

## **The Peal Boards in the West Porch - No 8 in Parish News October 2014 by John Read**

As you enter the church through the west door, the first thing that might catch your eye are the peal boards on the walls, six on the right side and three on the left. The boards commemorate the achievements of the Saffron Walden Society of Change Ringers between 1891 and 1912, when the ring consisted of eight bells, and in 1936, when the Society's first peal on the twelve bells was rung. It can be seen that members of the Pitstow family appear in all of them, usually four Pitstows and on one occasion five taking part.

The Pitstows' connection with the Society began in 1865, when Frederick Pitstow joined the band at the age of 15, and once he had mastered change ringing, he persuaded his brother Nathan to join. A younger brother, Ernest, also joined the band in due course. When the next generation came along, they were joined by Fred's sons, Alfred and Frederick junior, and finally by Ernest's sons, Harold and Leonard, who were some twenty years younger than their cousins. Many people in the congregation will remember Len Pitstow, who died in 1984, and his wife Mary, and I was privileged to know him when I joined the band myself in 1972. Len was not only Master of the ringers, but he was also chairman of the Saffron Walden Music Society, and was a great lover of classical music. His brother Harold moved to London and as a member of the Westminster Abbey ringing band, rang the Abbey bells for many great state occasions.

The remarkable thing about the Saffron Walden ringing band in the Pitstow era, was that they were way ahead of their time in their ability to ring the more advanced compositions, and they were acknowledged to be one of the leading bands in the country. The art of change ringing is based on permutations of all the possible orders of the bells, known as changes, and one of the principles is that in any one peal, no change may be repeated. Ringing composers have devised many different "methods" for achieving this. These include fairly simple methods such as Plain Bob, which are easier for the ringers to memorise, and more complex methods such as Superlative Surprise, Cambridge Surprise and London Surprise (all to be seen on the peal boards), which require considerable expertise to master. Today, ringers all over Britain are capable of ringing such advanced methods, but in the early 1900s, experts in these would have been few and far between.

The present ringing band is of a high standard, which the Pitstows would surely have been proud of. They have their own website ([saffronwaldenbells](http://saffronwaldenbells.com)), which includes the history of the Society going back to 1623, when Thomas Turner left a bequest for the bells to be rung every year on the anniversary of his death. Proceeds of the bequest, totalling £1.67, are still paid to the ringers every year, and the Society still rings the bells for "Great Ringing Day" around the date of Turner's death in June.

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