

TALES FROM THE TOWER

For years now, October has been a busy month for ringing. Competitions, guild meetings, and of course our beloved Tavistock Deanery Ringing Festival. You don't need me to tell you that none of that is happening this year.

Another event that won't be happening is the Tavistock ringers' annual outing, when we board a coach and are driven by a long-suffering driver along narrow lanes to almost inaccessible village churches or into busy city centres when any idea of parking near the church is laughable. All part of the fun of a ringers' outing (we tell the driver).

This year, we should have been going to East Devon, to Branscombe (I begged for this because my grandfather was born there) and to Colyton, where our much-missed curate Steve Martin is now rector, and three or four other churches in the vicinity. Well, there is always another year (despite how we may be feeling at the moment) and outings, like all those other joyous events, will resume. Maybe we'll go to Branscombe next year. Or, surely, the year after....

But thinking about that has reminded me of the many outings I have been on over the years. As a young teenager, sitting in the back row of the coach with four or five other youngsters, the ringing outing was a step into adult life. It was always a happy day, for we were treated not as children but just like any other ringer. We knew our capabilities and there was always some ringing to suit us. Some of us were quite good, in fact, and made useful members of the band. And ringing different bells, in different towers, was good experience. We all felt we had learned from it.

I do remember a few little hiccups. There was the time two or three of us somehow got left in the tower when everyone left, and found ourselves locked in. How else to attract attention other than to toll one of the bells? Luckily, the others had gone for lunch to a cafe opposite the church and we were rescued, though not with very good grace. I can't think why. It wasn't our fault they'd left us there. Well, I don't think it was....

Occasionally there would be a more embarrassing mishap. A broken stay - well, it happens in the best of towers and all you can do is apologise and leave a contribution towards a new one. I also remember ropes breaking in more than one tower, all seventy feet or so of hemp or nylon descending on the ringer's head with no warning. Now, that really isn't the ringer's fault but it does rather spoil the rest of the ringing. (It doesn't usually cause any injury, by the way, just something of a surprise.)

Sometimes we arrive at a tower to find that whoever was going to let us in has forgotten all about us. Panic ensues as we try to find someone else who has a key and is available, but sometimes we have to go away disappointed. Luckily this doesn't happen often and may be balanced out by the times when either the person organising the outing has misjudged the time needed between towers or local traffic conditions have held us up, and by the time we arrive the local ringer has given up and gone home. (Mobile phones are a help here.)

Outings often take us through countryside we have never seen to villages we might never otherwise visit. To churches more interesting than we ever thought. Hidden tea-gardens, ancient gravestones, ringing chambers that don't seem to have been opened for years, steep spiral stairways, convoluted passages winding through the roof space of the bigger

churches, dizzying heights... every church is different. Every bell is a source of interest.

This year, I happen to be going to Branscombe on the very day when we should have had our outing there. So with so much happening 'virtually' maybe I should visit each of the churches we had intended to visit and send back photos. A virtual ringing outing with just one.

We have to make the best of what we have, don't we. And maybe next year.....

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