

TOWER CAPTAIN'S REPORT TO STAPLEHURST TOWER AGM 2021

At this point in time one year ago, our band was not ringing at all, as the Government social-distancing measures made ringing here impossible. Covid-19 infections and deaths were rising exponentially due to the new and highly-infectious Delta variant. The whole country headed into yet another major lockdown (basically all social activities over the Christmas and New Year period were cancelled and extended well into the spring). For the first time in my "tenure" at Staplehurst, the bells were not rung for Remembrance Sunday or any physical church service (until normal services restarted in late May), due to the various lockdown restrictions. In an effort to raise community spirits, three ringers in my own family "bubble" (Steve, Chris and myself - with enthusiastic "assistance" by 2-year old grand-daughter Erin) did, though, ring briefly on Christmas morning 2020. Chris and I also tolled the tenor for 20 minutes to mark the funeral of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh on 17th April 2021.

Towards the end of December 2020 the Oxford Astra-Zeneca Vaccine was approved, so (together with the Pfizer & Moderna vaccines) the long hoped-for way out of this pandemic was beginning to look more certain. That said, it would be almost another six months before most of us had been double-vaccinated and felt confident enough to begin ringing again in May. Even then, we took things very gingerly at first, keeping both windows open in the ringing room, placing bands, carrying out regular lateral flow tests and wearing masks. Exercising our ringing muscles and brains again after such a long break, also took a lot of effort. We were rewarded, however, with positive Facebook posts from the local community who appreciated hearing the bells again. We achieved one quarter peal of Norwich Minor on 13th July 2021. It is hoped that more quarter peals will be attempted soon, as these are by far the best way to improve our ringing expertise.

Going into autumn 2021, the number of new covid-19 cases, hospital admissions and deaths are all reducing, the fully-vaccinated population nears 80%, with boosters being rolled out alongside the winter flu vaccines. Those of us who have returned to ringing are beginning to feel sufficiently confident to dispense with masks in the tower (unless anyone requests otherwise) but we continue to keep ventilation at a maximum, regardless of the weather, in order to keep the virus transmission risks as low as possible.

As I write this report in October 2021, I am acutely aware of the need to build up the number and expertise of our ringers, to safeguard the future of our band and ringing in general. The pandemic and a variety of other factors have very effectively halved the size of the band over the past 19 months. A dozen ringers have not (yet) returned to ringing, although the door will always remain open to any who change their minds. Mostly this has been due to advancing frailties, moving away or a refocussing of how people spend their free time.

The age-profile of our remaining ringers is now predominantly 60+ with very few able to teach new recruits. With none of us getting any younger, it is now extremely urgent that we pass on our skills to the next and younger generation of potential ringers. We are fortunate to have Adam and Steve who support the band when their work and/or young family commitments allow. We do need to actively concentrate on attracting new recruits in the under 50 age group.

In addition, the Steele family from Frittenden are very willing and positively welcome to boost our numbers. It was very gratifying to be able to ring all 10 for Sunday Service recently, a rare treat these days. Learning to ring, as all ringers appreciate (particularly if they come to it later in life), needs a great deal of time and application from both teacher and student. I hope that everyone will give constructive and positive thought to the part they could play to help implement the very urgent "Recruitment and Training Strategy".

Similarly, the AGM Agenda item "Handbell Team Development Strategy" also needs in depth thought and positive action to get this team up and running. You will recall that in 2019 the band agreed to invest a great deal of its funds to purchasing a set of 25 handbells for tune or change ringing. A launch meeting held in February 2020 looked very positive and was well-supported...and then the pandemic hit. We now need a champion, not necessarily the ultimate person who will lead this new team in the longer term, but someone with a knowledge of music and ringing to relaunch. Someone to raise the interest of the public and get a team together to ring the handbells. If no-one comes forward I would suggest we consider selling them to recoup the value of our investment.

Finally, I would like to thank the tower officers and other ringers who all pull together to keep ringing at Staplehurst and/or elsewhere. It will be a hard task to rebuild our band to the heady heights of Surprise Royal but with goodwill and application, each one of us can take steps towards progress and encourage others to learn our peculiar and rewarding skills in ringing.

Sue Bassett
Tower Captain
10th October 2021