

WHY ON EARTH ARE THE BELLS RINGING NOW?



Since October 1988, the sound of bells has become part of Balsham life. (Prior to that the bells had not been in a fit state to ring for about 30 years.) To the uninitiated, however, it must seem strange that the bells ring at various times when there is no kind of church service taking place. We hope you enjoy the sound of ringing whenever it occurs, although sometimes, we know, it sounds more pleasant than others! In this series of articles I shall attempt to explain what's going on and in so doing I will also be giving a glimpse of the social life of Bellringers.

I also hope that these articles will inspire some in the village to try their hand at bell ringing. The bells don't just ring themselves, and unless people come forward, we will eventually have a magnificent, but silent, ring of bells. But don't just do it out of a sense of duty. Bellringing is great fun. It's a skill, which requires some time and perseverance to learn, and the reward is, as with most such activities, proportional to the effort. It also has a strong social side. You will soon discover people with a like interest in the neighbouring area, and then you will discover that you are made welcome anywhere that they ring bells in the English manner. (See Part 5 - Ringers on the Move in due course.) There's no snobbery in ringing - University Professors take advice from, and ring alongside, Chefs and Garage Mechanics. If you have an inflated ego, don't try it, but you'll miss meeting a lot of interesting people!

If you have some interest, there will be several things you will want to know. First, are you up to it? Well, with skill the heaviest bell here can be rung with a little finger. Having said that, there is a lower size limit, which is generally around 10 years old. Don't worry about the upper end of the age range - I have taught people over

70 with great success. The other worry people sometimes have is whether they need to be musical; a sense of rhythm certainly helps, but that's about all that's needed.

Parents in particular may worry whether bellringing is dangerous. They have visions of Quasimodo swinging on ropes. Well, it's not like that at all! Bells can be dangerous. So can cars and bicycles. You will be taught how to handle a bell safely from the outset.

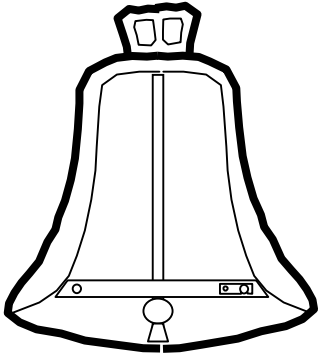
Then, what is your commitment? Do you need to go to Church? How much time will it take? You will be more than welcome at the services for which you ring, but attendance is in no way compulsory. Tuesday night practice is 2 hours, Sunday service ringing is $\frac{3}{4}$ hour. Initially, to learn to handle a bell, individual "tied" lessons will be as often as possible, by mutual arrangement. If you get really hooked, you'll be able to go to other practices (elsewhere) every night of the week!

And finally cost. Bellringing must be one of the cheapest hobbies around. This is partly because of a long established culture in which ringers give their time freely to help others, in return for like help they have received in the past. Learning to handle a bell is free. Once you are good enough to join in on practice nights, a contribution of 30p is expected, & there's an annual subscription to the Balsham Holy Trinity Ringing Guild of £3 (£1-50 for under 16s). But, when you're good enough to ring for weddings you can recoup some of that! (See Part 4, Highdays and Holidays in due course)

But all you really need to know is that bellringing can become a lifelong & absorbing hobby, which can be enjoyed at any level, & which gives you a passport to a group of friends anywhere where they ring bells in the English fashion, not only in England, but from Sydney to Washington, & also in Italy, where they do something similar.

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Part 1 - Practice Makes Perfect



When we started in October, 1988, there were just three of us who knew how to ring. During those first few months I taught about 30 people how to handle a bell, and my diary had two sessions a night, five nights a week for a couple of months in order to fit everybody in. I became quite friendly with the rat who was enjoying the harvest festival leftovers, even though one evening he nearly cost me some of my best

learners. (Don't worry he hasn't been spotted since the sheaf of corn went). Anyway, that amount of totally undisciplined, random sounding of bells would have been unbearable - for us and for you! Both then and now, when there is a new recruit, the first few individual lessons are on a bell with the clapper 'tied' so that it cannot sound. After a while on a tied bell, however, the new recruit can handle it safely and also has some measure of control over the timing of each stroke. From then on, the aim is to ring with other people, as part of a team and to sound the bell at the right time within a regular sequence. Now you do need to hear your bell.

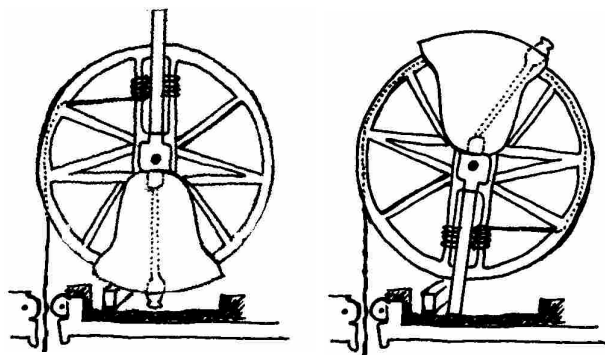
Just to give an idea of what's going on, we have six bells and one 'change' (a sequence containing all six bells) takes almost exactly two seconds, so the sounding of each bell has to be fitted in the middle of a slot a third of a second long. To do this, remember that you are turning a large lump of metal (at Balsham, anything between 4 and 13 cwt, depending on the bell) through a full circle, and the sound actually comes about two seconds after you first start pulling on the rope. There is a pleasure in mastering the control of a bell sufficiently to be able to ring it at precisely the right

moment and with team work, to develop a really good, steady rhythm, but if that's all you're doing there comes a point when it actually gets rather boring.

Well, bellringing need never be boring! If we're not ringing in the same repeated order each time, it's not (necessarily!) a mistake; if the rhythm's half reasonable, it's probably deliberate. In what's known as 'method ringing', pairs of bells swap places between each change, and very often changes are not repeated between the beginning and the end of the piece of ringing. This needs lots of practice and it's mainly this which keeps us busy on Tuesday nights nowadays. Please forgive us when we don't get it right - we're always learning.

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Part 2 - Beginnings & Endings



You may have noticed some peculiarly untidy bits at the beginning and the end of a spell of ringing. This is when we are 'raising' and 'lowering' the bells.

Normally, each time a bell sounds, it has swung in a full circle from the mouth upwards position, through mouth downwards and back to mouth upwards - so it has to start mouth upwards. Balancing up to 13 cwt of metal in this position is alright if you know what you're doing, but it would be very dangerous to leave the bells like that unsupervised. So, to start off with we have to get all the bells mouth upwards (raising) and at the end they must all be 'lowered' into the safe, mouth downwards, position.

Raising is a bit like pushing a child on a swing - a little push each time and it swings higher and higher - and lowering is the reverse. Trying to keep in time with each other while doing this is very difficult! The higher the bell gets, the longer it takes between swings, so to keep in phase, all the bells have to be raised (or lowered) at the same rate - and that doesn't happen naturally. Raising is about the only time you really have to put any physical effort into ringing. Once the bells are up, even the heaviest bell (the 'tenor') can be rung with just a little finger, but you can get quite warm raising it, and it's a lot more work (and hence slower) than for the lightest (the 'treble').

To raise or lower well, we need enough of our more experienced ringers, which even in the best regulated towers doesn't always happen right at the beginning or end of a practice - so not infrequently you will hear us raising bells singly, or in twos or threes. We also do this if we want to get all the bells raised before the beginning of a wedding, for example, without more than one or two ringers having to turn up early. (If you would like to see how a bell works, let me know and we can arrange a demonstration).

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Part 3 - Church Services



The original aim of this set of articles was to give an insight into what's going on when the bells are ringing but not for a church service, but it wouldn't be complete without a word or two about what is, after all, their main purpose.

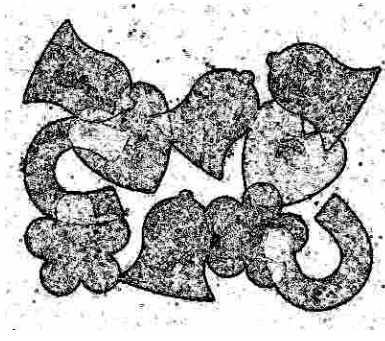
In general we ring for half to three quarters of an hour before a service, which should give anyone within earshot a chance to make it to church on time. You will know you're late if you hear us lowering (see 'beginnings and endings' last month), but just to make it absolutely clear when the service is about to begin, we chime the treble (the lightest bell) on it's own for a few moments right at the end. The services we normally ring for are the 10.30 am Sunday and Christmas Day services and the Christmas Eve 11.30 pm one, but we also ring for some special services.

Ringling for a Church Service is 'to the glory of God' and to announce publicly that the service is about to take place - to call people to Church. There is one occasion, however, when the bells do a little more than that. On Remembrance Sunday the clappers are 'half muffled'. A leather pad is fitted to one side of the clapper, which gives a very distinctive, and rather moving, sound to the ringing. Half muffled ringing is a traditional mark of respect among ringers, and on this occasion it serves to remind people at large that it is Remembrance Sunday. Other than this, the only occasion on which we use the muffles is for funerals, and also we half muffled the bells the morning after Princess Diana was killed, which happened to be a Sunday. The day after the Queen Mother died was also a Sunday - Easter Sunday. It was not appropriate to

muffle the bells for Easter Day, and in any case the Queen Mother's life was in many ways more to be celebrated than mourned. We did have some muffled ringing on the day of her funeral, however.

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Part 4 - Highdays and Holidays



Historically, church bells have been rung for all sorts of occasions - particularly royal and political events. To a certain extent they were a means of spreading news of the fortunes of war, and other major events, before the days of TV and radio. Nowadays, the only regular secular occasion for which we ring is the New Year. We usually ring for a

little while to 'ring the old year out', stopping a little before midnight. Then, after ringing twelve blows on the tenor (the first being precisely at midnight) we immediately join in with the other bells to 'ring the New Year in'.

Weddings involve a church service, of course, but I'm including them here as 'high days'. We generally ring for about half an hour, starting as the newly weds come out of the church, to celebrate a joyful occasion, and announce it to the world at large. This is one piece of ringing for which we make a charge, currently £72. This may sound a lot but we don't get very fat on it! Each ringer receives £6. The remainder is split: £18 to the Balsham tower bell fund, to pay for maintenance (we have just spent about £250 on two new ropes), and £18 to the local association Bell Fund - which helped fund the refurbishment of Balsham bells to the tune of over £1,000 in 1988, and continues to help others in a similar position. (We are prepared to consider ringing for other occasions for a similar fee. Let us know what you want!) By comparison with earlier times, the fees are, in fact, pretty paltry. Between £1 and £5 seems to have been usual in 1880 - (admittedly for cathedrals) - I wonder what that would be now?

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Part 5 - Ringers on the Move



One of the nicest things about bellringing is the friendly social life. You can expect a warm welcome as a visiting ringer on a practice night or for most Sunday Service ringing anywhere where they ring bells in the English manner. This includes not only over 5,000 villages and towns in Britain but also about 80 places in our former colonies. (There is

even a Balsham trained ringer (Nick Lampe - see picture from his Balsham days) in Sydney, Australia!) The Italian ringers are also an extremely hospitable crowd, and we made some very good friends there on holiday some years ago. Visiting other churches and meeting other ringers is great fun but it's also very good for one's ringing. It's rather like gaining lots of experience driving different cars, but also, one can do different things with different groups of ringers - more like trying out a different car, and on a skid pan. Sometimes also the visitors are there for the local band's benefit rather than their own - we owe a lot to ringers who have visited us on practice night.

We don't always just visit another tower on its practice night - every now and then we have an outing, that is we spend a day touring around an area, ringing for about an hour at five or six churches. The converse of this is that every now and then another group of ringers wants to visit Balsham on their outing. From the outset we have had a limit on visits, namely one a month maximum, but apart

from this, and providing there isn't a clash with a wedding or other local activity, we generally say yes. 'We' by the way, is in fact the Rector. The bellringers (and specifically Anita Young, our secretary) are the contact points, but the bells are under the Rector's jurisdiction and all ringing must be with her permission. We liaise with her and then reply to any requests.

Sometimes visitors like to ring a quarter peal or a peal - but more about that in the next part.

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Part 6 - Peals and Quarter Peals



To a bellringer a 'Peal' has a special meaning. Essentially, it means ringing at least 5,000 changes in one go. (A 'change' is a sequence of all the bells, each sounding once - for example 1 2 3 4 5 6 is a 'change' and 2 1 4 3 6 5 is another).

Depending on the weight of the bells this takes about three hours (almost exactly at Balsham) and that's quite a long time to keep going both mentally and physically. There are many reasons for wanting to ring a peal. For some it's the challenge of being able to keep going without mistake for that long (a bit like running a marathon I suppose - although I've never done that). For others it's the opportunity to get an extended piece of really good ringing, which gives them a chance to enjoy the musical and mathematical side of it. Whatever the attractions for the individual ringers though, peals are almost invariably rung to mark a special occasion, and this goes for quarter peals too. Quarter peals, as you may suppose, are at least 1250 changes long, and take about three quarters of an hour. They are rung by ringers who aren't quite confident about being able to keep going for three hours, ringers who haven't got three hours to spare, or just ringers who don't enjoy marathons. We have rung various quarter peals, generally with a little outside help. (All the ringers in the one we rang before the licensing of Francis Woolley in February 2001 were from Balsham or West Wrating bands.)

Peals and quarter peals do go on for quite a long time, but they should be good ringing; we hope you enjoy them. We generally advertise peals in advance in the Review, and put up a notice in the church saying why we are ringing, but a word of warning. Ringers

are a very friendly lot, but you will not get a very friendly reception if you try and speak to anyone ringing a peal or quarter peal. It requires a lot of concentration, and if you cause someone to lose their place, then everyone will have to start again, or the attempt will just have to be given up. Come and see us on a Tuesday night instead, and we can guarantee that the welcome will be warm, even if the church isn't!