

## Salopian Meanderings Pt. 2

No doubt most annual ringing tours fall into a pattern after a while – the “Barnes Weekend” grew from modest beginnings 21 years ago to a week-long event with people coming and going but latterly seems to have settled into an extended weekend (Thursday to Monday) with most participants staying for the duration.

We met where we left off last year - at St Bartholomew's, Tong, that extraordinary church with a sloping floor, a plethora of monuments and an octagonal tower with squat spire above the chancel crossing, wherein hang the Great Bell and the lesser bells on two levels. Given the failure of Her Majesty to arrange a visit and the Earl of Bradford to produce a son and heir on this particular occasion, we had to confine ourselves to ringing the six. (To be fair to HM, she did turn out to watch us ring Stedman Triples at East Raynham in 2002 but then there was no bourdon needing a reason to be rung.)

Headquarters was again the Valley Hotel in Coalbrookdale, and by the time we checked in we had already rung a good quarter of Grandsire Caters on the fine 10 up the road. Despite the light rain many opted to walk up to the Golden Ball for supper, remembering the excellence of the beer from last year.

Broseley bells seemed to remember that they and/or we can't ring Original Major, though the attempt was going well for a while. After that it was down to the south of the county and the imposing tower of St Laurence, Ludlow. The 134 steps may have daunted the more arthritic but the Wheelchair Support Team coped admirably. Meanwhile one retired engineer was pondering the plumbing of the shiny new stainless steel toilet module downstairs. The Church Inn promises good views of the church and good beer and did not disappoint.

Between Clungunford and Clunbury we stopped off at Orchard House, where an enormous barn proved to be a cornucopia of mechanical devices. In one corner was the Marches Training Belfry, the object of our visit. Ringing eight “bells” of identical weight was a novel experience. Next door was the Fire Ring, temporarily unavailable due to an accumulation of junk in its ringing chamber. Your correspondent spent some time wandering around examining the collection of vintage tractors, all lovingly restored. The firkin of ale, we were firmly informed, was for the district barbecue on the morrow, but it was only mid-afternoon and there were plenty of large pots of tea emerging from the kitchen to assuage thirsts for the time being. Notwithstanding the memory of lunch and the prospect of dinner, the scones with blackberry jam proved quite irresistible. Dinner was at the Meadows Steakhouse; those who ventured to tackle the “Flintstone” rib and were soundly defeated can probably blame the scones.

On Saturday we were again close to the Welsh border, stopping for lunch at the Plough, Wistanstow, the home of Wood's Brewery. Those hoping for a prompt start at Church Stretton were dismayed to encounter a serious tailback on the A49. The problem it transpired was a pair of green gypsy caravans, accompanied by sundry animals and children, occupying half the width of the single carriageway. As excuses for late arrival go, it compares favourably with the trailer load of potatoes demolishing the chapel wall at Constantine in 2008. Hope Bowdler tenor stirred memories of something being written about its outstanding tone but a subsequent Google search produced

nothing (obviously the relevant issue of the RW isn't on-line yet – *hint*). Dinner passed enjoyably but uneventfully.

Sunday was a day of comparative leisure with only two quarter attempts. Someone of prominence in the Surrey Association managed to break the tenor clapper during service ringing at Coalbrookdale. The appearance of an horde of noisy children at Meole Brace presented a dilemma – shoo them away or welcome them as potential future recruits to the Exercise. Given the shortage of time and unpromising demeanour of said children, the former option was taken. After Evensong ringing at Chad's, Shrewsbury, the party divided with the serious beer drinkers going to the All Nations at Madely, a very fine pub and one of the oldest home-brew houses in the country, before adjourning for curry, while the rest went straight to the Thai restaurant in Ironbridge.

On Monday the little estate church at Patshull proved difficult to find for some, neither sat-nav nor consulting locals being much use. These bells are probably not rung very often and London was soon deemed over-ambitious. A large memorial plaque in the ringing room records the fact that one Sunday morning a worker on the estate "whilst ringing to call the faithful to worship, fell dead, aged 43". It ends with the sobering advice "Boast thou not of to morrow (sic), for thou knowest not what the day may bring forth". Indeed one knows not, but the failure of Double Oxford Triples at the last tower was perhaps not altogether unforeseeable.

All in all the current format seems to work well and will be repeated in Dorset next year if Mike and Jill, to whom be grateful thanks outpoured, can be prevailed upon to exercise their wondrous powers of organisation once more.

TN