

## TALES FROM THE TOWER

This month's puzzle is:

531246E9780T

What does it mean? (Answer at the foot of this article.)

Meanwhile, here we are in Freedom Week/Month/Day..... and that's nearly as much a puzzle as the string of numbers I just gave you. What can we do? (Pretty much what we like.... Or maybe not?) What must we not do? ( Go abroad, at least if we want any certainty of coming back and not having to go into unexpected quarantine. Oh, and go to nightclubs after September if not fully vaccinated, though apparently it's all right until then. That's if we want to, of course. I don't think we actually HAVE to go to nightclubs. But then again, I wouldn't be at all surprised if we were told we should.)

But what has this to do with church towers and bells? Well, as you know, we have been restricted just like anyone else over the past 16 months, and just like everyone else, our restrictions have been suddenly lifted and we have to decide for ourselves how to proceed. And - just like so many people - we've found it not quite so easy.

Social distancing, for a start. It's now apparently a thing of the past. (For the time being, anyway. I take nothing for granted now.) So the fact that the bell ropes hang quite close together need no longer be a problem and we needn't limit ourselves to ringing only six bells. And if there are more ringers in the tower than can actually ring at any one time, it doesn't matter that they have to either squeeze together on the two small window seats or stand closer to each other and to the participating ringers than anyone has stood for a long time.

Or does it? For some of us, it will take some getting used to. It seems almost intrusive. And we have agreed to continue to wear masks and sanitise before going up the narrow spiral staircase and before touching the ropes. We know the danger has not gone away.

We will get used to it, of course. It's just a case of remembering what 'normal' used to be and returning to it, each in our own good time. For some, there is no problem at all; for others, it will take a little longer.

None of this stopped two of our ringers, Phil and Ian, from going to Exeter on Monday morning to ring the Cathedral bells as part of the city's welcome to Prince Charles and his wife Camilla on their three-day visit to Devon and Cornwall. Again, it was the first time for 16 months that all twelve bells had been rung, and because it was the first day of 'freedom' there had been no chance to practise beforehand. Some may even have wondered if they still had the muscle for the heavier bells, and even the climb up to the ringing chamber, wearing masks and on a hot day, seemed harder than it used to.

But once a ringer has the rope in his or her hand, and once the command 'Look to...Treble's going....She's gone...' is given, the natural training and habit of years takes over and the rhythm of the pull transcends any fleeting nervousness. And Exeter cathedral bells will always sound majestic, whatever they are ringing.

On this occasion, the ringing started with a short peal of Devon call changes, including the famous 'Turn Again Whittington' sequence, which is properly rung on six bells in the order 531246. (Hum it to yourself.) The ringers, although aware that the Royal party were probably several miles away by then (their loss!) then continued with a course of a 'simple' method known as Erin, and then a touch of the slightly more complex Stedman; both correctly in the form of Cinques, which indicates the involvement of eleven active bells with the heavy tenor beating like a drum behind.

You might well have heard some of this ringing on BBCTV Spotlight that evening. I listened out for it and thought what a treat it must have been for the people of Exeter to hear their bells rung in full at last, so joyously and so well, after such a long silence. Surely it must be a forecast of better times to come.

And as we grow used to our new 'freedom' and hope to continue to regain the lives we took so casually for granted until the beginning of 2020, so we local ringers will become more confident and the bells of Tavistock will ring out again - not just six, as has been the norm for the last few weeks, not even just eight as we are beginning to do now, but all ten bells. I hope that when you hear them you will feel as joyous as we do, perhaps still wearing masks, probably still sanitising our hands, but taking pleasure in the pull of the rope and the sound of the bells overhead.

It really will be a message of hope for us all.

(Answer to the puzzle: there was a clue in my description of the Whittington changes - rung on twelve bells, with 0 representing the tenth, E the eleventh and T the tenor (the 12th and heaviest bell) it follows the same principle but is known as Double Whittingtons. (And I confess I didn't know that myself, and neither did Google!)

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