

TALES FROM THE TOWER

Those who have been following the non-adventures of the Tavistock Ringers during the last few months will know that, like everyone else, we have had to watch many anticipated events crumble to dust. Service ringing on the full ten bells - weddings - civic and national events - our much-loved Deanery Festival, due at the end of October, and now our Annual Outing.

That should have taken place on October 10. Of course, it didn't - we didn't even have to discuss that, as by midsummer it was obviously not going to take place. Travelling, either by coach (impossible) or car-sharing (no-no) was out for a start and ringing only half the bells at each tower, even if the confined spaces allowed that many, was just not going to be feasible. It was Off.

Or was it....? Hasn't everything happened 'virtually' this year? How many of us have not attended at least one family get-together, meeting or birthday party via Zoom? So couldn't we have a Virtual Ringing Outing as well?

As it happened, one of the towers we had intended visiting was Branscombe in East Devon. And it also happened that I was going there for a week's holiday, postponed from April (you all know why) and starting on October 10. (I had - somewhat naively, as it turns out - thought I would be there for the outing, ready to visit Musbury, Seaton, Colyton and Sidbury as well. I think I mentioned this in my last article.)

So there I was, in place and ideally situated to go on a Virtual Ringing Outing. And with nothing much else to do, the only wet day of the week seemed the ideal day to do it.

There are various traditions inseparable from ringing outings. The transport - be it coach or a string of cars - must get lost at least once in a twisty, narrow lane with almost no passing places, and if a large, slow moving vehicle such as a tractor, preferably towing one of those huge, mysterious contraptions made of long yellow spikes, can be induced to come in the opposite direction, so much the better. (Narrow bridges are a good substitute- I remember several of us once having to entice a full sized coach over a long, narrow bridge on Dartmoor, with only inches to spare on each side. We did it, but I am not sure the coach company or its driver was ever so enthusiastic about ringing trips again.)

Even without getting lost, churches are not always easy to find. Some are miles outside their village and there is always much craning of necks as ringers gaze out on all sides for a glimpse of the tower or spire, with triumphant cries of 'There it is!' resulting in a sigh of relief all round. Relief, it has to be said, all too often dashed when we find there is almost nowhere to park a coach or several cars, and if there is the local women's institute or playgroup is holding a special event in the adjoining hall and the car park is full anyway.

Faithfully observing these traditions, I visited each church on our list. I was even able to go into some of the churches, but was almost able to tick another box (nobody being there to let us in) when I arrived at Musbury, although the routine was unexpectedly changed by my actually being refused entry! The very nice lady who was just shutting the door after a very limited funeral told me that nobody else was being allowed in anyway, the church having suffered a major ceiling plaster collapse some months ago and not considered safe. So that was a first, but hopefully will not be added to the list of Ringing Outing Traditions, and of course we wish Musbury well and hope they can get their repairs done soon.

The rest of the Virtual Outing passed without further excitement, apart from a satnav meltdown (probably already a new tradition) which took me miles out of my way, and the distraction of passing (or, more accurately, not passing) the Lyme Bay Winery, where a pause was made and some Christmas shopping completed. (Wouldn't mind this becoming a tradition.) And so, after visiting Colyton and Sidbury, I returned to my accommodation in Branscombe.

But the outing wasn't over then. Being Virtual, it could continue on another day, and the highlight came on Thursday when, in brilliant sunshine, I met Steve Martin, our former curate and now Rector of Colyton and most of the churches on our list, at Branscombe itself, and he took me to the top of the tower, from where we had a wonderful view of that lovely village. Not only that, I joined in a small Evening Prayer service with two other parishioners, and - best of all, and a fitting end to my Virtual Outing - was, by Steve's invitation, able to ring not one but ALL the bells of Branscombe by virtue of their Ellacombe chiming device - something I have never done before. (It's much harder work than ringing one bell in the traditional manner, by the way.)

As a virtual outing, it wasn't bad at all, apart from the fact that otherwise no bells were rung and it was a trifle lonely. But that's 2020 for us all, isn't it - making the best of what we have and what we can do, quite a lot of it on our own. And at least I know roughly where each tower is now, should we be able to (and we fervently hope we will) do it for real next year.

And one more thing: while sending his best wishes and regards to us all here in Tavistock, Steve has promised us a real cream tea when we do go!

I hope he doesn't regret that when several coach loads of hungry and thirsty ringers turn up on his doorstep....

Donna Baker