon and evening practices became rare , and most now start at either 10·30 or 4·30, with occasional moves to avoid constraints.

7 Diversification

The traditional Saturday Combined Practices catered for all levels of ability, and while attendance was relatively large and practices were long they could provide ringing at all levels. But with shorter practices and fewer people attending the 'things to all people' didn't work so well so the Branch progressively introduced additional practices intended to benefit specific groups.

Surprise Major – A Surprise Major practice was first introduced in the early 1980s and it enabled those who attended to make progress that they might not otherwise have done. But after a few years attendance dropped and it was discontinued, but revived briefly in the 1990s. For several years in the early 2000s Wokingham All Saints turned one practice a month into an invitation Surprise practice for Branch members to join in. Then in 2017 the Branch re-started monthly Surprise Major practices, which still run, though they were downgraded to 'advanced' in 2022 to cater for a wider audience.

Surprise Minor – A Surprise Minor practice introduced 1992 was well supported initially but discontinued after a couple of years for lack of support. Since 2020 the Branch events diary has included the monthly Surprise Minor practice run by Eversley tower (just over the Branch border) at which Branch members are welcome.

Elementary – From 1988 to 1999 monthly elementary practices, including 8-bell ringing, were run at Twyford. Then in 2019 Elementary practices were introduced with a focus on basic techniques, and by 2023 they were so popular they had to be run twice a month.

Intermediate / Focused – A cohort from the Elementary practices needed something more advanced to make further progress so in 2025 one of the two monthly elementary practices was replaced by a Focused Intermediate practice.

Daytime – The traditional Saturday practices, and the specialist practices listed above that run on weekday evenings, are all designed to be outside the working week. In 2009 it was clear that a significant number of members were either retired, working shifts or had flexible jobs so the Branch introduced a monthly Tuesday afternoon practice, initially held at Wokingham All Saints (with the option of ringing eight if needed) and since 2012 held at Binfield.

Youth – Since the creation of a Youth Officer in 2017 there have been youth specific practices and events run separately from other Branch practices. Some have been organised by the Branch but many have been run in collaboration with neighbouring branches, notably the very active Bucks and Berks Young Ringers.

Go / No-go – It was always assumed that enough ringers would turn up. Usually they did but occasionally didn't, which was dispiriting for the few who did. So when

new practices were introduced members were asked to indicate beforehand whether they expected to attend, with the practice was confirmed or cancelled accordingly. Each year a few are cancelled but most are run (46 in 2025).

8 Member engagement

When the practices were started in 1910 for '*monthly combined meetings at Branch towers*' they didn't explicitly say '*for all members*' but it seems fair to assume that was intended, and that they weren't just meant to be for a small elite. But it's equally clearly from the attendances reported they were a long way short of the total membership.

For example in 1939 the total attendance of members at combined practices was 230. Assuming 12 practices that's just short of 20 on average, about 12% of the then membership (157). With roughly 1·5 attendances per member in total they 'could' all have attended if they took it in turns and most of them only attended once, but that seems improbable. More likely a handful of keen members attended most practices, which would account for the attendance numbers with a fair fraction of the membership not attending any.

In 1981 the average attendance was higher at 26, which with 169 members was 1·85 attendances per member. But that still makes widespread attendance unlikely.

In recent years more detailed analysis shows that about 55% of members do not attend any Branch events (40 to 50 practices of various sorts, striking competitions and meetings). Half a dozen attend over half of the events, and about a third attend two or more event. Slightly over 10% attend only one and the rest attend none.

Recent years aren't directly comparable with the past because the current practices offer nearly twice as much ringing time and also give a choice of practice type.

9 Commentary

My analysis of practices in Sonning Deanery over more than a century has shown that things definitely haven't 'always been like they are now'.

They progressed from the (to us) rather surprising situation of having no Branch practices at all (other than the ringing before AGMs or meetings) through 70 years of nominal stasis during which there was a recurring battle to keep up attendance at a monthly practice, to the current situation with up to five different practices a month (plus youth activities).

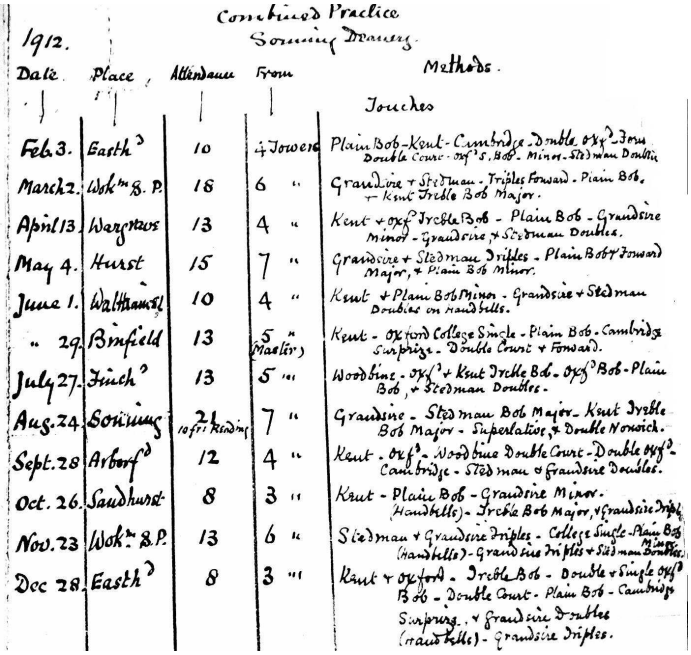
At the same time the Branch has gone from the equally surprising (to us) position of having no ringing master to an era where we have both a Ringing Master and Deputy Ringing Master who are kept fully occupied organising and running practices.

What appears not to have changed is that events that in theory should help to bring all members together don't in practice because a significant fraction of the membership never attend any of them.

What is equally clear is that if even half the membership turned up to a practice it would be completely unmanageable, even with a three hour practice. Did the original proponents of combined practices think about that possibility? Or did they assume that most members would not attend? We are unlikely ever to know but it's interesting to speculate

John Harrison 25 July 2026

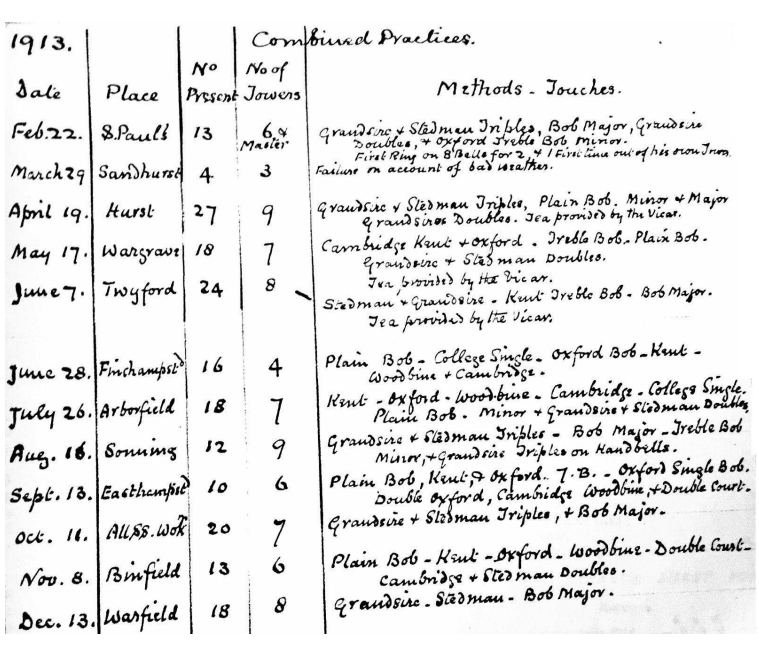
Appendix – Combined practices in 1912 & 1913



Combined Practice
Sonning Deanery.

1912.

Date	Place	Attendance	From	Methods. Touches
Feb 3.	Earth^{d}	10	4 Towers	Plain Bob - Kent - Cambridge - Double Oxf^{d} - Iron Double Court - Oxf^{d} S. Bob - Minor - Stedman Doubles
March 2.	Wok^{m} & S. P.	18	6 "	Grandsire + Stedman - Triples Forward - Plain Bob, + Kent Treble Bob Major.
April 13.	Wargraves	13	4 "	Kent + Oxf^{d} Treble Bob - Plain Bob - Grandsire Minor - Grandsire + Stedman Doubles.
May 4.	Hurst	15	7 "	Grandsire + Stedman Triples - Plain Bob + Forward Major, + Plain Bob Minor.
June 1.	Walthamst^{d}	10	4 "	Kent + Plain Bob Minor - Grandsire + Stedman Doubles on Handbells.
" 29.	Binfield	13	5 " (Master)	Kent - Oxford College Single - Plain Bob - Cambridge Surprize - Double Court + Forward.
July 27.	Finch^{d}	13	5 "	Woodbine - Oxf^{d} + Kent Treble Bob - Oxf^{d} Bob - Plain Bob, + Stedman Doubles.
Aug. 24.	Sonning	21 (10 first ringing)	7 "	Grandsire - Stedman Bob Major - Kent Treble Bob Major - Superlative + Double Norwich.
Sept. 28	Arbor^{d}	12	4 "	Kent - Oxf^{d} - Woodbine Double Court - Double Oxf^{d} - Cambridge - Stedman + Grandsire Doubles.
Oct. 26.	Sandhurst	8	3 "	Kent - Plain Bob - Grandsire Minor. (Handbells) - Treble Bob Major, + Grandsire Trip^{s}
Nov. 23	Wok^{m} & S.P.	13	6 "	Stedman + Grandsire Triples - College Single - Plain Bob (handbells) - Grandsire Triples + Stedman Doubles Minor
Dec 28.	Earth^{d}	8	3 "	Kent + Oxford - Treble Bob - Double + Single Oxf^{d} Bob - Double Court - Plain Bob - Cambridge Surprize, + Grandsire Doubles (Handbells) - Grandsire Triples.



1913.

Combined Practices.

Date	Place	No Present	No of Towers	Methods - Touches.
Feb 22.	S. Paul's	13	6 & Master	Grandsire + Stedman Triples, Bob Major, Grandsire Doubles, + Oxford Treble Bob Minor. First Ring on 8 Bells for 2 & 1 First time out of his own Tower.
March 29	Sandhurst	4	3	Failure on account of bad weather.
April 19.	Hurst	27	9	Grandsire + Stedman Triples, Plain Bob. Minor + Major Grandsires Doubles. Tea provided by the Vicar.
May 17.	Warsgrave	18	7	Cambridge Kent + Oxford - Treble Bob - Plain Bob. Grandsire + Stedman Doubles. Tea provided by the Vicar.
June 7.	Twyford	24	8	Stedman + Grandsire - Kent Treble Bob - Bob Major. Tea provided by the Vicar.
June 28.	Finchampst^{d}	16	4	Plain Bob - College Single - Oxford Bob - Kent - Woodbine + Cambridge.
July 26.	Arborfield	18	7	Kent - Oxford - Woodbine - Cambridge - College Single. Plain Bob - Minor + Grandsire + Stedman Doubles.
Aug. 16.	Sonning	12	9	Grandsire + Stedman Triples - Bob Major - Treble Bob Minor, + Grandsire Triples on Handbells.
Sept. 13.	Eastheampst^{d}	10	6	Plain Bob, Kent, + Oxford. T.B. - Oxford Single Bob. Double Oxford, Cambridge Woodbine, + Double Court.
Oct. 11.	All SS. Wok	20	7	Grandsire + Stedman Triples, + Bob Major.
Nov. 8.	Binfield	13	6	Plain Bob - Kent - Oxford - Woodbine - Double Court - Cambridge + Stedman Doubles.
Dec. 13.	Warfield	18	8	Grandsire - Stedman - Bob Major.