

Travels in Plum Country

With the third weekend of July approaching, those who qualify in the broadest sense as Barnes ringers were heading westwards for that area which abounds in damsons and other drupes, the Vale of Evesham. Teddy bears were out in force again this year, only this time they weren't parachuting from towers but acting as key fobs at the Evesham Hotel, sitting on the reception desk in their little embroidered waistcoats awaiting our arrival. One could say the place is a little quirky – opening the door of the gents, one is confronted by a life-sized ragdoll with a basket of towels – but it's a fine hotel and well placed for a few days' ringing around the Worcestershire/Gloucestershire borders. The small bar has no handpumps but when they heard we were coming they laid on a cask of "That" from the Teme Valley Brewery. And when they discovered that some of us enjoy a little nightcap before retiring the range of malt whiskeys multiplied overnight.

Evesham Bell Tower and its glorious Taylor twelve need no introduction, but the stonework is crumbling and ringing on the back bells is limited while the restoration appeal gets underway. However we were able to enjoy them when we joined the locals for practice. It seems our efforts were not unappreciated, as a text arrived from the Vicar saying that he was enjoying "the smell of the rain, the sound of the bells and a good bottle of claret". A follow-up message (perhaps a glass or two later) revealed that the only thing necessary to complete his personal utopia was the presence of Helen Mirren.

I'll drink to the quotation from Tolkien on the wall of the Royal Oak "If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world". For the benefit of anyone going to Evesham practice, the friendly staff here are happy to serve food to ringers after 9.30 (and jolly good no nonsense pub food at that). Otherwise you might try the Trumpet (a lovely Hook Norton pub which was drunk dry during the 2005 12-bell eliminator) or the Red Lion which has just reopened after a 104 year stint as a shop and sells Cannon Royal ales and local cider and perry.

We've become fairly adept at getting Mike and his wheelchair into all manner of towers but occasionally one defeats us. Pershore Abbey was an obvious non-starter (and those who did go up failed to do justice to the bells, perhaps due to the increasing vertiginousness that accompanies advancing years). Great Comberton, with a narrow, dark and uneven staircase in what appears to be a cavity wall between the tower and the nave, also proved unnegotiable, necessitating a quick switch of quarter peal bands. Little Comberton was accessible enough but the "go" of the bells soon put paid to any thoughts of scoring Reverse Bob Minor and even Plain Bob was a struggle - the ringer of the fifth hadn't sweated so much in a quarter since St Buryan tenor.

One aim of the tour was to encourage those who don't normally conduct to call a quarter of Bob Minor. Of four attempts, two were successful – in one case despite the "experts" in the band making the wrong assumption about the calling of the 540 and proffering advice which thoroughly confused the conductor. Martin didn't succeed, through no fault of his own, but was compensated by a cracking quarter of Lincolnshire, his first blows in the method.

Over the weekend there were some very exotic pieces of machinery in the hotel car park. That most exclusive group, the Bugatti Owners Club, were in residence and helped us finish the ale too. Such is the thoughtfulness of the management that they seated one of their larger bears at the head of the table on Saturday evening, lest anyone should be dismayed at the prospect of thirteen sitting down to dinner. But why did we find ourselves solving logic problems over coffee instead of singing Flanders and Swann?

The last day is often an anti-climax in one way or another. Sometimes it's just the result of dwindling numbers and the prospect of work on the morrow; this year it was an indifferent lunch and a late start at Stratford-on-Avon leading to a hurried and less than satisfactory quarter (You know the scenario – “We might just get it round in time if we start now” when you all know in your heart it would be far more sensible to just ring a couple of decent service touches). All in all, though, it was yet another superbly organised and thoroughly enjoyable “Barnes Weekend”.