

TALES FROM THE TOWER

What is it about February that always finds me going through old papers, yellowing at the edges (the papers, not me – although on the other hand...), tax returns, accounts and bank statements I could have thrown out years ago, insurance certificates from firms I don't even remember and other such detritus of everyday living?

Yes, I know – it's the weather. What else is there to do on a streaming wet and windy February afternoon? (Especially in lockdown.) Even the dogs don't want to go for a walk. (I say 'even' but my dogs don't like rain even on a summer's day, let alone in winter. They bound cheerfully to the door, although they do submit with some suspicion to having their raincoats put on - you'd think there'd be a clue there, wouldn't you - but open the door and show them the weather and they're back under the sofa at a speed with which the space explorer Perseverance could have reached Mars in half the time.)

But that's beside the point. Wet February days were invented for clearing out cupboards and going through old papers, and this February has been the turn of the Tavistock Bell Ringers' archives which, as secretary, I currently hold. And they are, I may say, much more interesting than those old tax accounts and bank statements.

For instance, there is a record card of the first full peal ever rung on the bells. Surprisingly, because Tavistock was not then, nor for many more years, a method-ringing tower, this was performed on Easter Monday, April 5th 1926 and commemorated the recasting of the eight bells. The ringers were probably all from Plymouth and include William (Bill) Lavers, whom I remember from years later. It consisted, for those of you who have been following my attempts to explain method ringing, of 5040 changes of Grandsire Triples (Holt's Ten-Part, to be specific) and took three hours thirteen minutes. The residents of Tavistock must have wondered what had hit them! (*'They'm not going to be doing this every Sunday, be they?'*)

No less of an achievement was a 'long length' of 400 call changes, rung in July 1988 to mark Sir Francis Drake's defeat of the Armada four hundred years before (see what they did there?). Now, to be well rung, call changes demand just as much concentration and attention as method ringing, with very many more calls, and for the conductor who had to remember these and call each one at the right moment, this was quite a feat. It took one hour 25 minutes and whereas normally the procedure is one bell, one ringer, all the way through, it was felt that every ringer should have the opportunity of joining in with this, so although the ringing was non-stop, some of the ringers 'changed in' (or took over the ropes) during the ringing, enabling no less than thirteen to take part. And to top it all, the full course of 400 changes was composed by Jeremy Burnham the teenage son of the then tower captain, Robin Burnham (who sadly died last Christmas). It also included the famous musical changes: Queens (13572468), and Tittums (15263748).

They were a lively bunch, back in the mid-eighties. The year before their 400-change course, they enjoyed no less than three outings, and these weren't just day trips by coach, venturing over the border to Dorset or Somerset – oh no! Well, all right, one was to Dorset, but one saw the band crossing the sea to Ireland and another further north, to Scotland. (Were they *ever* at home, to ring for Sunday services, one can't help asking? But yes, they must have been, because they were pretty stern about service ringing and kept a register – if you didn't achieve a high enough number of attendances, you weren't considered a full member and wouldn't have a vote at the AGM. So there....)

Dated only a few years before this, I find a letter written by Sue, Robin's wife, to the Prince and Princess of Wales after the occasion of their visit to Tavistock to present West Devon Council with its borough charter. Naturally, the ringers of Tavistock, having rung for both the Prince and Princess's marriage and the birth of Prince William, were not going to let such an occasion pass without adding their own musical tribute. Sue also mentions how wet and cold Dartmoor can be,

but apparently this wasn't February – wisely, the visit seems to have been arranged for March and was warm and sunny. (That makes a change.)

Lastly, although I don't have the date, a record of ringing in 44 churches in one day was broken by the same young ringer (Jeremy Burnham) who composed that long length. After months of planning, he managed to ring in 50 different churches in the Taunton area, sometimes with only four minutes between towers. (How close to each other could they have been? Why is there no list? Perhaps one could be forthcoming...?) And in case you wonder why anyone would do this, except for the human tendency to break records, this must have been sponsored because it added £500 to the Sydenham Damerel Bell Restoration Fund. (Well done, Jeremy.)

Well, that's as far as I've got for now. I hope you've enjoyed this ramble through the bone-yards of the Ringers' Archives as much as I have. Maybe I will make more discoveries for next time.

Meanwhile, the rain seems to have eased a little and the dogs need a walk, whether they know it or not. And those dreary old accounts and bank statements are still waiting to be shredded....

Donna Baker