

A personal history of the Balsham Holy Trinity Ringing Guild

Richard Pargeter

Background

I have been Tower Captain of the Balsham Holy Trinity Ringing Guild since its formation in 1989, following the augmentation and re-hanging of the bells at Balsham in 1988. With the break in activities in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it seemed as good a time as any to bring some of the previous 31 years' memories together. This is largely a personal history, with a little input from other people, who I have tried to acknowledge. I take responsibility for any errors.

In the beginning (for me)

Diana and I moved to Balsham from Duxford in the spring of 1986. We had been building a bungalow since the end of the previous year, and there was a huge amount still to be done to complete it and to get the large garden in order. When we moved in, we put the bed on a square of carpet on the spare room floor, with no curtains (to windows which fortunately looked out onto an old field hedge, with a horse field beyond) and we had a half-built kitchen with just a Baby Belling cooker. The garden was essentially mud, except for the scrub round the edges which we had intentionally left for wildlife and to keep the wind at bay. So, I didn't have a lot of time to spare for other projects.

Meanwhile, Bill Girard, the then Rector, was gearing up to complete necessary works on the church tower, which had been started with the insertion of a reinforced concrete liner in the 1970s. He judged that the extra interest and support (including financial) that he would receive by including rehanging of the bells in this work would outweigh the additional trouble and cost. I think that he was correct, although I have never analysed the figures, but if he was, this was to a large extent down to Bill's facility for getting people directly involved at little or no cost, and getting his own hands dirty. The bells were taken out by the Royal Engineers from Waterbeach as an exercise, and Balsham Buildings were roped in to do a lot of the movement of the bells and frame on the ground. Then, it didn't take him long to discover that I had just taught a new band of ringers at Duxford. From that point on there was no escape!

Alan Roffey (in the pictures to the right) commented recently that *"I do remember how long it took to hoist those bells back into the belfry I think you had to haul 50 feet on the chain to lift the bell by one foot, such was the gearing on the pulleys – it took for ever and I don't think I would want to do it now!"*



The new frame. Mrs Wind (Bill Girard's mother) watching from a grave stone; Alan Roffey and Frank Barker on the right.



Alan Roffey, Andy Slepyan, Frank Barker and Bruce Roser negotiating the step with one of the returning bells.



Bill Girard with the new treble. Clare Starr in the stripy top and Andy Slepyan on the right in the left hand picture, and Jenny Hicks, Daniel Faircloth and Zoe Merry to the right of Mrs Wind in the right hand picture were all early members of the band.

Fortunately the timing worked out well. We were just getting sorted on the house and garden front by the time that the bells were ready in the autumn of 1988. I organised a band of ringers¹ for the inauguration service on 2nd October, which included representatives of the local ringing association, (Ely Diocesan Association of Church Bellringers) and the tower captain from Duxford - all of whom I would be leaning on to help me train a band - and Mike Neale, Peter Neale's brother, who was the only remaining active ringer from the previous Balsham band that I was aware of. (Mike still rings at Inverness, where I was able to visit and ring with him in summer 2015.)

Earlier in the year (the weekend of 16th and 17th of April) there was a tower open day, and I put a sign-up sheet out inviting anyone interested in learning to ring to leave their names and contact details. Thirty two people signed up! I can't remember exactly how many came to the meeting we held after that, where I explained what was involved, but I do know that the Monday after the flower festival / harvest festival weekend when the bells were inaugurated, I started teaching, and that over the next month I (with support from my ringing friends) gave 24 learners between 1 and 9 lessons each. I was at the church four or five nights of the week, often for two sessions (at 6 and 7:45 pm), and the occasional Saturday morning, with between two and six learners at each. This continued, scaled down a bit throughout November and December, but with the Tuesday practice night introduced after a month, from 1st November. I remember that on that first occasion we had to ration each learner to one go at rounds, with a band of competent ringers on the other 5 bells, and someone standing behind them. I don't know how I managed all this, but I do know I couldn't have done it alone!

When we started, I set a target. We were to ring for Christmas, and this we achieved. I can't remember the band, but it would have included Pam Down, Helen Brookes (ready-made ringers who I didn't have to teach) and myself, but acceptable rounds with even three learners of under three months experience was quite an achievement. Remember, they were all learning together, so I wasn't able to give intensive training to any of them.

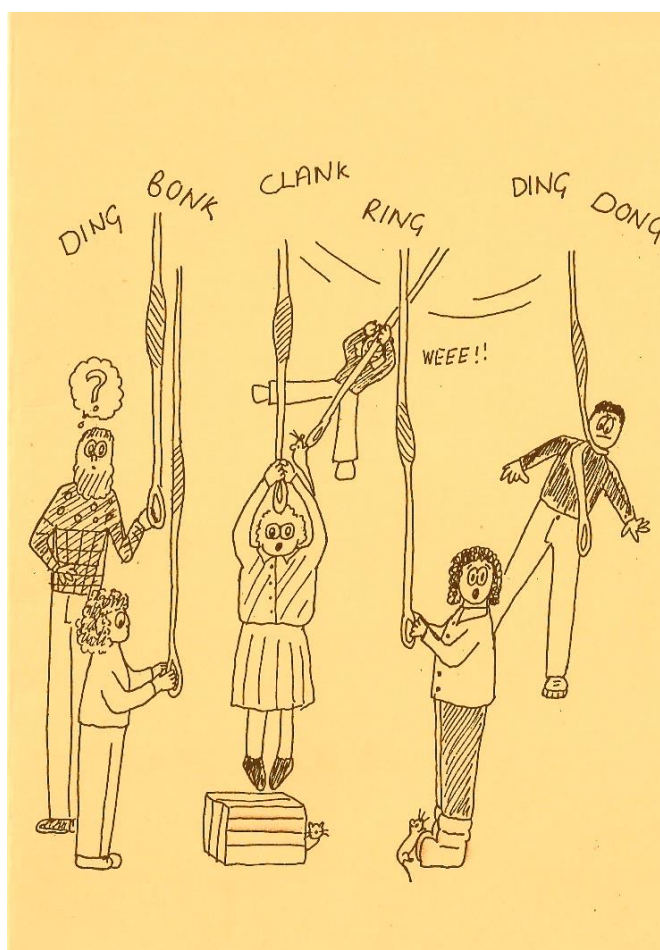
On 11th January 1989, the Balsham Holy Trinity Ringing Guild was formally established. Sixteen were present, including the Rector, and there were two apologies. We agreed a name and constitution, and elected officers. There were 26 founder ringing members, of whom three (Helen Brookes, Pam

¹ The band was: John Gipson (President, EDA Cambridge District), treble; Richard Pargeter, 2; Ian Barton (Tower captain, Duxford), 3; Mike Neale, 4; Ian Davies (Secretary, EDA Cambridge District), 5; Alan Winter (EDA General Secretary), tenor.

Down and me) were already competent ringers, and the rest raw recruits. In 1990 it was recorded that only 17 had paid their subscriptions, so perhaps that is a better number, but nevertheless, a healthy start. It included ten children (in italics below).

Founder Members

Helen Brookes
Sarah Cobb
 Pauline Daniels
Pam Down (Treasurer)
Daniel Faircloth
Jenny Hicks
Benjamin Johnson
Margaret Johnson
Jane Kerry
Nick Lampe
 Sylvia Merry
Zoe Merry
 Pat Manning
 Janet Pettit
 Lucy Pettit
Rachel Plumb
 Stuart Purdie
Richard Pargeter (Tower Captain)
 Alan Roffey (Tower Keeper)
Katie Roffey
 Karl Rouse
 Andrew Slepian
Clare Starr
Laura West
Anita Young (Secretary)
 Richard Young
 Diana Pargeter (Associate Member)



A bank account was set up, and immediately received a donation of £7.80 from Janet Pettit who had commissioned a Christmas card illustrating the early days. I am the tall, bearded character, looking bemused, the short lady on a box is Pauline Daniels, Clare Starr is swinging gleefully on a rope (I hope the bell is down!) and I think it is Karl Rouse, Lucy Pettit's boyfriend at the time, apparently trying to hang himself (he did have some handling issues – but not quite that bad!). I think the ringer in front of me is Jane Kerry, and the lady with a rat on her boot is Janet. This rat had been enjoying a sheaf of corn in the tower (the inauguration coincided with Harvest Festival), and I saw it briefly when I opened up on several occasions. However, on this occasion it had apparently climbed up the metal spiral stair, and in the middle of a teaching session, lost its nerve and fell off and landed on the brick floor in the middle of the circle. It lay there stunned for a few moments before running off under a chest, but by this time, Janet, dutifully holding on to her tail end as she had been taught, was half way out of the tower (bear in mind, it was ground floor then). I took it off her just in time!

As one might expect, these numbers didn't hold up (and would have been a challenge anyway – on a 2 hour practice night, when only one or two of the less experienced could sensibly be ringing together, twenty three learners wouldn't get much rope time!). Nevertheless, at the next AGM I reported that

17 had rung at some time or another for Sunday service, and that there were about 12 regulars remaining. We also elected a ready-made ringer, Len Mead, at that time. I believe that 4 or 5 of those initial learners are still ringing, or in the case of Nick Lampe, continued until his death (in October 2013 see [Balsham Review, November 2013](#)).

One thing which the records don't show easily is that we have, over the years, only failed to ring for a service or other formal occasion when requested to do so on a handful of occasions over the 31 years between 1989 and 2019. Anita Young, Margaret Johnson and I have been a continuous part of that, with total numbers of occasions rung for being 1341, 758 and 1349. Pam Down had a break from ringing in Balsham, but is now back with us, and Benjamin Johnson is still an active ringer (in Leeds). Based on Sunday service ringing records, some members have only lasted a year, while most have



Earliest picture of the band, June 1989.

Richard Pargeter, Janet Pettit, Daniel Faircloth, Pam Down, Clare Starr, Nick Lampe, Jane Kerry, Anita Young.

continued for 5 years or so and a few for a bit over 10 years. Some have given up because of ill health, some have moved away (Nick Lampe holds the record there, having emigrated to Australia), but some have just lost interest, or succumbed to the pressure of work or exams. Whatever the reasons, it is essential for the continuation of ringing to continually recruit and train new people. Over the 31 years I have taught 77 ringers who have continued long enough to feature in the Sunday service ringing records, and a few more who didn't. By contrast, including myself, there have been only 9 'ready-made' ringers. Retention of ringers is often discussed by the wider ringing fraternity and there have been various studies and initiatives aimed at trying to improve the situation. So far as Balsham is concerned, I believe that we have uniformly maintained a very friendly atmosphere, and done everything we can to keep people interested, but life is busy, there are many competing attractions, and you can't legislate for ill health and a proportion of people do move away. I don't think we've done too badly.

Tower Captain	
Richard Pargeter	1989 to present
Secretary	
Anita Young	1989 to 2013
Clare Chappell	2014 to 2017
Claire Tucker	2018 to present
Treasurer	
Pam Down	1989 to 1994
Anne Bridge	1995 to 2000
Cheryl Wise	2001 to 2004
Julia Watkinson	2005 to 2013
Lara Pearson	2014 to present
Tower Keeper	
Alan Roffey	1989 to 1995
Benjamin Johnson	1996 to 1998
Ashley Johnson	1999 to 2004
Mike McCall	2006 to 2011
Mike Leeson	2012 to 2016
Charles Tallack	2017 to present

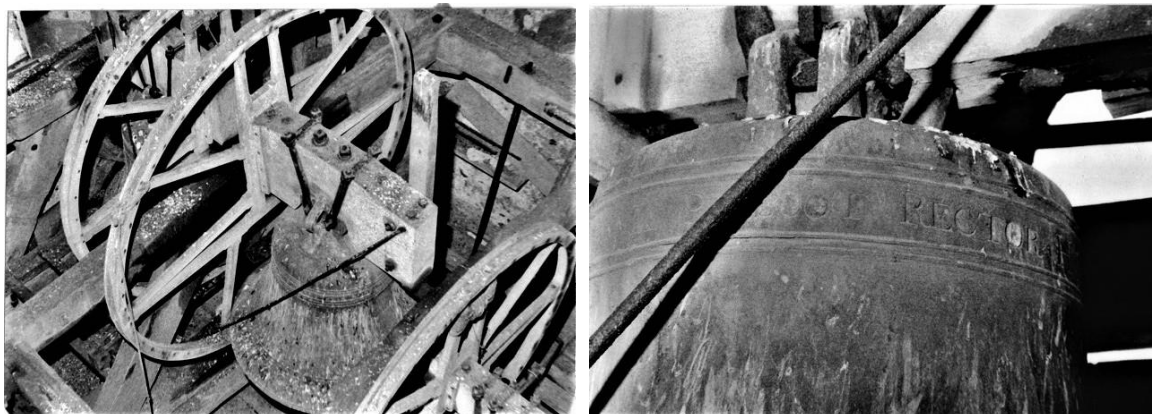
BHTRG Officers



*Nick Lampe's final practice before Australia.
Pat Manning, Janet Pettit, Anita Young, Daniel Faircloth, Nick Lampe, Richard Pargeter, Clare Starr, Pam Down.*

Infrastructure

I did see the bells in the old frame, but didn't photograph them. The only two pictures of them before rehanging that I am aware of are these ones. A notable feature of these images is a large quantity of pigeon muck!



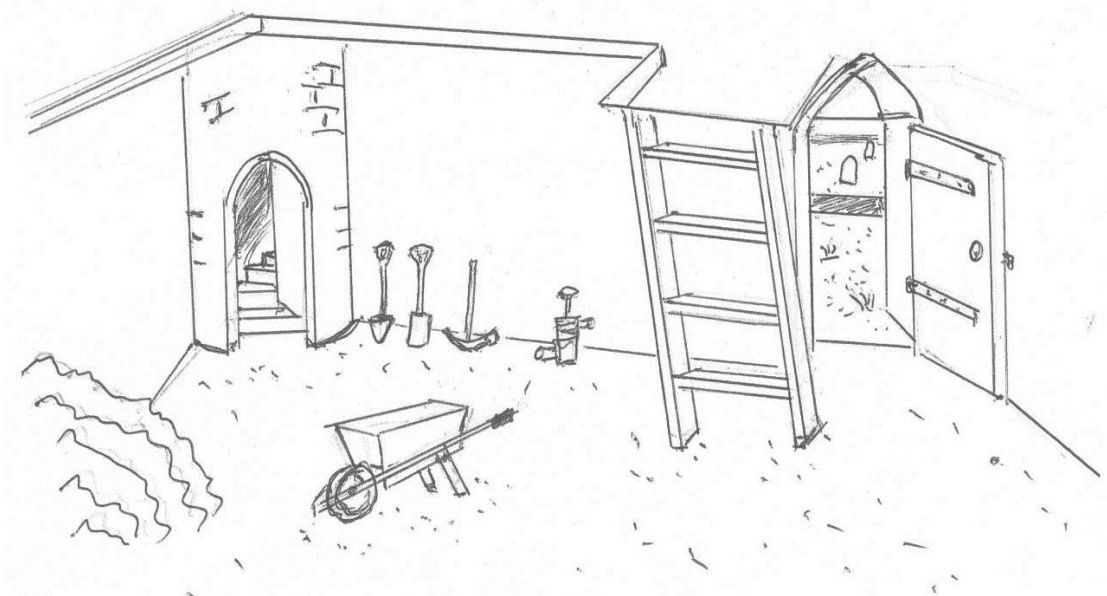
Before they were rehung, the bells had been rung from a raised floor which was over the coke store for the stove in the church. This was before the tower was stabilised with reinforced concrete in the 1970s, after which the bells were not rung until they were augmented and rehung in 1988, and ringing was then from the ground floor. Peter Neale has provided the following text and sketch explaining the post second World War history:

PSALM 48 v. 12.... 'Tell of the Towers thereof, Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; That ye may tell it to the generation following'.

In the nineteen-forties, when some men had returned from the War and church bells were no longer just early warning signals, a team of Balsham residents, mostly farm workers, council workers and lorry drivers, started ringing the five bells hung high in the tower. However, about 1950 the Wooden Bell Frame cracked and it became dangerous to swing the bells right up.

For the next about five years, Mr James Gray (Jimmy), (Peoples Warden) and his son Russell announced the start of a service, by chiming the 2nd bell, they also took on the task of climbing the ladders to wind up the church clock, every day!

Access to the tower was through a small wooden door in the southwest corner, (now blocked up, but with a water tap in that position {outside – in the corner of the disabled toilet inside}). Mr Gray and ringers then had to climb five wooden steps to the ringing floor, under which was stored the coke fuel for the church's two tortoise heating stoves, and the grave digger's wheelbarrow, spade and pick-axe and the pump to dry out water filled graves.



Sketch showing beneath the ringing floor prior to tower repairs, looking south. Door to the outside on the right, spiral stair on the left – already out of use in the 1950s.

It should be noted that the nave stove stood on the north side beside the nearest last full column, with a flue-pipe of about 10 inches diameter passing at about 7 feet above the floor into the masonry of the north east corner of the tower. Once inside, the flue turned skywards and eventually arrived out in the NE corner of the tower lead roof !



The nave, with the organ at the West end, and the tortoise stove (screened) on the right.

About 1955, after my Brother, Michael and I had removed 8 'pulp bags' full of twigs, that the jackdaws had brought in through the slit - window in this staircase, my father, Alan Neale (Rector's Warden) repaired, with the aid of steel plates (actually the sides from a hay / straw baler from K.N.S. Balsham Ltd), the bell frame.

Also just visible in the south east corner was a doorway to a completely worn out spiral stone staircase, which earlier clock-winders had worn out, and in which were stored remnants of the original 'chancel east window', 2 pieces of which now hang in the south aisle windows.

The close - boarded ringing floor stretched from corner to corner with a match boarding wall infilling the high nave west arch. A central, near vertical, 16 rung, ladder led upwards to the wooden intermediate floor, through a square hole and then if one was winding the clock, one had another shorter ladder to climb.

This intermediate floor was at the same level as the present-day floor [the ceiling to the ringing chamber], giving access to the 'Wall Safes' made in the thick tower walls and now more

importantly, to the spiral Stone Staircase in the South West walls and buttresses, leading up to the Bell Frame and its five bells.

Once the bells were able to be rung again, Arnold Lambert, George and Jim Freestone, 'Dusty and Wally' Beeton, Peter Cunningham and Michael Neale made up regular teams for Balsham Church Services, and toured to ring in other local towers.



Left to right (back): Arnold Lambert, Jim Freestone, Peter Cunningham, Bill Jolly, Michael Neale, George Freestone, Walter Beeton.

Seated: Alan Neale (Rector's Warden), Rev, Guy Ford (Rector), James Gray (People's warden)

However the fabric of Balsham tower was on the move; A E Beeton and Son, local builders at the Old Plough on the corner of West Wickham and West Wrattling Roads, under the direction of Harry Beeton, firstly tied in the buttresses around the upper spiral stair with metal hoops inside and out, and then had to tackle the South East corner where masonry was falling into the Nave. The newly installed, between the tower and the font, Walker organ, had to have scaffolding erected over it with galvanised sheets to keep off larger chunks, but the dust finally encouraged the organ to be removed to a platform built in the former organ chamber beside the chancel.

The west wall of the south aisle was taking the thrust of the crumbling tower, so Harry and his team rebuilt the south buttress with floor bricks and then started on the nave side of the tower. Having removed many a barrowful of dry sand and mortar, they then rebuilt the south east corner, removing the old lower spiral stair.

Obviously, during this time of tower instability the ringing team had to stop, and although welcome in other towers, eventually to disband. This is where I came in, never a proper ringer, I took to chiming the three smallest bells, one in each hand and one under a foot, for services, and if not me then Bill Jolly performed, and we learned to continue chiming whilst squinting through a small hole in the match boarding to see when to stop. This hole was quite near the cast iron bell hanger's plate put up by Bullock & Co.

By now the Reverend Guy Ford had retired as had my father, to be replaced by the Reverend Jack Hunter and I respectively. Knowing the financial limitations of the Parochial Church

Council, the Rev. Jack went to the village with a public meeting to ask: "Do the people of Balsham want their church tower to fall down and the costs of clearing away the rubble and rebuilding the west end of the nave? Or, do they want to take it down and rebuild a new tower, or do they want it to be repaired and strengthened with an inner reinforced concrete core? So started the mammoth task of raising enough funds and proceeding with the third choice

Well, the decision was to repair and strengthen with an inner reinforced concrete core, and that resulted in the removal of the raised ringing floor. Thus, when the bells were re-hung in 1988, they were rung from the ground floor, open to the rest of the church.

In 1996, Bill Girard announced plans at our AGM for major changes to the tower. (We had been planning to install curtains to make it a bit warmer in the winter, and he wanted to prevent us from wasting our money on this.) In 1997 he hoped that decisions and approval would be given soon for a raised ringing floor to allow for toilets and a kitchen below. However, the following year he was still no further forward, and in the minutes of the 1999 meeting the tower works were said to be *"at an impasse at the moment. The Rector is very depressed about it all"*. The 2000 minutes state *"Nothing happening at the moment"*, and by the next meeting, Bill had retired, and nothing more was heard of these plans. We were still on the ground floor, and without curtains!

I have no record of details of those plans, but I do recall that at one point they involved moving the font and having a floor which extended across that area, giving a gallery space for the ringers, opening out from a glazed ringing room. Work on a possibly less grand plan did start, and Peacocks from West Watting measured up for the woodwork, but work stopped when Stan Stinton was told by the Powers that he was not allowed to work on his own. It is also recorded in our minutes that Bill was considering opening up the staircase in the south west corner (which may not exist) to gain access. The main reservation I would have had about the grand plans was that the ringers would only just about have been visible from the east end of the church, and we would have lost our connection with the main body of the church.

Fast forward to 2014, and we had got curtains back on the agenda, but Julie Norris told us that *"we need to seek advice on how to proceed with this project especially in regards to maintaining the aesthetics of the arch which is a nice feature of the church and thus a compromise may be necessary"*. In the same minutes it is recorded that we were asked to write a letter of support for the 'community room project' to say that we would use the kitchen, toilets etc. However, at our next AGM in January 2015 we had our first sight of the plans. Work was scheduled to start in 2016. The base of the tower was to be used for toilets, and there was to be a ringing floor above. I knew there would be problems immediately I saw the neat hexagon showing rope positions, which was neither the current situation nor a feasible proposition. From that point on I worked very hard to get involved in planning and decision making. Initially I campaigned for a small gallery with access via a stair from the body of the church, but the 'rare 13th century arch' was considered too special to be obscured in any way and this was firmly rejected. A meeting was held on site in April with the architect and Alan Hughes from Whitechapel bell foundry (which we were not invited to, but which I nevertheless attended along with Mike Leeson, our tower keeper!). This highlighted several problems with the existing design, which I detailed in a document I passed to the PCC. The issues were not perfectly resolved, but I think that it was at this time that the architect, Helen Axworthy, hit on the idea of reversing the pitch of the spiral stair which did improve access, and in the 2016 minutes it is reported that *"we finally have plans that look to accommodate everything. The idea is to have half glass panelling on the balcony to allow visibility and the staircase will be arranged to allow us as much space in the ringing chamber as possible. The plans are not exactly what everyone wanted but at least we will gain new toilets and a*

kitchen.” I once again asked to be involved, but it remained a struggle, and progress was slow. It was during 2018 that I became aware that some decisions had finally been made and work looked imminent, so I approached the PCC in October to get forewarning of the expected schedule, plans for clearing the tower area, and to ask to be involved in detailed planning. Nevertheless I didn’t see any detailed plans until the end of November (when I was provided with the ones which had been issued for tender in June). Review of these revealed two major issues for the ringers.

First, access was to be by a spiral stair in the original position, but with only 507mm clear width, (compared with 800mm required by building regulations, and 675mm for the existing stair). To cut a long story short, it was accepted that 507mm was too narrow, and the existing stair was re-used, rotated by 90°.

Second, with everything retained behind the arch, as required by the Diocesan Advisory Committee, (DAC) there was very limited space on the east side of the new ringing floor. The glass balustrade was uncomfortably close for those with a nervous disposition, and there was very limited room for those not actually ringing to stand or sit around safely. I realised that if the floor were to be extended into the arch by just 600mm as a little balcony, this would make a huge difference, and I did not believe that it would obscure the 13th century arch, and would possibly improve the appearance of the whole installation. Furthermore, so far as I could tell, this option had not been considered by the DAC. By this time (early December), with building work due to start in January, there was some resistance to change, but I felt that I would be failing in my duty to past, present and future generations if I didn’t push for it. Finally, it seems that I had gained some credit, and the PCC and the architect gave my proposals proper consideration, recognised that I had genuine and serious concerns, and were very helpful in exploring and following it through. Again, to cut a long story short, a few members of the DAC made a site visit on 18th January, and encouraged us to submit a request for an amendment to the faculty. The PCC passed a formal motion to submit a ‘statement of need’ for a change to the existing faculty for the work on the following Sunday (20th), which was submitted to the DAC for formal consideration at their meeting on 31 January. They agreed, and forwarded it to the Chancellor, who is the person who actually has to sign such things off. He could have taken time to review it in detail, but he did approve it quickly, so, at the eleventh hour we did get the extra 600mm, and a practical stair.

From that point on I was properly involved in the regular progress meetings, and dropped in regularly to speak to Bob and Richard, the two main workmen from Lodge and Sons, the builders. Bob and I saw eye to eye on many matters, and we were able to head off a number of issues as we went along. For example, we nearly had a full width bench, taking up the whole of the hard won 600mm (far too deep to sit on comfortably anyway), with ten little doors along the front instead of two lift up lids. Bob in particular was a true craftsman, and the overall quality of the job was excellent.

Work didn’t start until the end of January 2018 (our last practice was on 22nd), and we were not able to ring again until July. Work wasn’t quite finished, but we got permission for the Johnson quarter peal (see at the end of [Quarter Peals](#) below) to be rung on the 4th. With a break like that there is a real risk of losing at least part of the band, and I was very keen to organise some activity, preferably ringing, on Tuesday evenings, to keep the band together and to keep Tuesday evenings sacrosanct. We owe a real debt of gratitude to West Wrating who allowed us to use their bells during this period.

Turning to more minor matters, wear and tear have required the repair (new tail ends in 2009 and 2019) and replacement of ropes (we now hold two spares in stock, having bought two new ones in 2002). Anne Bridge and I also replaced the top ends of the ropes with pre-stretched polyester in 1996, which not only extended their life considerably as this is much more hard-wearing than the natural

fibre, but also stabilised the rope length. With 60ft of natural fibre, the ropes would shrink by a foot or more between dry and damp weather. The ropes could be literally out of reach for some of our more vertically challenged members on a warm damp Sunday morning after a dry spell. It also gave us some rope to use for repairing tail ends from thereon. We also replaced worn pulleys (in 2006), but the tower keeper's job has been more concerned with cleaning, and muffling the bells when required, than any major work. Chris Sollis gave us a vacuum cleaner in 1996, which has been used to clean the staircase before open tower occasions, and is now useful for the new ringing floor, which the Church cleaning ladies don't attend to.

Heating has been a continual problem. The church can easily get down to just a few degrees centigrade, and we have held plenty of practices at between 5 and 10°C. With the ringing area open to the church, any attempt to heat the air is immediately doomed to failure. Bill Girard insisted that we should have a large powerful wall mounted fan heater; it just created a draft! As mentioned above, we have attempted to install curtains on a number of occasions, but ultimately the only beneficial heating is radiant. For many years we subsisted on two old gas heaters, courtesy of the Ricketts and the Sollises, and now we have a quartz electric radiant heater. What is under your feet also matters, and quite early on we installed a second-hand carpet, and then in 2009, this was overlaid with a worn and cut about, but very good quality and recently cleaned Indian carpet which had been in my mother in law's house. We now have a wooden floor which is noticeably warmer than the brick, and hope to put the Indian carpet on it when some imperfections have been rectified by the builders.

I have tried to take every new recruit up to see the bells, and preferably to see one in operation. Nevertheless, understanding of what is happening upstairs is not always easy to grasp, and I had long felt that a model bell would be a useful teaching aid. The opportunity to obtain a really nice one arose when we got a donation from the 11x great grandson of Richard Rewell (now the Rule family as spellings have changed over the years - see graves to the west of the church).



'Richard Revvell' on the 5th bell.



J Rule graffiti in the bell chamber

The significance of Richard Rewell is that he donated our current bell No. 5, in about 1540, so we thought it fitting to use the donation to purchase a bell, albeit a little smaller than the 11cwt No 5! The Rules clearly continued to be involved with the bells, evidenced by the fact that J Rule inscribed his name in the stonework at the top of the stairs by the old bell frame in January 1876.



The 'Penyard Bell', made by Robin Noble.

The other teaching aid which we have is a simulator ('Ringleader' made by David Bagley). With this we can 'tie' a bell (fix the clapper in position with a wooden strut, so that it doesn't sound), but hear a simulated bell sound in the ringing room, triggered by a reflective tape on the wheel passing a photocell and LED. More than this, the simulator can 'ring' up to 12 bells in a wide range of methods, so we can tie one or more bells in our 6 bell tower, and ring a 12 bell method with up to 11 simulated ringers, who all ring perfectly. We bought this in 1992,



Tied bell

partly with a donation from the Balsham Ploughmen, when such things were quite uncommon. Much more sophisticated options, linked to laptop computers, are now available, but the main benefit is in early teaching, for which ours is still more than adequate. It is used mostly in the early stages of learning to handle a bell so that the learner hears a bell striking at the correct moment, but our neighbours are not subjected to the uneven tolling of a single bell for an hour or so at a time. Ultimately, it is very important for ringers to pick out the sound of their own bell, so that discovering early on when it sounds in the continuous cycle of ringing is very useful. It is also useful to get learners to ring with 5 other simulated bells, just ringing rounds, to encourage the skill of ringing by ear, rather than ringing by sight (ie timing your pull by rhythm and listening, rather than by watching the other ropes).

Almost as important as the physical infrastructure is the attitude and support of the Church authorities, and the incumbent in particular. Following on from Bill Girard, incumbents have been Francis Woolley, Julie Norris and currently Iain McColl. All have been favourably disposed to bells and bell ringing, and we have never had any conflict with Church authorities. Having said that, we have had to work hard to avoid being forgotten, and the incumbents have not all known as much about bells and bell ringing as Bill did. The closest we have come to having ringing clergy was Julie's daughter Rachel, who learned to ring in Oxford, and rang with us on a few occasions when she was home.

Peals and quarters

For anyone reading this who is not a ringer, the word 'Peal' has a special meaning to those of us who are. 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.

Peals

To date, there have been 9 peals rung at Balsham. The first was on 19 September 1992. This was getting on for four years since the bells had been rehung, and sooner or later someone from elsewhere would be asking to ring a peal. When Bill Girard told us that 21st September would be the 25th anniversary of his ordination as a deacon, we decided that this should be the time for a local band to ring the first one. Unfortunately that was a Monday, but the Saturday before turned out to be Anita and Richard Young's 28th wedding anniversary, and it wasn't that far off the 4th anniversary of the dedication of the augmented and rehanging ring. So we were not short of special occasions to celebrate! So far as ringers were concerned, we had Pam



Band for the peal on 19 September 1992. Left to right, John Sherwood, Peter Hinton, Daniel Faircloth, Richard Pargeter, Pam Down, Barry Johnson.

contribution of the Ely Diocesan Association of Church Bell Ringers, both financially and with practical ringing support. Barry Johnson, Cambridge District Ringing Master, who had made it his business to visit practice nights at all the towers in the district, and had visited Balsham more than once was our choice. Barry caused us a little concern by arriving 20 minutes late (because we had failed to warn him of a road closure, and mobile phones weren't so common back then), but after that all went well. It was Pam's first peal on a working bell, and Daniel's first peal, at the first attempt. It was also the very first peal on the bells ever, so far as we could ascertain.

After this there have been eight more peals. Balsham ringers have not rung any of these (although I was in one), but three have had Balsham associations. The one I was in was the second one, on 26 March 1995. This was organised by Mike Neale, Peter Neale's brother, who is the only person I know of who used to ring on the bells before augmentation, and was still an active ringer at the time of rehanging. In a letter to the Ringing World he says:

BALSHAM, Cambs,

Holy Trinity

Sat Sept 19 1992 3hrs 5 (13)

5040 Plain Bob Minor

1 John D Sherwood

2 Pamela A Down

3 Richard J Pargeter

4 Daniel C Faircloth

5 Barry R M Johnson

6 Peter D Hinton (C)

First inside: 2

First attempt: 4.

Rung in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the ordination of the Rector, WCN Girard as a deacon. Also 28th wedding anniversary compliment to Anita and Richard Young. First peal on the augmented ring, and believed to be the first ever.

Down and me, and I judged that Daniel Faircloth, who had learned on these bells, was ready (and about to go off to university). We then wanted to include some of the stalwart helpers who had supported us over the last four years. Unfortunately Ian Barton from Duxford, who had probably done more than any, was unavailable, but Peter Hinton and John Sherwood who had helped us in a number of quarter peals accepted the invitation. Finally, we wanted to make some official recognition of the

"I think it was about 1951 when as a 12 year old I was encouraged to climb up to the ringing room [at that time there was a raised floor above the coke store – see above] at Holy Trinity, Balsham, and so began my ringing career. The second bell of the heavy ring was the learners bell. The first major event I remember was ringing for the coronation in 1953, it was somewhere about this time that Bill Ridgman introduced the struggling band, as we were, to the Ely D.A. and encouraged some of us to progress to plain hunt and plain bob.

After many years with little or no ringing I found my engineering skills welcomed when the bells at St Andrew's, Bedford were being hung in 1982, and this has been my home tower for most of the time since. Thanks to the ringing fraternity in general and my immediate colleagues I have progressed to ringing at surprise Major level, but the opportunity to successfully ring a peal had eluded me.



Band for the peal on 26 March 1995. Left to right, Mike Neale, David Jones, Evelyn Kirby, Richard Pargeter, Owen Davis, Phillip George.

BALSHAM, Cambs,

Holy Trinity

Sun March 26th 1995 2hrs 56 (13)

5040 Minor

(3m: 7 different extents, (1,2) Cambridge S (3,4) St Clements (5-7) Plain B.)

1 David M Jones

2 Evelyn Kirby

3 Mike A Neale

4 Richard J Pargeter

5 Owen A Davis

6 Phillip S George (C)

First peal: 3

On Mothering Sunday. A compliment to Mary Neale, who celebrated her 90th birthday today. First peal; 3. 100th peal for the Assn.; 6.

The forthcoming birthday of an aunt who lives in Balsham provided the stimulus, so I invited a band to join me in the celebration. The bells having been rehung and augmented to 6 in 1988 meant I chose to ring the 3rd, and a very enjoyable peal was scored. Especially during the last extent when at times the rhythm was so near perfect that one felt elated and gratified with the result.

I should like to thank my friends for helping me to mark my Aunt's birthday so successfully, but alas although the tower is in sight of her window, the wind took most of the sound in the other direction!"

Although the peal was principally in honour of Aunt Mary Neale's 90th birthday, it was also Mike's and the conductor's birthdays as well, and Mothering Sunday.

Regarding Mike's letter, it is interesting that I independently chose the 3rd (the original 2nd) as my principal teaching bell, and that Tom Ridgman, son of Bill, is one of our regular practice night supporters.

The next peal of interest was rung by family members and friends of Brenda (nee Whittaker) and Owen Preston to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary on 31 July 2004. Brenda was born in Balsham



Owen and Brenda Preston

and attended the village school until she was 11 years old. Subsequently she went to school and worked in Cambridge. Her mother lived in West Wickham Road. Owen and Brenda met at Balsham Youth Club when Owen used to visit his grandmother, who lived in Old House Road. The original five bells had been rung for the wedding, and one of the ringers was Brenda's Uncle Jim. Since then the bells fell into disrepair, and were not safe to ring for their silver wedding celebrations

Finally, some visitors from Essex were apparently short of a good reason to ring a peal, and agreed (for a fee, I suspect) to ring it in honour of Dick Paden's 65th birthday!

Quarter Peals

We have rung various quarter peals, generally with a little outside help. The first was on Sunday 1st October 1989 to mark the first anniversary of the dedication of the augmented ring of 6 bells. It was rung by Pam Down and me with four of our stalwart helpers, Helen Winter, Graham Louth, Ian Barton and Peter Hinton. Then there were ones for:

- Janet and Roy Pettit's silver wedding,
- Christening of our first-born (including grandfather, father, aunt and Godfather amongst the ringers),
- Jim and Monica Bingley's golden wedding,
- Jim Bingley's 80th birthday,
- Farewell to Bill Girard (and also, with echoes of the peal, for Anita and Richard Young's 35th wedding anniversary),
- Licensing of Francis Woolley,
- Anita Young's and Ashley Johnson's birthdays,
- In memory of Jim Bingley,
- Richard and Leo Paden's ruby wedding,

BALSHAM, Cambs,

Holy Trinity

Sat Jul 31 2004 2h54 (13)

5040 Surprise Minor

(7m: 1 ext each Wells, London, York, Beverley, Ipswich, Norwich, Cambridge)

1 Catherine E Hughes-D'Aeth

2 Roger I Kendrick

3 Edward N Hughes-D'Aeth

4 John N Hughes-D'Aeth (C)

5 W John Riley

6 Graham Bloom

First on 6 bells: 3.

Rung by family members and friends as a compliment to Brenda and Owen Preston, married in this church 50 years ago today.

ESSEX ASSOCIATION

BALSHAM, Cambs, Holy Trinity

Wed Jan 4 2006 2h53 (13)

5040 Surprise Minor

(7m: London, Beverley, Lightfoot, Bourne, Ipswich, Norwich, Cambridge)

1 Liz Griffith-Jones

2 Thomas G Scase

3 John Roberts

4 Clive B Moore

5 Daniel J Smith

6 Adrian C Malton (C)

First of 7-Surprise: 2.

65th birthday compliment to Richard Paden, Churchwarden.

- Francis Woolley's departure (all ringers from Balsham or West Wrattling),
- Queen's diamond jubilee,
- In memory of Francis Woolley and Richard Young,
- In memory of Catherine Seville.

Two names are worth noting in this list. Jim Bingley learned in 1991, and continued to ring until ill health (inner ear problems affecting his balance) caused him to give up in 1998. He was partially deaf, blind in one eye, and getting on that way in the other due to an accident with home-made explosives as a boy. I had to modify my teaching methods for him, but it was well worth the effort. He never progressed beyond plain hunt, but in eight years, he rang for 284 Sunday services, and was a reliable practice night ringer. Catherine Seville did not progress as far as that. She lived in the Old Rectory, now Sutton Hall, and a chance encounter with her revealed that she enjoyed listening to the bells, and looked forward to Tuesday evenings. Of course, I invited her to come along, and she did at the very next opportunity, and stayed all evening (in November!). She was very arthritic, and it was a major achievement to visit the bells, but she was also very determined! She had had a total of 16 lessons over a period of 10 weeks, and was just about ready to ring rounds on a Sunday when she died in her sleep. Wasted effort? Perhaps in terms of keeping numbers up, but it was an honour to get to know such a courageous and determined person with such a keen interest in everything going on around her, and how can it be a waste of time when the learner says that it is a 'wonderful feeling when it goes right', and keeps using words like 'exhilarating'?

Another series of quarter peals which must be mentioned are the ones rung by the Johnson family and friends. In addition to Margaret (mum), all the children (Benjamin, Tristan, Ashley and Beth) learned to ring. Tristan was only just over 12, and had only just started learning when he was diagnosed with leukaemia, and within 2 months of the picture (of him being



Jim Bingley's 80th birthday. Left to right, Elizabeth Cook, Doreen Cox, Dickon Clark, Monica Bingley, Richard Pargeter, Jim Bingley, Janet Pettit, Clare Starr, Daniel Faircloth, Anita Young.



Peter Hinton with Tristan Johnson on his 12th birthday, 4 July 1992

helped by Peter Hinton on an outing on his birthday in 1992), he was dead. A quarter peal has been rung, initially in his memory, but since in memory of all Balsham children who have died, on his birthday (4th July) ever since.

Outreach

The activity of bell ringing is 'outreach' by its very nature. Apart from tied bell ringing when teaching someone to handle a bell, it's difficult to do secretly! The primary purpose (and the reason why the owners – the Church – allow us to use these ancient and valuable instruments for nothing) is to call people to service on Sundays and some other occasions like Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We also ring for some more secular reasons, with New Year being the regular one. We ring for a little while late on New Year's Eve, stopping just before midnight (to ring out the old year), ring twelve blows on the tenor (the biggest bell, which the clock uses to strike), and then immediately join in with the remaining bells for a few minutes (to ring in the new year). We get the timing of the first of the twelve blows as precise as we can, but of course, the further you are from the church, the later you will think we are! It is accurate in the ringing room. Over the years, in addition to peals and quarter peals (see separate section on these), other occasions have included:

- Happy Birthday for the Women's Institute (1st 2 lines) 11/9/90
- Deanery Synod, 1991
- Terry Waite's release, 18/11/91
- Princess Diana's death (half muffled Sunday morning) 31/8/97
- Queen's golden jubilee. 2012
- Olympics, 2012
- VJ day 70th anniversary , 2015
- 100th anniversary of the end of World War I



Battle's Over, 100th anniversary of the end of World War I.

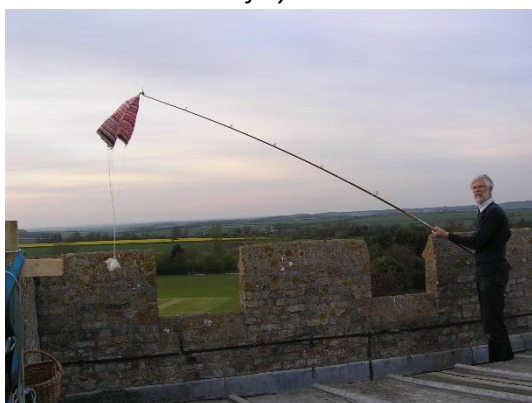
Charles Tallack, John Sollis, Claire Tucker, Anita Young, Richard Pargeter, and Colin Eade with Richard Pargeter.



Teddies on the way up...



Teddies safely received...



...and ready to be lifted over the parapet.

We have also tried to be part of village life as a local society, and have had a stall at the Balsham Feast ever since Jan Ellam and the Ploughmen revived it in 2000. Our aim has been to have a presence, partly as a recruiting aid. I don't think that I can name anyone who came forward to learn at any of these events, but it is still important to be known and noticed as a part of village life, and that may have led someone to us, at least in part. Who knows? Our aim has not been to make money, but initially we did succeed in doing that. Just to have a focus for our stand, I made a barrel of 'elderflower champagne' which we gave away to anyone who was passing by. We were given donations far in excess of anything we would have dared to ask for it! We also hired the Ely Diocesan Association of Church Bell Ringers' working model bell on a couple of occasions, but that had limited impact. What we have become known for more recently is teddy bear parachuting (where 'teddy' equals any soft toy). We were first asked to do this in 2016, so I built a gantry with a pulley (a worn one from one of the bells, replaced 10 years earlier) which I strapped to a crenelation on the tower. John Sollis provided a long piece of rope (it's 21m to the ground) and we borrowed a basket from Hazel Leeson, so we could safely haul the teddies up to the top in full view of their owners. Then there were the buttresses to take account of. If the intrepid teddies had been just dropped over the side, many of them would have landed on the buttresses, so in order to drop them far enough away from the tower, John Sollis loaned us his sea

fishing rod. Every teddy who jumped got a signed certificate with the time taken to reach the ground



Teddy release and flight

on it. Tim Johnson and Alex Pargeter have assisted me on top, Anita Young (in a stylish red safety helmet) has ventured under the gantry to load the teddies in the basket, and Margaret Johnson has issued certificates. Timing has been by Claire Tucker. Inevitably the wind has taken a few onto the aisle roofs, but we haven't lost one in a tree so far! All have been rescued. One time the fire service (who had their tender on show) learned of a teddy on the roof, and a fireman appeared on the tower roof. I showed him where it was and got the reply 'I'll have to check with my boss'. We didn't see him again! We have also done teddy parachuting for Church fetes.

For flower festivals, we used to have the tower open to visitors, and I would also allow anyone to have a go on the 3rd under supervision – effectively have a first lesson with me. The bell was tied, and sound came from the simulator. This meant that visitors to the bell chamber could see a bell in motion without being deafened. If the weather was dry, the tower roof was open, with views to Ely Cathedral in one direction and the Stansted radar in another on a clear day, as well as views over the village. Sadly, modern concerns over liability for health and safety mean that we are no longer allowed to open the roof.



The second, labelled for flower festival visitors.



Cricket and wind farm from the tower roof (Ely Cathedral, arrowed, and inset from another day, hardly visible in the haze)



Sutton Hall (old rectory) from the tower roof



Stansted (Debden) radar from the tower roof



Bells for all occasions, 2015



Woolly tower captain!



Anita with the parachuting teddies, 2017



Bats in the belfry, 2019



Parachuting teddy



'Practice night' from bells for all occasions; 'Anita' on the right. 2015

Another village event which we have taken part in is the Christmas tree festival. The first year was easy – the theme was Christmas Bells. The next year we made it 'Bells for all Occasions',

and then we decorated the tree with parachuting teddy bears, and the last time our theme was 'Bats in the Belfry', with black origami bats with glitter on as decorations. Anita Young has taken the lead on all these, and created many knitted decorations. In addition to an angel, snowman and Father Christmas, there were representations of some of the ringers, Anita and me included! I have inherited myself and the angel, and now they feature in our home Christmas decorations.

In 1993, we had a visit from Paul Barnes and an Anglia TV crew. They were filming for a programme called "The Village Show", which was broadcast in May 1994. We were just a few minutes right at the end of the show, following a link along the lines of "There's heavier metal still in the tower of Holy Trinity...", after a bit on the gym that used to be on the Plumbs dairy site. The film crew had interesting ideas about where they wanted to film from (including on the floor, looking up at Janet Pettit ringing – she was wearing trousers!), and had little understanding of the risks involved, and/or regard for health and safety. It made for an interesting practice night! Anita Young, Pam Down, Jim Bingley, Janet Pettit, Daniel Faircloth and I feature in the ringing, with another person sitting out who I can't quite identify.

We have held a few open evenings, some of which have been well attended and have resulted in a number of recruits, but on other occasions we have enjoyed lots of cake, but no one to share it with, including one occasion when we went to the trouble of leafleting the whole village. All in all, this has not proved to be the best use of our time.

We have always maintained a presence in the parish magazine (the Balsham Review), starting with an announcement of the formation of the Guild in 1989, and including a series of articles "Why on earth are the bells ringing now?" and information on any special ringing, particularly peals and quarters. We feature on the Village website (balsham.net) and, thanks to Jules Scotland, have our own Facebook page

Social events

At the first meeting, it was agreed that we should have an outing in the autumn of that year, and we joined forces with Duxford on 16th September and visited Nayland, Polstead, Kersey, Preston and Long Melford. We continued having outings until 1999, with just two exceptions in 1993 and 1996, and then so far as my records show, there was a gap until 2014, and we have had one more in September 2018. We were due to have one in 2020, but Covid intervened. Outings take one to some beautiful parts of the country, some interesting parts of churches, and broaden one's experience of different bells. Balsham ringers have nearly always come back with a realisation of how nice our bells are - in sound and handling! Anita recalls vividly that the Dalham tower captain's warning about the long unguided rope draft was very pertinent, and that someone did need to be rescued. And we only went there because Exning's 5th was out of action for some reason. When we went to Euston (which is an isolated church in parkland) we found pony and trap driving in progress, and the access to Great Livermere's ringing chamber was not for the faint hearted! The view from on top of Long Melford tower was impressive, but the wind was a challenge. We also visited Taylor's bell foundry and museum, in 1991 and 1992, and then again in 2018. Surprisingly little had changed in the foundry, but the sallies had changed from green to striped on the bells (they have a very light ring of 12).

Those are just a few memories, and here are just a few pictures:



*On the roof, Long Melford, 16 September 1989.
Caroline & Graham Louth, Richard Pargeter, Daniel Faircloth, Janet Pettit, Andy Slepyan,
Clare Starr,
Pam Down, Benjamin Johnson, Margaret Johnson*



*Anita Young, Pam Down, Pat Manning, Albury,
30 June 1990*



*Black Horse Brent Pelham, 30 June 1990
Sally Down, Janet Pettit, Catherine Down,
Len Mead, Nick Lampe*



Outing group, 30 June 1990

Back row: Nick Lampe, Maureen Havil, Pauline Betts, ?, Len Mead, Ian Barton, Pam Down, Graham Louth, Clare Starr, Anita Young

Front row: Diana & Richard Pargeter, Michael Northcroft-Brown, Joanna Williams, Katherine Wright, Caroline Louth,

On ground: Ben Barton, Janet Pettit.



Tower outing, 27 July 1991.

Anita Young, Pam Down, Janet Pettit, Len Mead.



*Janet Pettit, Len Mead,
Loughborough bell foundry,
March 1992*



*Access to the ringing chamber at St Peter's, Great Livermere, 16 September 1995.
Benjamin Johnson, left and Anne Bridge, right.*



Emma Feeley, 14 September 1996



Kate Jopling, alternative entertainment with an organ, 14 September 1996



Loughborough bell foundry, 18 April 2018

Back: ? Richard Pargeter, ?, ?

Middle: Anita Young, Tim Johnson, Melissa Tabeski, Anne Bragg, Jules Scotland, Claire Tucker, Kevin Brown, Felicity Johnson, Margaret Johnson, ?

Front: ?, ?, ?, Alex Johnson, Amelia Johnson



Brinkley, 15 September 2018

From far corner (treble), clockwise: Pam Down, Mike Rowland, Lara Pearson, Mick Locke, Charles Tallack



Pampisford, 15 September 2018

Charles Tallack, Margaret Johnson, John Sollis



Barbecue, July 2006 – uncertain weather.

*Tim, lost in smoke; Mike and Anne McCall, Diana Pargeter;
Margaret Johnson behind Chris, Alison and Peter Rickett;
Anita and Richard Young, Chris Kemp, Beth Johnson.*

Starting in July 1990, in Pam Down's garden, we have held a series of summer barbecues. There was one in Cheryl Wise's garden in Hildersham in 1997, but most have been in our garden. The format has always been to have heat supplied, and everyone brings their own main course, and a pudding or salad and drink to share. In more recent years, Margaret Johnson has



Barbecue, July 2018

managed the contributions, so that we don't get all potato salad, and no puddings (or vice versa!) and has also managed the invitation list. The weather has generally smiled on us, although on a couple of occasions (as in 2006) we have had to clear out the garage, and set up the barbecue on the drive outside.

I'm not sure whether striking competitions really count as social events, but I'm not sure where else to put them! For those who don't know, a number of bands ring a set number of changes and are generally marked on the irregularities in rhythm ('striking') The band with the smallest number of such irregularities ('faults') wins. So, a typical striking competition involves a lot of bands of ringers getting together, going off to ring as well as they can at some point, and sitting around criticising or marvelling at the other bands' performances in the meantime. There is usually a good tea, after which the judges announce their decisions. Ideally it takes place on a lovely sunny afternoon, and if nerves don't overwhelm you, it is a good social occasion. There is an annual striking competition held by the Cambridge district of the Ely Diocesan Association of Church Bell Ringers, which we have entered on

three occasions. We never did very well, relative to the other more experienced bands, but I was proud of the achievements of the ringers, and we won the President's Award, for most improved band, twice. The first time, in 1989, the president, Johnny Gipson, congratulated us on 'having the nerve to enter' after only eight months ringing! It was also reported in the Ringing World that *"During the afternoon the Balsham folk, while listening to the winning band ringing London Surprise with near mechanical precision, had remarked "That's what we'll be like in 20 years time". They are aiming high."*



*EDA striking competition band, Stapleford, 1989
Janet Pettit, Daniel Faircloth, Pam Down,
Benjamin Johnson, Richard Pargeter, Anita Young.*



*EDA striking competition band, Pampisford, 1990
Daniel Faircloth, Pam Down, Janet Pettit, Richard
Pargeter, Clare Starr, Anita Young.*



*EDA striking competition band, Whittlesford, 1992
Anita Young, Pam Down, Richard Pargeter, Anne
Bridge, Len Mead. (Daniel Faircloth hiding)*

The Cambridge District also organise a league based competition. In this, bands visit each other's practice nights, and at some point in the evening, each rings a test piece. It encourages people to work on the accuracy of their striking, and bolsters numbers on practice nights. We entered this when it first started in 1994, and soldiered on on our own until we entered jointly with West Wratting in 1997. I think the last time we entered was in 2003. We never did very well, and some of us began to get a bit fed up with always coming second! It has always been a friendly, low key competition, but there have been bands who have taken it rather more (too?) seriously. I still get asked to judge matches every now and then.

COVID 19 and beyond

I said that this history had been written at this time because of the break in activities in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which implies that this is where it should stop. During the lockdown, and the longer period when we were not allowed to ring, we have used a computer app 'Ringing Room' to

allow us to do some sort of ringing together, and as soon as we were allowed a few socially distanced ringers in the tower, we did what we could to ring for Sunday services (initially services on Zoom, later at the church) and special occasions. We discovered that chiming more than one bell at once is not as easy as it sounds, and have a new found respect for Peter Neale! (See under 'Infrastructure' above.) Now we are allowed to have a full band of six together, and although we are still taking precautions, we are back ringing properly again, and in much better shape than some neighbouring towers. It is about time to start recruiting again, and time to draw this to a close. So, finally, a big thank you to all the ringers who have taken part in and supported ringing in Balsham over the last 33 years.

Richard Pargeter
August 2021