

TALES FROM THE TOWER

Like many organisations, big and small, Tavistock Bell Ringers hold an Annual General Meeting and, also like so many, this usually takes place as the beginning of the year, in January or February.

This year, instead of braving wind, rain, ice or snow, to meet in the Parish Room, we all stayed at home and met by Zoom. (There must be a poem there, somewhere.) Indeed, Zoom has become so much a way of life for so many of us, I sometimes wonder if we will ever return to real, face to face, meetings, in rooms warm or cold, involving journeys into the great outdoors and gatherings where people actually shake hands, smile and talk to each other without masks over their faces. Well, we can dream.... and, hopefully, by next year that dream - or some, of it, at least - will be realised

The Ringers' AGM is usually a friendly, mainly uncontroversial affair (though it does sometimes have its moments - we are all individuals, after all) but it nevertheless takes a little organising and, as Secretary, that task falls mainly to me. I generally use email to circulate the Agenda, together with last year's Minutes - which I will have already circulated soon after last year's meeting to ask for corrections while fresh in members' minds - and make sure I have the key to the Parish Room and get there early, with a helper or two, to put out chairs, and that's about it. The Tower Captain, George, brings his report to read out, I read out mine (uncannily similar, usually), the Treasurer distributes her report and balance sheet, we elect new officers, or re-elect those existing ones who haven't managed to wriggle out, welcome new members, fix the date for our outing, and hope there won't be too much Any Other Business, which is where any controversy might arise. Just like any other AGM, in fact.

This year, having realised so time ago that it would have to be via Zoom, I made some changes. There's probably a limit to the time and concentration anyone feels happy with giving to those credit-card sized screen images, and (as anyone who has 'enjoyed' family zooms will know) there can be a problem when several people try to speak at once. So as well as circulating the Minutes ahead of time, I asked for the various reports to be sent to me a week or two early, so that I could circulate them as well and everyone could read them at leisure. You don't want the family cat walking across the keyboard at a vital moment or (as my two schnauzers decided moments before we began) a dogs' wrestling match, with sound effects, to take over everyone's living room.

All that done, it only remained for Phil to book a slot on the Devon Guild zoom account (how we have progressed in under a year!) so that we would not be constrained by time, and the invitation sent round to enable everyone to log in. To our extreme delight, at least two members who had never used Zoom before (there can't be many of them left by now) made the effort to join, and when the moment came no less than 17 members were in place, all ensconced in probably somewhat comfier chairs than usual (no offence to those in the Parish Room, but still) and we were joined by our Vicar, Chris, who always chairs our meetings.

Having been in a state of nerves all day in case it didn't work, I am thankful to report that all went very well. We began, of course, with a prayer and a moment to remember Robin Burnham, a former ringer and Tower Captain, who sadly died on Christmas Day. The Vicar thanked us all for doing whatever we could during this strange and difficult year to keep the bells sounding whenever possible, and George thanked Phil in particular for his sterling work in keeping the team together with weekly meetings (Zoom, again, of course, whatever would we do without it) and even virtual ringing practices. Each of those who had supplied a report were able to comment further if we wished and the Treasurer's report and balance sheet accepted. There were, unsurprisingly, no new ringers to welcome, and we were all sad to learn that one of our most accomplished ringers, Ann, had decided the time had come for her to retire from ringing. We all agreed that she would be much missed and wished her well.

Last year's outing, which never happened, was discussed and it was agreed that if we should be able, by next October, to undertake an outing then, we would visit most of the towers we didn't reach in 2020. (Especially as the most important one was to be Colyton, where our former curate and ringer Steve Martin

is now Rector, and he had been so disappointed by our being unable to come that he has promised us a cream tea if and when we finally do get there!)

There was very little other business to discuss and the Vicar brought the meeting to an end with Grace at 8.05 - the quickest and probably most efficient AGM in the history of Tavistock Bellringers. (Thanks to Zoom....) A date was set for next year's AGM, and we all sat back in our own chairs for the usual friendly chatter that invariably follows such meetings.

Like so much that has happened in the past year, it was a meeting with a difference, a meeting that could not have taken place without the technology now available to us all, and yet everything that needed to be done was done, without any trouble at all, and we were all able to 'meet', to see each other and converse, almost as if we had been together in reality.

All the same, it remains the fervent wish of us all that we shall be able to come together properly by this time next year and that, even sooner than that, we will be back in the tower, ringing all ten bells again, both for members of the church and for the townspeople themselves. And also for ourselves, as ringers, for that special joy we all gain from hearing the bells sound above our heads as we pull on the ropes.

Zoom is all very well and we would have been all the poorer without it during these past months, but there is nothing like the real thing!

Donna Baker