

Belfry Bat October 2021

The North Staffs Association held its first live ringing meeting since February 2020 on October 2nd. It was at Barlaston, where the six bells have an interesting history. In the nineteenth century the old church next to Barlaston Hall received a ring of five bells cast by William Blews of Birmingham, one of which was recast by Taylors in 1933. By the 1970s the bells were in a poor state, and were recast into a six by Taylors, with the 1933 bell retained as the tenor of the new ring. In the 1980s the old church was closed because of mining subsidence and a replacement was built elsewhere in the parish, and because the old church had bells, the new one had to have a tower to accommodate them. It is a concrete structure which I think bears an appropriately strong resemblance to the winding tower of the former colliery at Hem Heath. This meeting was exactly sixty years since the first Association meeting I attended, on my first weekend at Keele.

The 9.15 mass at Chesterton Catholic Church on Sunday was the first service there for our friend Father Michael Miners, newly appointed as parish priest of Wolstanton and Chesterton. We got to know Michael when he was Catholic Chaplain at Keele twenty years ago. I went from there to ring at Madeley, where four Keele ringers and one local. rang five quite well.

With the end of the playing season, the Madeley U3A croquet group moved into winter mode on October 4th with our first coffee meeting at the Madeley Centre. We have found this to be a good way for the members to keep in touch when not playing.

Our Wednesday ringing group had an awayday on October 6th. Six of us travelled to Little Eaton near Derby to ring with Paul and Ruth Jopp. Like us, their garage has a ring of bells, slightly heavier than ours and with a different history. In the 1960s Paul's father collected old school bells which after tuning he installed in his house at Stoulton in Worcestershire. Later he was able to replace them with ten bells which had been part of a carillon, and he cast two more himself to make a ring of twelve. After his death they were inherited by Paul who installed them in their current home, and renamed them the St Oulton Campanile. We attempted a fairly ambitious peal, but it was a case of more good practice. In the evening Ro and Steve were absent from the practice but we still had eight, including Denzil Spencer from Betley for the first time since March 2020.

At the Whitmore practice the following morning we had a discussion about whether to continue ringing through the winter. I was in favour of trying to continue on a monthly basis if not weekly, or at least getting together once a month for coffee, like we do for croquet.

On Saturday October 9th we visited my daughter Sally for the first time in several months. She has visited us several times recently, so it was time for us to go there. Our route across the Peak District is one of my favourite drives but was not as attractive as usual because it was quite misty.

The Keele band demonstrated its strength in depth on the following morning, when with two couples away we still managed to ring six. The conventional wisdom is that a band needs to have fifty percent more ringers than bells, so this was confirmation of that. In the old days, when ringers were paid, there would be a principal band, often always ringing the same bell, and a reserve band who only rang when required by absence – a bit like a football team. The St Paul's Cathedral band was like this until fairly recently. One of the ways I judge our ringing is to ask myself if I would be embarrassed if a ringing friend of mine heard it. Definitely a *don't mind who heard it* day today!

Our Wednesday peal band had its first success at home for two months on October 13th. On the following day we went to Lancashire and combined two objectives. One was to deliver a bell I had sold to Whalley Abbey, the Blackburn Diocesan Retreat Centre, where it will be installed on the chapel. While there we delivered some cushions for renovation at a workshop near Preston.

On Sunday three of the Keele band joined one Madeley ringer to ring for the service, and once again we rang well. I got home to find Matt the builder and Adam his joiner installing our new garage door, and by 1.30 I had given it its first coat of paint.

On Monday I again drove my favourite route but as last time the views were restricted by mist. This time I was going to Wetton for the funeral of Chris Lucas, a ringer who was also a member of the Warslow Silver Band, so we had to share the ringing floor with instrumentalists. We did some good ringing until ten minutes before the service, and again afterwards. Phil's Law of Funerals was once again proved correct – I didn't know that Chris was a bee keeper. Wetton bells are unique in that the six bells were cast in different centuries. Until the millennium there were three bells in the tower. Several ringers lived in the village, and between them they hatched a plan to augment the ring to six by buying second-hand bells, with the result that for a while several garages in the village contained an old bell. When they were taken for tuning, one was found to be unsuitable, so was recast, early in the current century, joining five others from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Our Wednesday peal attempt was unsuccessful, partly because we were competing with very noisy chain saws working on our back hedge, which is now much reduced in height and width. A much improved view! In the evening there were only six at the practice, so we finished early.

On Thursday morning we set off for Olney, Buckinghamshire, to visit my brother and his wife. It was the first time we had seen them for two years, so an overdue visit. Olney was the home of John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*. On the way back on Saturday we called on my sister and her husband in Dorridge, after which the journey home was a slow one because of delays on the M6.

Before we went away we had three visits from a local tree surgeon, firstly to trim the hedge and trees between our orchard and a neighbour's paddock, secondly to trim the overgrown hedge behind our house, and finally to do severe pruning on three ancient fruit trees in our orchard. The final job was unfinished when we set out, so when we got home we were keen to inspect the result, which was very good. Two apple trees and a pear tree have been reduced to about six feet high, and we hope that they will produce new growth and fruit within reach. I have offered some of the timber to millwrights and woodturning groups. There were nine at ringing on Sunday morning, but the ringing was not as good as it sometimes is.

Our peal attempt on Wednesday morning came to grief after half an hour, but we rang a good quarter peal. In the evening there were only seven at St John's, but we had a good practice. On Thursday morning I went to Whitmore for the final practice until the spring. after which we went to the university chapel for the funeral of David de Cruz. In the afternoon Ro had her covid booster, so we are now both triple-jabbed.

My first task on Sunday was to adjust the clock. I arrived at church just before seven o'clock so was able to use my quick method, winding the hands back almost an hour. While there I wound the clock, although the Sunday wind is usually done by Llinos. We rang four again at Madeley, after which I did the final painting of the new garage door.

Phil Gay