

Beer, Bears and Sticky Clappers

(Barnes Ringers and Friends in Cheshire and Staffordshire)

“Toll charge” said the SatNav in his strident Antiguan voice. Assuming this to refer to the M6 Toll, I acquiesced and less than three hours later we were cruising along that most civilised of motorways and within a dozen miles of the meeting place, the *Old Peculier* in Handsacre. Most of the party were already there and had eaten all the giant Yorkshire puddings which were the speciality of the house.

Our base was the Manor House at Alsager, yet another Best Western hotel and, while most of them tend to be old inns modernised, this one was rather more extension than original. Sadly the choice of ales in the bar quickly went down from two to one, the quality of which declined from good to barely drinkable over the next three days. Fortunately, for those prepared to take a 20 minute walk into town, there was good beer to be had at the *Mere* and the *Lodge*, as well as an excellent fish and chip shop and a curry house with some out-of-the-ordinary dishes.

All that remains of the former church of St Chad in Wybunbury is a leaning tower. Some thirty years ago the tilt had become cause for concern but, in an operation predating the one at Pisa, it was jacked up to the vertical and then permitted a more modest lean because the local people preferred it that way. A sign in the ringing chamber announced that “Everyone here brings happiness – some by arriving, some by leaving”.

There was a Bear Festival (no, that’s not a typo) at Brereton. The name will be familiar to ringers on account of Lord Brereton of that ilk, the founder and first Master of the ASCY, who apparently insisted that all his estate workers learned to ring. Today the villagers have a propensity for using the tower to do with bears what the good citizens of Ypres once did with their surplus cats, except that the bears fare rather better, being equipped with diminutive parachutes (and stuffed with kapok or suchlike rather than flesh and bones). By the time we arrived the plummeting had finished and we were able to raise the anticlockwise ground-floor six under the gaze of sundry teddies and a life-sized Mrs Bear in bonnet and frock. Continuing the ursine theme, a splendid specimen baring its fearsome fangs was spotted among the pieces of armour high up on the chancel wall. Jeremy celebrated his 4,000th tower by distributing some sweetmeats which may or may not have been bear-shaped.

This trip was unusual for the number of mechanical failures which occurred. After six extents of doubles at Keele it became apparent that the tenor was no longer audible, the clapper having seized up completely. Then the treble at Betley tried the same trick, intermittently but often enough for the validity of the performance to be in doubt. While clapper seizures may be blamed on the weather (it was that extraordinarily hot week in the middle of July) the same cannot be said of the stay bolts which dropped out of the second at Lower Peover, giving Mary rather a shock and a need for copious applications of Micropore.

We were made welcome everywhere but thanks are especially due to Phil and Rowena Gay who entertained us at *Woodlands* with home-made scones and jam and a chance to try their light ring (it’s not a mini-ring!).

The menu for Saturday’s dinner was perhaps the most interesting we have seen (“too interesting” said one, opting for the chicken) with duck proving a popular choice, albeit accompanied by the

ubiquitous broccoli and carrots. Trisha the Tower Captain made the first speech then yours truly, responding on behalf of the “friends”, was prevailed upon to recount the tale of “the time we got locked in the bar” for the benefit of the newcomers. (No, I’m not going to repeat it here, you’ll probably find it in a RW from 13 years ago.)

Sunday morning found the faithful few ringing for service at Alsager and Kidsgrove. The latter church stands close to the mouth of the Harecastle Tunnel, through which some of us have passed on the NB Intrepid; others had to go and see the curiously orange water for themselves. Maybe it was the carvery lunch coming so soon after breakfast, but Little Bob wouldn’t go at Tunstall. Stedman fared rather better at Wolstanton, once we had worked out which bell was the tenor. Finally, Ray Daw joined us for Grandsire Caters on the fine ten at Stoke on Trent, a fitting end to yet another enjoyable “Barnes Weekend”.

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