



Obituary

Jean Jeffery

15th May 1934 – 15th October 2022

The eulogy given by Archdeacon Ken Higgins at Jean's funeral can be [found here](#).

In a few words it will be impossible to explain the vast contribution which Jean Jeffery made to Irish bell ringing over a period of seventy-two years. It will also be impossible to measure the loss that so many people feel at the passing of a dear friend whose hallmarks were her waspish sense of humour, dedication and absolute dependability. There is nobody ringing in Ireland today who remembers a time when Jean was not at the heart of what we do, and so, despite recent illness, it was still a blow to hear of her passing on 15th October.

The six bells of St Donard's, Belfast, were installed in 1949 and a recruitment drive to begin a team was launched. James Rush, a former Holywood ringer, along with the team from St Thomas', taught the new team, which included the sixteen-year old Jean Stewart. Jean and her friends had been recruited from the Girl Guides. Thus began a ringing career which spanned eight decades and saw Irish ringing milestones, high office in the Irish Association of Change Ringers and – most importantly to Jean – consistent weekly service ringing.



Apart from three years in early childhood, Jean's entire life was spent in Belfast and centred around St Donard's Church. At her funeral service the rector, Archdeacon Ken Higgins, recited the very long list of church organisations in which Jean was involved and spoke of the total commitment shown to each one over the decades. This quality was very familiar to the ringers present and made us wonder how Jean found time to ring!

Jean Stewart (as she was then) began ringing at a halcyon period for Irish bell ringing, when the team at Holywood produced ringing of an advanced nature and this nurtured Jean's obvious talent. A perusal of the Irish Association peal book shows an array of "firsts" in which Jean took part. Altogether Jean rang eighty-four peals for the Irish Association (which included twenty on handbells) as well as peals for the Society of Royal Cumberlands Youths and other societies. These ranged from doubles to cinques. The Holywood team was very fond of Kent and Oxford Treble Bob and so Jean rang in numerous peals of these methods, but also rang in the first peals of Wath and Pontefract Delight Major and Holywood Delight Major (one of only two occasions when a method has been pealed and named by an Irish band). The first ever peal of Surprise rung by an Irish band took place at St Donard's in 1954 and, of course, Jean was part of the team. Jean held the distinction of being the first (and to

date only) female Irish ringer to conduct a peal, which was 5040 Grandsire Triples at Hillsborough in 1951. As regards quarter peals, Jean didn't keep a record, but they number hundreds upon hundreds. Her favourite method (principle) was Stedman and she got her love of it from her friend Harry Brown. All of this ringing took place the length and breadth of the island of Ireland, but the really important thing for Jean was ensuring that the bells of St Donard's rang for service Sunday by Sunday. This was evidenced by the vast number of ringers she taught over the years and by the exacting standards which she expected. In ringing there were two ways of doing a thing – Jean's way or the wrong way! However, her teaching style was friendly, constructive and supportive. She thought nothing of travelling hundreds of miles to support a beginners' practice or ring in a first quarter, yet often told us how she went over London Surprise in her head to send herself off to sleep at night! Many was the occasion when Jean willingly got the bus to distant towers simply to ring for a wedding or to make up a team to help new recruits to ring rounds. And when Jean had promised to help, you KNEW she would honour that promise because she was always as good as her word. Once she even got the bus to Dublin to ring for fifteen minutes to make up a team for a midweek service. How many of us would be prepared to make that sort of effort? Her favourite tower was Mount Saint Alphonsus in Limerick, with its glorious ring of ten, and she always cherished the lovely friendships she had with the ringers there.

On two occasions Jean visited Italy to experience the Veronese style of ringing and in Rome was introduced to Pope Benedict XVI. Probably a red-letter day for them both!

When Jean married John Jeffery in 1960 and began a family, bell ringing was still given its place. In fact, Jean told the story of the first evening of her honeymoon when John Jeffery was dispatched to a coffee shop whilst his new bride went to bell practice at Bray Parish Church! In time, John and Jean raised a family – Colin, Carole and Neale – all of whom became ringers at St Donard's. Of recent years, it gave Jean enormous pride to see the ringing achievements of her grandson, Michael Crockett, the present Master of the Society of Royal Cumberland Youths, of which Jean was also a member. Family clearly meant a great deal to Jean and her children and grandchildren were talked about in every conversation.

Jean's talents – both ringing and administrative – were recognised by the Irish Association of Change Ringers, and positions of responsibility were offered and readily accepted. The pinnacle of the long list of offices which Jean held, was the presidency of the association. Trailblazer yet again, Jean was the first female president of the IACR and it gave her pleasure of follow in the long line of good friends who had already held this office down the years. With Jean in the chair, you knew that the meeting would be over in good time for lunch! Behind the scenes, the amount of work done was phenomenal, and this on top of serving as Vestry Secretary at St Donard's and editor of the parish newsletter. At one point, Jean was also on the editorial team of the Irish Bell News. As a younger woman Jean had been a Central Council representative and was the key organiser of the CCCBR visit to Ireland in 1998. If a thing needed to be done, it got done, even if that meant not bothering to go to bed. You could have rung Jean's house well after midnight, confident of the fact that she'd still be up!

In recent years ill-health made ringing more challenging for Jean and latterly she struggled up to the ringing room of St Donard's virtually on her hands and knees. But that's what commitment made her do. In conversation it was so clear that the limitations imposed by ill-

Jean Jeffery obituary continued

health and age frustrated Jean, but that her zest for ringing was as alive as it had been when she started as a teenager. It is fitting then, that her last quarter peal on tower bells was rung for the birth of her great grand-daughter, Cara. She thoroughly enjoyed – despite the great physical effort – her last ring, which was at Taney about three weeks before her passing. And everyone there was delighted to see her ringing.

Many of us referred to Jean as the “Queen of Irish bell ringing” – which we meant kindly and respectfully – as she really was the centre of our activities for so long. This is why her passing still came as a terrible blow. Jean’s funeral took place at her beloved St Donard’s on Monday 24th October with a large congregation of family, friends and ringers who loved and respected her. Even the organist was a ringer! Before the service a well-struck quarter of doubles was rung by her friends and conducted by Michael. As the coffin left the church another band of friends rang call changes to bid farewell. Everyone present knew this was the end of an era.

All of the ringers of Ireland send our sincere sympathies to Jean’s family and we know how deeply she will be missed. By her friendship, humour, ability and determination she has set us all an example of what we can aspire to in our ringing and our dealings with others. Typically, she set the bar very high.

Simon Walker, Mike Pomeroy.

Jean Jeffery obituary continued

The obituary below, has been kindly contributed by Archdeacon Ken Higgins who gave the eulogy at Jean's funeral on Monday 24th October 2022, in St Donard's Parish Church, Bloomfield, Belfast.

On Sunday morning (16th October) I announced to the congregation of St Donard's the death of Jean and there was an audible gasp of shock. Jean had been in church just a couple of weeks earlier - sitting in the pew counting the number of people receiving Communion - as was her custom. It reminds us once again - should we need reminding - of the slender thread that separates life from death and the suddenness with which it can be broken.

Speaking to people afterwards, the main comment was that St Donard's had lost one of its stalwarts and it has. Jean has been associated with this Church since the age of 3 - when she was enrolled in the Sunday School - over 85 years ago!



Jean Stewart was born on 15th May 1934 at 132, Euston Street to parents James and Harriet. When she was only 6 weeks old, her parents moved to the village of Coagh in Co. Tyrone. Her father James was a painter and decorator, and he went there to find work. As a family they lived there for about two years before moving back to East Belfast and settling in East Bread Street.

At the age of 5 Jean began her school days in East Bread Street Primary and in the same year her little sister Iris was born. The girls shared a very happy home life together.

In 1945 Jean's Dad bought a shop selling wallpaper and paint on the Castlereagh Road moving the family which meant that Jean had to change school to Euston St Primary.

The Guiding movement played a big part in Jean's life from joining the Brownies at the age of 5 right up to being a Ranger until she was 18.

When Jean was 13 years of age she won a scholarship to the Belfast School of Commerce where she studied shorthand, typing and book-keeping and this led to her first job at the age of 15. She worked at the Northern Publishing Office and was paid £1 10 shillings a week. Other office jobs came and went before joining the Civil Service working in the Traffic Branch of the R.U.C. This was where she met her husband to be - motor mechanic - John Jeffery.

John & Jean were married here in St Donard's on St Patrick's Day 1960 and set up their first home in Victoria Drive, Sydenham. In those days, the Civil Service rule was that when a woman got married she had to leave so in 1960 Jean left the job she loved. She was in floods of tears. However, 12 years later, after having her children - Colin - Carol and Neale - she returned to work in the Civil Service and got her old job back at Traffic Branch where she remained until her retirement in 1998.

Jean Jeffery obituary continued

Tragedy struck in Jean's life when, in 1986, John suffered a heart attack and died at their home in Nendrum Gardens. Jean was left a widow at the age of just 52 after 26 years of marriage.

Colin, Carol and Neale eventually left home, married and eventually gave her 6 grandchildren and more recently a great-grandchild. Her family was at her heart and much cherished and they in turn loved and supported her especially in these last difficult years as her health deteriorated.

Jean's life revolved around her family and her church activities. She was - as I said earlier - a stalwart here for 85 years and was involved in so many different groups and organizations and areas of service. She set up the first Bunny group here - now called the Rainbows - she sang in the choir until Covid struck - she served as Secretary to the Select Vestry for 16 years - was Secretary of the Mother's Union group and latterly the Focus Women's Group. She set up a group for Young Women in the early days and was compiled the monthly CONTACT magazine for St Donard's which went out to every house in the parish. But above all this - her greatest passion was for BELL RINGING.

Bell ringing in St Donard's began around 1950 for Jean, when the Girl Guide group was approached looking to recruit some new ringers and Jean was one. This passion continued all her life - ringing bells for over 72 years, and her great sadness in these last years was that she wasn't able to climb the steps up to the bell tower.

Stand out moments in bell ringing included ringing a full peal to mark the death of King George VI and the following year ringing two full peals on the day of the Queen's Coronation. She was a Life Member and Trustee of the Irish Association of Change Ringers, serving in various offices including Master, Secretary and Chair. She later went on to become the first female president of the Irish Association and held this office for the maximum term.



Ian McCullagh President 2004 – 2009 congratulating Jean on becoming the first female President of the IACR in May 2009)

Bell ringing gave Jean the opportunity to travel throughout Ireland and England ringing in every church in Ireland with a peal of bells. She was invited by the Italian Bell ringers to join them in a tour of towers in the Garda region and some years later to join them for a fabulous week's ringing Jean Jeffery obituary 3 | Page tour in Rome - she even met Pope Benedict.

She was passionate about passing on her love of bell ringing and did much to promote and train the next generation of ringers. She would regularly travel throughout Ireland to help with training.

She was a member of the Society of Royal Cumberland Youths - this is one of the two most prestigious ringing Societies to exist - promoting excellence in ringing around the world - she remained a member until her death.

Jean Jeffery obituary continued

Her contribution to bell ringing was immense - here and elsewhere - and she was very affectionately regarded and respected in ringing circles throughout the UK.

Whenever Jean wasn't ringing bells or travelling to meetings - or typing up minutes of various kinds - she enjoyed knitting, sewing and reading.

Someone once said

'if you find something to be right you stick with it - if you find something to be good you stick with it - if you find something to be true you stick with it.'

Jean stuck at things - her commitment to her family - her church - her faith - her passions - and I don't think she could have achieved everything she did in her time on earth, without her faith in God.

I read this "Guidance means I can count on God - Commitment means 'God can count on me'". Jean was someone you could count on - always reliable - always giving her best.

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In the Book of Common Prayer there's a lovely service of Preparation for Death and we used this as we gathered round Jean's bed in her last days in the Ulster Hospital. We commended her into the care and keeping of God and we prayed these words

"Jean our companion in faith, the Lord who gave you to us has taken you to himself. He who died for you and rose again from death, is calling you to enjoy the peace of the heavenly city in which there is neither sorrow nor pain and where weakness is transformed into strength. He is calling you to see Him face to face that you may be made like him forever. He comes to welcome you with angels and archangels and all his faithful people that you may know in its fullness the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Enter into the joy of your Lord and give glory to Him.

All I can say is There'd better be bells in heaven!!!