



James Swindells Wilde was born in Hyde, a town in Cheshire in northern England, in 1862, the third of seven children born to James and Eliza Wilde.

His life was in most ways unremarkable, excepting for his involvement in church bellringing. In the late 19th century, those halcyon days before the synthetic entertainment so prevalent today, bellringing was a very active pastime, a hobby for many as well as a duty in Sundays. The Wildes were a prominent ringing dynasty spreading over four generations, active in composing the ‘peals’ used by the ringers as well as taking part in numerous notable performances themselves. Indeed, James Wilde senior was responsible for the bellringing composition featured in Dorothy L Sayer’s famous novel about bellringing, “The Nine Taylors”. James S Wilde was arguably the most talented member of a quite remarkable family and highly thought-of in the ringing fraternity.

All the more surprising then that he decided to emigrate - to move his family 12,000 miles to New Zealand, a bellringing desert - to Dunedin, which had no bells rung in the English fashion - the nearest place being Christchurch Cathedral, the only tower then functioning on the South Island.

We don’t know for sure why he made the move but it was shortly after the untimely death of his older brother Thomas with whom he shared the passion for bellringing. It was also a time of economic hardship and, coming from a working-class family, he may well have been driven by necessity. Whatever the reason, he arrived in Dunedin in 1901 with his wife and sister (both called Martha – very confusing) and three young children. He visited Australia on the way out and joined in the ringing in Melbourne and Hobart and also called in to Christchurch to meet the local ringers there.

The Wildes settled in a house on Balmoral Street, Opoho upon their arrival and James was to remain there for almost 50 years. He never left these shores again nor even travelled to the North Island as far as is known. He was a hatter by trade and carried on in that employment all his working life.

His interest in all things bellringing, however, never flagged despite his isolation. Over the years he made regular trips to Christchurch to join in the ringing there and we know from correspondence that he was an inspiration to his inexperienced colonial compatriots. He continued to compose ringing music, which was despatched back to the Old Country for publication in bellringing journals and eventual performance by his peers; some of it is still used today. He carried on voluminous correspondence with fellow ringers in England and took part in hotly-debated discussions by way of the correspondence columns in the bellringing press, practically a blood sport in those days. All this was made possible by the wonderful system of surface mail prevalent back then, not sure it would be so easy with the present mail system. . .

Last, but not least, he trained a small team to ring ‘changes’ in the English style on a set of handbells he had brought with him. Eventually, after much practising, he conducted a ‘peal’ on the handbells in Dunedin in 1938 at the tender age of 76. A continuous performance lasting over three hours, involving each of the four participants in ringing 5120 ‘changes’ and handling two handbells each. The other three members of the team (one of whom was his son Charles) had never rung a peal before nor would they again. It was one of the very earliest peals rung on handbells outside England and certainly the first in Australasia.

James Wilde died at Opoho in November 1949 and is buried in Dunedin’s Andersons Bay Cemetery with other members of his family, in a simple grave marked only as “Wilde”.

25 Years later, in 1975, a ring of eight bells, hung for English-style ringing, was installed in First Church. What a great shame it couldn’t have happened in his lifetime.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand from research by Peter Whitehead, bellringer, based in the Marlborough Sounds.