

TALES FROM THE TOWER

'How lovely to hear the bells ringing again!'

I've heard that comment several times in the past couple of weeks, and how lovely it is to hear it! When I last wrote, we didn't know when we would be able to start, and feared it might not be for months, but suddenly guidance was given that enabled many churches to hear their bells ringing out again - a message of joy and thankfulness and a reminder that this day is Sunday. (Do you, like me, still have problems with days of the week? Months of lockdown have had some funny effects, haven't they!)

However, lovely as it is, the sound of the bells isn't as we used to know it. Social distancing (I'd dearly like to know who first thought up that phrase) plays havoc with everything, and as I think I have mentioned before, the ropes in most towers fall too close to each other to allow a two- or even a one-metre gap. In many small country churches, that makes it almost impossible to ring more than two, or at the most, three bells. In Tavistock, with our larger chamber and ten bells, we can manage five. Not the joyful clamour we are all accustomed to, but not too bad, and we can even manage some of the simpler change methods, and produce music of a slightly more melodious kind. It helps, too, that we have two or three 'family' groups who can stand closer together.

One of our regular ringers is Captain at Bere Ferrers and has started service ringing there, on three bells, which probably gives the parishioners an 'ear worm' of Three Blind Mice for the rest of the day. The ground floor ringing chamber there is one of the tiniest I know but, as at Tavistock, and in almost every other tower, masks are worn and sanitisation rigidly practised. Other country towers are probably doing the same, but many towns and villages are still without the happy sound of their bells. It is very dependent on space, and also on the capabilities and age of the ringers. A lot of us fall into the older age bracket and some, like myself, may not feel quite ready to climb a narrow spiral staircase, clinging to a metal handrail, and stand in an enclosed space for fifteen minutes or more, wearing a mask, and wafting air around by the rapid movement of several ropes. Perhaps we might feel happier with a ground floor ring, where doors can be opened to let in plenty of fresh air... perhaps we just need time.

Sadly, it is not just Sunday service ringing that has suffered. Practice nights have gone by the board, the progression of many ringers in learning the more advanced methods has been halted (even with the invention of the RingingRoom app), the teaching of new ringers is now impossible, and meetings, competitions, peals and quarter peals are out of the question. Many of these are the cement of ringing, bringing ringers from other towers, other counties and even other countries together in the fellowship that has always been so important to us. There are ringers whose entire life centres around their ringing, ringers for whom Three Blind Mice rung for 20 minutes is just not very satisfying.

Nevertheless, that is what they will do because ringing is what ringers do, in whatever circumstances, just as singers sing, just as we all find ways to do what we love. And that is why it is so encouraging and rewarding to hear people say how lovely it is to hear the bells ringing again on Sunday mornings, even though we know the music we make falls far short of what we would like to be producing. We know (or hope!) that this is understood. To have it confirmed makes the limits, the masks, the sanitisation and the loss of our practice nights, meetings, peals and so forth, worthwhile. For the time being, anyway.

Let us hope that, with the resumption of all other aspects of the life we used to call 'normal' and now think 'halcyon', we will hear the bells rung in full peal before too long. When we do, we will all know that every ringer possible will be up those stairs, taking a rope once again and beaming with joy to hear the note of every bell in the tower striking overhead. And the town will hear the difference too.

Meanwhile, enjoy the sound of bells ringing again. They mean hope.

Donna Baker .