

Exeter Ringing outing May 2-5 2014

After a frantically busy week in Lewes, which very nicely included joining the Seaford ringers for their annual dinner on Tuesday night, we headed West to a rented cottage about 10 miles outside Exeter. It was a lovely cottage, and, being exhausted, we decided to miss the first tower at Cadbury, which would have meant a slow cross-country drive for us.

Instead we joined the local band in Dunsford, just a mile away, for their practise night. If my memory is correct, they are members of the Devonshire ringers, rather than the Devon Guild. This means that change ringing is the order of the day, with no hand-stroke gap, and the bells slightly lowered. This is very different to our style, but the biggest shock is that they coil the tail end of the rope round the left wrist. Apparently if they do not make this coil they are terrified of losing their rope, and the right hand never leaves the rope as the sally rises; one just lets the rope slide through the fingers! The tail end of the rope only has a very short length doubled back. Striking was typically very good and the lower very even. We were given a very warm welcome, and thoroughly enjoyed this introduction to Devon-style change ringing.

Saturday morning was a time to meet all the ringers for the weekend. It always feels a bit like the first day back at school; who has come back again, will there be any new faces? This year there was one new (and young) face, Alan Collins' granddaughter Madeleine (joined later by her parents), while the rest were old friends. Before setting off on the trip I updated Marion's tower list to include the number and weights of all the bells; my overall feeling was that there were lots of bells, and heavy ones at that. To start the trip rolling we had a 12 bell tower in Crediton. These bells went well and so plain hunt on 12 was not a struggle.

At Crediton I had an interesting discussion about the two types of ringing. Crediton, when it was an 8 bell tower, was all for call changes. When augmented from 8 to 10, and then to 12, the pressure for method-ringing increased. I also discovered that my old tower captain from South Wales (Peter Bennett) and his brother-in-law, were largely instrumental in this change. There are clearly two ringing 'factions' in the county, but they are largely friendly, with plenty of cross over.

The drive through the beautiful Devon country side took us to a 6 (Shobrooke) followed by a 15cwt 10 (Thorverton) before lunch. Once refreshed, we enjoyed the 8 at Silverton, hidden behind an organ undergoing major reconstruction. The following 20cwt 8 at Bradninch were too much for me to handle, and others found them difficult, so I escaped after struggling with a plain course of Grandsire Triples. The final tower of the day was a very satisfying 10cwt 10 (Cullompton) that sounded very deep, but went well.

Sunday morning ringing was due to start at 9.20am in Tiverton, which was approximately 45 minutes drive from our holiday cottage. The following tower was in Exeter, and so we decided to be a bit lazy and skip the first tower of the day. However, even at 11.30am we encountered major traffic problems in Exeter, trying to get to St Thomas, south of the river Exe. Some ringers arrived late for this tower, as one driver had left his car lights on overnight, and having given the hotel reception the wrong car number (his wife's) they could not advise him of the lights on situation – hence a flat battery and a request for the AA! The next tower was rather interesting; St Petroc's is one of several small, mediaeval, red sandstone churches in the City, sitting right on the main Exeter High Street. Part of the church is now given over to a ringing centre, with 5cwt 6, set in one corner at ground level. Ringing there was not easy, as all the ropes were very long.

The highlight of the day, and probably of the weekend too, was our visit to Exeter Cathedral. With 14 bells (12 plus 2 semi-tones) this is the heaviest ring in the world, helped in no small way by the second heaviest tenor, at 72cwt. Access to the chamber involved over 120 steps, followed by a long walk across the area between the nave vaulting and the roof. It took three people to raise the tenor, and it is common for two people to turn the tenor in. We started by ringing rounds – at a slow pace; a typical peal time runs over 4 hours. I rang on the 10cwt 6,

not being very used to heavy bells: this was quite enough for me. Braver mortals were allowed to try the tenor. Sheila struggled to pull off the 4, and needed help! A course of Cambridge Royal was rung with the help of some of the local band. Due to parking in a time limited area, we had to leave before the end of this session, but this did give us a chance to hear the bells from outside – again a very splendid sound, still audible from a reasonable distance in the High Street.



Nick and Peter raised the tenor – with some local help.

The final tower of the day (Pinhoe) was in a beautiful setting on a hill, high above Exeter. We took a coffee-break in the churchyard, and admired the views across Exeter to the Haldon Hills on the other side of the estuary. Everyone was pleased to find a nice spacious car park, after city centre difficulties, but our relief was short-lived, when we were told that a Deanery Service was due to take place, right after our ringing session, and that the Bishop would be coming; a hasty re-arrangement of parking was required, so that ringers could be free to leave afterwards. The bells were fairly easy going, and we managed some nice methods. Towards the end of ringing we had to compete with the Vicar playing the keyboard at high volume just before the service began - he won!

Most of the ringers then went back to Tiverton for a communal meal.

Monday: our final day. Marion had arranged for 3 six bell towers for us, starting with Tiverton at 9.45am. This time we did drive to Tiverton, getting out of the car with the first strike of the first method. This was very enjoyable ground floor ring; methods rung included Cambridge and St Clements. A note for anyone planning a ringing trip to this beautiful county, do make allowance for “the Devon Mile” when calculation travel times. Those narrow winding lanes, with their high hedges make for very slow progress.

At the second tower (Stoodleigh) we had a warm welcome from the tower captain of a call change tower; the bells recently rehung. The session included a group photo, and also a big thanks from everyone to Marion, for all

her hard work organising the trip. She promises that next year her husband will remember the registration numbers of both their cars (see earlier) and know which one that they are travelling in!



Our cross-country journey to the third and final tower (Washfield) was made harder because we did not have an OS map of the area, and some road signs were broken. Retracing our path on Google Earth later, I think we did four sides of a triangle (!) The direct route would have been much quicker.

Final towers often lead to discussions for next year. We all enjoyed this year's trip, and the gorgeous Devon countryside. Egged on by the Collins family, and Jenny Dearie, there was talk of another trip to Devon next year; the Plymouth area comes with strong recommendations from them.. This year we had 18 ringers (give or take), with extra help from the Cathedral ringers, and this is a very manageable number. We even managed a dry Bank Holiday Monday until about 5pm, on our way back to our holiday cottage. Total driving miles for the 14 towers visited was 160 miles, something our American friends would feel very envious about – and this ignores the many other towers we drove past on our tour.

My initial concern about the weight of the bells was not justified. Although I did not offer to ring the 72cwt tenor, I didn't feel too restricted in ringing. Our newest ringer, Alan's granddaughter Madeline, has been ringing for less than a year, but was happy to treble for various methods as well as ringing the 2 at the Cathedral. We all hope that she will join us on future tours.

Again thank you Marion Hollands for all your hard work.

Michael Cotgrove (Edited by Sheila Wood)