

Barnes on the Kent/Sussex border

England's summer of weird weather brought one morning of extreme contrast to the bellringers of St Mary's Barnes on their tour of the Kent-Sussex towns and villages around Tenterden.

The tour began with just seven ringers on Wednesday, July 18, with successful quarters of Plain Bob Minor at Little Chart near Maidstone and of mixed doubles at Egerton. Reinforced the following day by Sheila and Jeremy Cheesman and other Barnes regulars, the quarter peal tally progressed well. London Surprise Minor at Aldington [embracing a flying visit from Jason Hughes] got the morning off to a good start, followed by Grandsire Triples at Appledore. To end the day a fine quarter peal of Stedman Triples was rung to celebrate the life of the Reverend Prebendary John Scott on the glorious eight of the parish church of St Mildred, Tenterden.

Friday, July 20 dawned dull and damp but by 9am a small group of interested passers-by stopped to listen to the delicate sound of handbells rung by Jill and Mike Wigney and Monica Trow outside the White Lion Hotel, Tenterden. At the same time, not more than 50 miles in the direction of London, the sound that the later joiners were hearing was of thunder and the drumbeat of one of the heaviest storms any of them could remember driving through. And yet, by lunchtime in Lydd the sun was shining and the stories of driving blind on the motorway seemed to belong to another country. James White, arriving from Fleet, Lucy Bricheno from Oxford and Francis and Liz Ring-Davies from Mortlake amazed all with the details of their journeys through the storm – the same one that almost washed parts of Gloucestershire off the map.

The morning schedule of quarter peals had to be rearranged to take account of the delayed arrivals and led to a couple of near misses. But the bright afternoon brought success; first with a date touch of minor composed by Will Willans and conducted by Adrian Udal at Brookland, where the bells are hung in a kind of tapering barn alongside the church. The 2007 changes on 20-07-2007 began with three rows of Cambridge Surprise, and continued with Plain Bob, to give the perfect composition. This was followed by a rooftop tour of St Mary the Virgin, Rye, which has fantastic views across the cinque port, and a stylish early evening quarter of Grandsire Triples.

St Nicholas Sandhurst - a popular church for weddings - is set high up on the hill and offered a delightful vista in the clear air of Saturday morning. The tower captain told us that the adjacent field is handy for landing helicopters, although the most recent bride had simply walked across the lane from her house. The ground floor ringing area is spacious and the bells pleasant. Unfortunately, owing to recurring illness, Mike and Jill Wigney had to return to London, so it was general ringing at Sandhurst and then the party headed for St Giles, Bodiam.

This was the challenge of the morning: how to find the church. Full rounds three times and then the correct lane appeared and we were there. But no luck with the quarter of Norwich. The view of the day was from Ewhurst, back across the valley where Bodiam Castle nestles under the hill of Sandhurst. Again no success with the after-lunch quarter at Beckley, and so on to the 12 of the tour – at Benenden. Sadly we were only ten by then. Stedman at Rolvenden rolled on for forty minutes before falling apart in the heat of the evening and a tired band rolled back to a pleasant dinner at the White Lion in Tenterden.

Injury struck again on Sunday and we skipped a quarter of doubles, but then our luck turned. Quarters of Plain Bob Minor at Warehorne, 1288 Grandsire Triples at Wittersham and 1302 Grandsire Triples at Biddenden – rung with local tower captain Tim Munt as we were by then back to seven ringers - meant that all returned to the Sunday evening traffic jams with that warm feeling of success. We take with us pleasant memories of a beautiful part of southern England, wonderful churches, some delightful bells and much good company.

Those of us who are friends of the Barnes band are particularly grateful to them, and especially to Eddie Hartley and Trisha Hawkins for research, organisation and generosity of time and to Jill Wigney for being a whiz at sorting out all the finances. We can't wait for next year! AH/SP/AU