

Through the Wardrobe Door – a tale of new ringers

We didn't set out to become bell-ringers. On that fateful sunny day in July 2014, all we did set out to do was to spend a few pleasant hours at the Stockton Heath Festival. But there, between the usual displays on the field - the dog show, the craft stands and the tea-tent, was the Ambergate Campanile, a more unusual sight that inevitably drew us in. After watching from a safe distance for a while, we rather self-consciously had a go. Learning the story of St. Thomas' Church and the Bollington Bells, our fate was sealed and we signed up.

Fast forward to late autumn of that year and our first introductory meeting at St Mary's, Weaverham. "We've got to go *up there*?" It seemed to be a very narrow door and an even narrower stone staircase, spiralling steeply upwards. With relief, we almost fell through the door at the top and dropped down into our very first ringing chamber. It's hard to describe that initial impression as there was so much to take in: Stonework and mullioned windows, old pews and window nooks, a ladder hung on the wall, clocks, notices, plaques which made little sense and of course, the rather ominous dangling bell ropes. "Don't touch the ropes!" A group of nervous looking people were already gathered, then more crowded in, adding to a slightly claustrophobic atmosphere that was somehow exciting at the same time. Friendly strangers explained the mysteries of full-circle ringing and demonstrated how it was done. And then we were invited to visit the bells themselves. Another tight ascent and we squeezed in. It was dark and cold in the bell chamber that night, with the wind whistling through the louvres, through which we could glimpse the lights and church yard far below. If we were going to be put off the whole thing, this was when it would happen, standing in that cramped and creepy space, looking at the waiting bells. But it didn't. Like the children climbing through the cupboard in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to find a whole new world, so it proved to be for us that night as we stumbled through the ringing chamber door. Little did we know what adventures lay ahead!

And so to the serious business of bell handling. "But I'll drop the tail end, wont I?" The dozen or so of us that make up the nascent band were spread around five local towers. Thus far, we have variously attempted rounds, call-changing, ringing up and down and now Plain Hunting. "Some of that sounded quite good!" The new language, rules and organisation of The Exercise are becoming familiar and our confidence is slowly improving; such is the progress that is likely to be familiar to all readers of this article.

More unusual, perhaps, are those activities associated with a completely new installation of bells. Our ring of 8, generously donated by St. John's Church, Bollington, has been augmented by two new memorial bells. Watching these being cast at Taylor's was an unforgettable and strangely moving experience! And more recently, as the bells have arrived at the church to be installed, some of us (and many other volunteers) found themselves donning the high-viz vests and hard hats. Up and down the scaffolding they have gone, sawing, hammering, hoisting, heaving and tightening bolts. The bells themselves were brought into the church to await their final journey up the tower. Bedecked in flowers, they were a beautiful sight, visited by all ages, from the very old to the very young. It was interesting to see how many people just wanted to touch them. "...because I'll never get another chance!" and take a selfie to share on social media. On the Sunday, there was a Service of Blessing conducted by the Revd. Michael Ridley. This was another surprisingly moving occasion; particularly when Graham, the former tower captain from Bollington, spoke about how much they all miss the sound of their bells ringing out across the valley. As their new custodians, we are starting to sense the responsibility of the ring!

The church service brought together a wide range of people from both the local and ringing communities.

And it is this that has been the greatest find of our new 'hobby' – the community. The 'nervous-looking group' have become our friends, as have the patient band members and tutors in our training towers. We have been embraced without reserve. They have encouraged us to join in the other aspects of ringing – 'part two', social events, tower outings, branch meetings and all the rest. (Being 'persuaded' to join a scratch band in the branch striking competition, was not what we had anticipated when turning up to just help serve the teas!) We have been welcomed into their homes, and they into ours. Bell-ringing has made us look both inwards and outwards. Inwards to the local community – the churches, the villages and the wonderful people who create and sustain them; and outwards, to the wider ringing world contained in hundreds of other ringing chambers up and down the land. We may not be able to say we started ringing at the age of five, nor are we likely to grab a long list of towers, but it has been a delight to at least start a whole new journey as we get older! Proud recipients of Guild-membership certificates, we are now eagerly awaiting the moment when we can ring in our own tower. It's going to be a very special Christmas this year.

It's a good job we didn't head straight for the tea-tent...



Bell handling



The Revd. Michael Ridley blessing the bells



Part of the installation workforce. Left to right: Ian, Peter, John, Steve (Taylor's bell hanger) and Ray.



Members of the new band for Stockton Heath.

Left to Right: Peter, Steve, Jackie (front), Carol, Gregory, Joanne, John, Sarah and Paul

Photo courtesy of Nick.



Members of the band 'helping' dismantle the mobile belfry at the Hatton Show 2015!

Unless stated otherwise, all photos courtesy of John.