

TALES FROM THE TOWER

Hello again. Here we are, still stumbling through a year that has turned out more wildly different from any other year any of us has ever experienced – or wished to experience! – and still with no very clear idea of what the future holds. When will we be able to sing hymns again? Will there be a Christmas Tree Festival this year? And when will the church bells ring out again over Tavistock?

There have been lots of ideas, suggestions and conjecture about this. Someone, somewhere, suggested (perhaps not altogether seriously) that Perspex screens might be erected between each ringer's position, so that they could ring without danger of touching or breathing on each other. That idea brought forth a flurry of questions – what about the ringing chambers where the ropes fall only inches apart and the ringers frequently nudge each other's elbows? What about the ringers who habitually fling their ropes out in a wide semi-circle and need all their two metres of social distancing, even in normal times, simply to avoid lassoing those next to them? And what about the beginners, who may need someone standing close, either ready to grab a rope that has suddenly turned into a snake or to whisper words of advice into an anxious ear?

As so often happens, solutions often bring forth problems of their own.

The problems of ringing are uniquely difficult and not always understood. But they are being considered, and have often arisen during the many Zoom meetings we've all been having in lieu of ringing chamber discussions or after-practice pub chat. The latest thinking seems to be a resigned acceptance that it is indeed going to be a while before we are all able to join each other in the tower, all willy-nilly and everyone welcome, and ring which bells we personally choose, swapping around as suits our different abilities. Instead, it is now suggested that to get the bells ringing at all, we will have to accept that not all of them can be rung at any one time and not all the ringers will be able to be present. So you may hear not ten, eight, or even six of the Tavistock bells being rung for services, but perhaps five – every other one of the peal of ten, which should, I think, pass the one-metre test (I haven't been up there with my tape measure) and sound reasonably tuneful - although rather sombre. And there is probably going to be a time limit of fifteen minutes. And no Tuesday evening practices...

But at least, as we all agree, the bells will be rung. The town will know there is a service being held in the church. And everyone will remember that it is Sunday! (Until now, every day has seemed like a Saturday, with no Sunday following it.)

That is still in the future, although not too distant now, we hope. Meanwhile, many of the ringers have been honing their mental skills with – of course – the technology that has really stepped up to the mark during this period. Zoom, which most of us had probably never heard of until March or April when it suddenly burst upon us with family chats and quizzes, business meetings, keep-fit sessions and what have you, has been helping bellringers to keep their change ringing brain cells active by supplementing another online platform, designed just for us, called Ringing Room.

In this, with Zoom to help with chat and advice, a number of ringers can meet (virtually), and find themselves in a 'tower' where a circle of ropes or handbells can be seen on their screen. All you do to 'ring a bell' is to press one of the buttons on your keyboard, each one of which is assigned to one of the bells in the circle, and off you go. It is of huge benefit, both to beginning ringers whose tower education has been so rudely interrupted and to the more advanced who enjoy learning ever more complicated and difficult methods. Why, you don't even need to be a ringer! Without ever needing to touch a rope, you can jump straight in and start learning to ring all those mysteriously named change methods – Grandsire, Plain Bob, April Day, Canterbury Pleasure, Cambridge Surprise. This really could be for everyone. And you won't upset the neighbours!

The virtual world can produce some heady moments, and keen ringers have been setting new standards with lengthy performances. And it's so flexible. You don't need to be in the same place – or even the same country. One of our ringers, who lives in Liskeard, has told us how he 'rang' a quarter peal with friends in Derbyshire just a couple of weeks ago. I'm sure there have been many other such performances, keeping ringers (starved of their real ringing for nearly four months now) happy and content while their non-ringing friends bemoan the lack of football or their other favourite sport.

Still, there is nothing like the sound of church bells ringing on a Sunday morning, or sounding over town and countryside on a weekday evening as the ringers practise their art. Whatever the consolation we may gain from virtual ringing, there is nothing quite like the feeling of pulling on a rope, knowing that several hundredweight or tonnes of metal is swinging high overhead and striking at your command (well, most of the time, anyway). We shall all be very glad to get back to proper ringing, for services and for weddings, whenever the signal is finally given.

I, for one, hope that it won't be too many months before we can once again hear the words traditionally spoken to set the bells ringing: 'Look to. Treble's going – she's gone!'

Donna Baker