

## Obituary

John Michael Berning (14.12.1941- 17.12.2006)

Mike Berning was born in 1941. He attended the King Edward VII School in Johannesburg before going up to Rhodes University in 1960, where he read Honours in History, graduating in 1963. Having decided on a career in librarianship, Mike proceeded from Rhodes to the University of Cape Town in 1964, initially to read for a Certificate in that subject. In 1968 he was awarded his Diploma in Librarianship from UCT.

In the first part of 1965 Mike was employed in the South African Library in Cape Town, but in September of that year he was appointed Librarian of the Cory Library at Rhodes University. From 1978 until 1986 he acted as Deputy to the University Librarian until, in 1988, the post of Deputy University Librarian was created, to which he was appointed. Mike retired in 1999.

In 1968 Dean Kenneth Oram sought volunteers to ring the cathedral bells in Grahamstown. At that time Bill Jackson, who had learnt to ring at Dalton-in Furness, was in town and was willing to teach a band. He was joined by Paul Spencer, who had learnt at Armitage Bridge in Yorkshire. Mike Berning, who was very involved in the life of the cathedral, was one of their recruits.

On 23 October 1977 the local band rang the first, and only, quarter by a Sunday service band on the cathedral bells prior to their being rehung in 1993. Four of the band were ringing their first quarter, including Mike, who rang the tenor. The conductor was Paul Spencer and it was his first quarter as conductor. The method was Plain Bob Doubles and the quarter was rung on the front six, the tenors of the octave being virtually unringable at that time.

After Spencer moved to Cape Town, Mike took over as Tower Captain and, through a very difficult period in the 1980s, held a band together and continued to teach recruits. He helped Jane Gant (as she then was) to arrange the inaugural meeting of the South African Guild of Church Bell Ringers, which was held in Grahamstown in 1988. Mike also helped draft the constitution of the Guild.

After Colin Lewis arrived in Grahamstown in 1989, Mike joined him in petitioning the Parish Council for permission to rehang the bells in a new frame. Mike and Colin also met the Mayor of Grahamstown and obtained her support, and the support of the City Council, for the rehang project. Mike was one of the band who rang the bells for the first time in their new frame, on Christmas Eve, 1993.

Mike rang nineteen quarters on the cathedral bells after they had been rehung. In November 1994 he rang his first quarter inside, to Plain Bob Doubles. In August 1996 he covered on the heaviest tenor in Africa to his first of Triples, rung to welcome a new Vice Chancellor to Rhodes University. Three years later he rang the treble to a quarter in eleven Doubles methods/variations, which was (and still remains) the record number of m/v to a quarter of Doubles in Africa.

Perhaps Mike's most memorable quarter was his only one inside to Grandsire, half muffled on the day of The Queen Mother's funeral, rung during a tremendous thunderstorm. Mike also rang in the first quarter on the new bells at Hillandale. Mike's total was twenty five, twenty at the cathedral and five at Hillandale, a Benedictine monastery near Grahamstown. Regretfully, he never rang a peal. In 2005 the ringing community honoured Mike by electing him to Honorary Life Membership of the South African Guild of Church Bell Ringers.

In addition to tower bells, Mike was keen on tune ringing on handbells and led the Grahamstown Handbell Ringers Group. He was also Senior Lay Minister and Head Server in the cathedral, and a member of the Cathedral Parish Council.

Mike published a number of important monographs, based mainly on documents in the Cory Library, and contributed to the *Dictionary of South African Biography*. Among his works was a valuable article on “Campanology in the Colonies: English bellringing and South Africa”, published in 1992 in *Lantern*, and a booklet entitled *Handbells in Victorian Grahamstown, with a note on bell ringing at Grahamstown cathedral*, published in 2003. Mike also wrote about the first ringers in Grahamstown, and it is significant that, a generation or so later, some of the surnames reappear among the early ringers in Durban. Sadly, Mike is no longer with us to unravel that story.

Mike had an emergency operation for a hernia in 2004 and was in intensive care for many weeks. Although he recovered sufficiently to ring occasionally, his strength was never fully restored. He last rang on 27 November 2006, when the Municipality requested that the bells be rung to celebrate the fact that all the Municipal dams were full. His photograph appeared, as a member of that band, in *The Ringing World* of 15 December 2006. Two days earlier he had been taken into hospital for another emergency operation. Sadly, he did not survive, and died on Sunday 17 December.

Mike was the last member resident in Grahamstown of the change ringing band taught by Jackson and Spencer and his passing marks the end of an era. His death is greatly regretted and his presence will be sorely missed among the ringing community in South Africa.

The Archbishop of Cape Town occasionally honours those who have done outstanding work for the Church in the Province, by admitting them to the Order of St Simon of Cyrene. Before Mike died, His Grace signed the papers for him to become a member of that illustrious Order. Sadly, Mike had not been told before his death and that fact had not been made public.

Mike was married to Ann, to whom deepest sympathies are expressed.

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