Sixty years ago, as a lad in shorts, I accompanied my father as he visited his parishioners in the benefice of Glasbury. On the walls of house after house were one or two framed certificates: of Competence in Religious Knowledge (issued by the Diocese of Swansea and Brecon after examination in the local church schools) and/or of election to the Hereford Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers (HDGBR). The most prized and hardest earned was the latter, for which candidates had to ring 120 changes on tower or handbells. My certificate (below) dates to January 1964, by which time I had already rung nineteen peals for the Guild!

The Hereford DGBR was founded in 1886, mainly at the instigation of two clergymen within the diocese: Rev G. M. Custance of Colwall and Prebendary W. H. Phillott, who was sometime incumbent of Staunton-on-Wye. Both had sons who were ringers and went up to Oxford University. At Oxford these young men benefited from ringing with such experts as The Revds. F. E. Robinson, G. F. Coleridge and C. D. P. Davies. In 1886, for example, they stood in a peal of Stedman Triples at Drayton conducted by Robinson. Both men subsequently played important roles in the new Guild. George Phillott was the first Master, even though employed as an architect in Cheltenham.

John Eisel’s book traces the formation and development of the Guild. The book also indicates the standard of ringing within the diocesan area before the foundation of the Guild. (The diocese largely equates with the territory of the much older British/Anglo-Saxon kingdom of the Magonsaete that formed a buffer zone between Wales and Anglo-Saxon Mercia).

The formation of the Hereford DGBR was part of the process of establishment of diocesan and territorial ringing associations that took place during the 1870s and 1880s. This process was an outgrowth of the ‘Oxford Movement’ of the nineteenth century that sought to reform the Church of England. Bells and ringers were seen as part of the Church of England. Ringers who drank, swore, or even lit fires in ringing chambers, were seen by reformers as disreputable, as were those who only rang for occasions other than church services.

The first meeting of the Hereford DGBR elected a committee of fourteen, of whom eight were clergy. The meeting also determined to employ a paid instructor. Subsequently James W. Washbrook was appointed to that position. In June 1886 he conducted the first peal for the Guild: Grandsire Triples at Ross-on-Wye. In 1887 H. J. Tucker replaced Washbrook as paid instructor, followed by W. H. Fussell in 1888 and subsequently by James Groves and then by William (Bill) Short.

Among the highlights of the pre-1914-18 War that Eisel recounts were the Kidston Shield competitions, first held at Glasbury in 1912 with eleven bands competing. The terrible effects of that War are also described. The number of ringing members of the Guild dropped by almost 200 from 1913 to 1914 and the names of over fifty ringers are recorded on the memorial tablet installed in All Saints’ Hereford as having given their lives during that conflict. The era of paid instructors ended and has not been renewed.

Standards after the war rose. The first course of Double Norwich CB Major by residents of the Guild was achieved in 1924, although the first peal of Cambridge S Minor by resident members was not rung until 1947. The Hereford Ringing Course, of immense value to ringers worldwide, started in 1963, and so the book continues.

The Hereford Diocesan Guild of Bellringers is well worth reading, especially since it contains photographs of many of the leading members of the Guild at different periods of the past. Perhaps, however, it lacks some of the more personal insights that add spice to history. A. F. M. Custance, son of one of the two instigators of the Guild and a committee member for 1886-7, was

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described by Canon Coleridge as '... the son of a poor Parson, he shortened his career at Oxford by driving tandem up the High and a steam launch down the river ...' Good on him, and good on John Eisel for writing this valuable history, and good on The Whitting Society of Ringers for publishing this fascinating and valuable book.

The Hereford Diocesan Guild of Bellringers, 1886-1986 – The History of the First Hundred Years is an A5 format booklet of 108 pages, and is obtainable from Anne Phillipson, 9 Ebbsgrove, Loughton, MILTON KEYNES, MK5 8BD for £5.50 including UK P&P. Cheques should be payable to The Whitting Society of Ringers. It can also be bought on-line through the Society’s website, www.whitingsociety.org.uk – credit and debit cards accepted.

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