

Visiting English Change Ringers - A noisy hobby to praise the Lord

By Hannelore Hippe - 15/12/2013

Brian:

Speaking for myself. Change ringing has three particular things which I really find fascinating. First the mathematical and intellectual challenge, secondly the physical challenge to ring the bells and put them into the right musical position and thirdly the team spirit which is necessary to ring the bells. Well, we call ourselves 'bell ringers'. Those who want to sound special call themselves 'campanologists', but what we actually do at the end is 'change ringing'.

George:

No, there is nothing similar to the bells. The only way I remember when I was still young calling people to church was by playing the drums. When I came to England later I heard these bells for the first time and I thought: 'Wow! That is different!' Then I approached the tower especially closely and I found it so beautiful. I was absolutely convinced that the sound of those bells were recorded and played over and over again. Then one day I went up the tower and saw how it was really done and since then I stayed there. But be warned. If you once started it you won't be able to let it go. I have been told that the bells can be addictive!

Vicar:

It's very unique to our English countryside. I think people just love it to hear them chimed. And when the sound of the bells is carried through the village on a peaceful Sunday morning calling people to church that is simply wonderful.

"This train is for Ipswich. The next stop will be Kelvedon. We are now approaching Kelvedon!"

Author:

On a sunny autumn day I am travelling through the green slightly hilly countryside of the county of Essex, which is located east of London. At the station of Kelvedon Brian Meads is waiting for me. He is the chairman of the Essex Ringer Association which is the organisation for the bell ringers in Essex. There is quite a number of other organisations all over the country mainly structured by county and district. Brian, a wiry man in his mid fifties, seems to be the only one on the platform expecting someone, and since I obviously do not look like someone local he is waiving at me already from the distance. A short time later we are driving with his car through a picture-book landscape to the little village of Coggeshall ten kilometres away from Kelvedon. Coggeshall with its cute little half-timbered houses, the neat village green and the crooked pub is typical English, as typical English as ... as change ringing, the actual reason for my visit?

Brian:

It is specifically English. Not Scottish, not Welsh but thoroughly English. And in fact our way of bell ringing you will only find in the part of the world which we call the "Old English Empire".

Author:

We are stopping at the most beautiful church of St. Peter ad Vincula, St. Peter in chains. It is a little bit oversized for a little village like Coggeshall. The church is a 16th century church which majestically indicates that due to wool trade in the medieval Coggeshall was once much more important than it is today. The church tower, 40 mtrs tall, harbours ten bells which is, as I am told, for a reformed church quite something.

Brian:

In the whole world we have about 6000 sets of bells which are arranged in a way in which makes it possible to ring them in the English style. Five and a half thousand of those you will find in England alone.

Author:

The remaining five hundred you would find in former colonies like Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Brian:

There are between 50 and 100 sets with 12 bells, 250 have, like us, 10 bells and the rest has 5, 6 or 8 bells.

Author:

As I am about to learn you can ring even with only five bells very nicely. But what I do not realize yet is the fact that bell ringing is an important English cultural heritage like this beautiful church which we are facing. Only with the difference that it is not a cultural heritage made of stone which you can touch and take photos of but just a volatile, airy and resonant one.

Brian:

Something that is quintessentially English. England, Great Britain is known as the ringing isle, and that is because of our bells existing since the 17th century and which we consider worth protecting and maintaining. It is part of our cultural heritage, something which you cannot touch but hear.

Jochen:

My name is Jochen and I have practiced bell ringing here in Coggeshall since May this year which makes me a beginner. But I already enjoy it thoroughly.

Author:

Jochen is from Lower Saxony and lives in Essex for quite a time. He is not only fascinated by the sound of the bells but he also studied the history of this British custom.

Jochen:

I have always been interested in the English culture. You will find the Anglican Church as a reformed church special in many ways and English bell ringing is indeed connected to the English reformation.

Brian:

We had the English reformation under Henry VIII which was neither a Lutheran nor a Calvinistic reformation. The bells were removed completely from the towers and therefore completely lost their ecclesiastical function. When change ringing started it started purely as something secular without ecclesiastical meaning.

Jochen:

After the break with the catholic church all church bells, which were up to that point of history part of the catholic liturgy, were destroyed or removed. When they were reinstalled they were installed in a new fashion which is fairly unique. The bells were installed in such a way that they practically can move in full circles. You do not just tug a rope but you move the whole bell and that way you produce a sound. That is typical for English bell ringing and that is particularly attractive for someone who comes to England and wants to see or listen to something typically British.

Brian:

It started as a secular thing in the 17th century, as a secular hobby. In the countryside as well as in the fast growing cities like London, Norwich, Birmingham. It went on like that up to the middle of the 19th century when the Oxford movement started to become more significant and attractive in major parts of the population. All existing bell ringing organisations and associations started to become part of the ecclesiastical life again or were newly founded. My organisation the Essex Bell Ringer Association was founded in 1879.

Author:

Opposite St. Peter's you will find the picturesque church vicarage which you could easily use as a film set for a Miss Marple mystery. There you will find Vicar Chris Davey. I ask him whether he would consider English change ringing less secular but more about praising God.

Vicar:

I think it is. In many religious traditions not just Christianity but Buddhism and Hinduism bell ringing has a deep symbolic meaning. It increases our spiritual readiness and prepares us for a meeting with God. Since the church is an important part of our community bells call people to prayer, mark important events of the year like weddings, funerals, our big religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter. All those events are introduced and accompanied by bells.

Brian:

We normally would be ringing for services, for weddings, for baptisms. For all those happy events we ring the full sound. For funerals we ring half muffled as we call it. On those occasions we put a leather belt around the bell where the clapper hits the bell. Since the bell moves 360 degree with the clapper hitting the bell twice the

leather belt lets it hit it only once. Completely muffled belles are only rung exceptionally rarely. That is when a sovereign dies. The last time that happened was 1952 for the funeral of King George VI. But there was one exception. When the Queen Mother died all bells were rung completely muffled. That is the only occasion I know of when fully muffled ringing has been done when it wasn't the sovereign's death.

Author:

We only can imagine how that sounds. We do not have any acoustic samples of that. On one of the weekly practice nights with the bell ringer novices I was able to see and even hear how to ring the bells without producing a real sound.

Brian:

You can indeed compare our bell ringing with chess, bridge or other intellectual mathematical games. The reason it is mathematical is because you associate each bell with a number. If you have eight bells you have numbers from one to eight with all possible combinations of those numbers. That is the mathematical intellectual challenge for the ringer. All is completely organized. Nothing happens accidentally. If a band of English change ringers starts to ring it happens with absolute precision. Every ringer has to do the right thing precisely at the right time, otherwise you would produce chaos.

Jochen:

For me the most difficult and therefore the most challenging part of change ringing is the complexity of the methods, those bell ringing melodies. You have to keep them in mind, you have to keep in mind the special order of the bells, you have to know your exact position in a group of here at St. Peter ad Vincula ten ringers maximum, the change of your position and so on. That sometimes really amazes me and of course challenges me.

Brian:

Let us say you are ringing 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. We call that "rounds". If the director who is responsible for the calls says 3 to 4 he creates now the different order 1, 2, 4, 3, 5, 6. He would carry on like that and create all kinds of different changes.

Jochen:

But you can learn it and you experience senses of achievement.

Author:

I am able to realize that right away. On the Wednesday practice night with Brian two newcomers are present. Both started change ringing at the same time two months ago. It is the about 50 years old Ted who came rushing with his motor bike and then there is Scot.

Scott:

One of my friends at school told me that it would be totally cool and lots of fun. I am thirteen years old.

Author:

Do your other friends think it's cool?

Scott:

Well, the others actually don't know, only me and my friend Tom. Tom started one year ago and is far better than me.

Author:

And what do you especially like with change ringing?

Scott:

I get to ring heavy stuff and making noise, that is it.

Brian:

"Well done, both of you!"

Author:

Brian is absolutely satisfied with the result of the today's lesson. Both of his pupils attend lessons 3 times a week for one hour since they started three months ago.

Scott:

At the beginning it was very hard for me to get a feeling for the bells. If Brian teaches you you very quickly realize what you do wrong. But I am making progress. Soon I may join the others ringing rounds.

Jochen:

However, what is striking for me is the fact that though the bells are fairly heavy and you think that you need lots of strength you don't need strength particularly. You work with the appropriate momentum of the bell which makes the handling quite easy. Once you start bell ringing you find the complex systems within the bells are rung very appealing. You call those methods which are not comparable with the harmonies you would find in music. Appealing in so far because it is not something which you would find in regular music.

Author:

In the church tower which is four hundred years old and which houses bells the oldest of which is more than five hundred years old you will find modern computer technology. The purpose of this is to allow the ringers to practice without disturbing the neighbours of the idyllic little village. To achieve that the clappers are silenced. Reflectors in a highly sophisticated video system send impulses to the computer which makes the pupils and their teacher hear every bell which is chimed without actually producing a real sound which might be heard outside the church. I am impressed. In one of the mysteries of the famous English author Dorothy Sayers, who by the way lived only a stone's throw away from Coggeshall, an especially perfidious murder is committed with bells. Is bell ringing potentially dangerous?

Brian:

I think that is a bit farfetched. But as in every hobby you might find some potentially dangerous aspects in bell ringing, too. If you do not know exactly what you are doing you could be confronted with some unpleasant situations. If you pull the rope for example at the wrong time the rope could drag you up and you could bash your head on the ceiling. But that happens very rarely. Actually bell ringing is not dangerous.

Author:

But I still do not dare to pull one of those soft ropes in the church tower when both of the pupils finished their lesson and we are waiting for the local band which comes for the weekly practice night. There are ten bells in the tower. Brian freed the clappers again and ten long ropes are waiting for their masters. The weekly practice night is voluntary. You can come or leave it. Brian tells me that there are around nine ringers in the tower regularly. He had announced my presence beforehand. Today the little staircase which leads up into the tower would not stop creaking. At the end we are 15 people altogether in the tower. Half of them are women, young and old, a colourful mixture. Everybody looks at me and my microphone and Brian winks at me encouragingly. The delicate Janet is the tower captain. Now the bells are rung for the first time for real this evening.

Brian:

"Number two is now at fifth place - the position is important. What is number 4 doing now? She is then at third place. So three goes to four, you have to keep that in mind, otherwise it won't work".

Author:

Brian is talking to the pupils who are allowed to join the more experienced bell ringers ringing easy rounds this time. Then Brian starts again.

Author:

Though being with the band for about a year already thirteen years old Tom, Scott's friend, is still impressed by the skills of the experienced co ringers.

Tom:

It is amazing how they can do it. Look, bell number ten is the heaviest bell and even a tall man like him needs a box to climb on to ring the bell. The bigger the wheel of the bell is the longer is the attached rope.

Author:

The man who just rang the bell is as tall as a tree. I ask him, do you need lots of strength for ringing at least this one?

Ringer:

Yes, for this one. She weighs one and a half tons.

Author:

The announcement "She is gone" is for bell ringers the sign that ringing started again.

"Go Plain Bob Doubles"

What are doubles?

Jochen:

That announcement starts a new melody. It initiates certain orders of the bells so each bell ringer knows which position he is supposed to ring.

Author:

Is that called ringing?

Jochen:

No, that is method ringing. It is a certain method, a certain melody, which each ringer knows by heart.

Author:

Change ringing means two variations, call and method ringing. But I certainly won't be able to learn the special distinctions tonight. The band in Coggeshall is a colourful mixture. The over forties have a slight majority but the younger generation is well represented, too. That was not always the case. In England bell ringing had its ups and downs in the last decades. Brian has been a bell ringer for more than forty years. As Brian tells me until the seventies England hadn't had any recruitment problems for the past three hundred years.

Brian:

Uncoolness in bells came a little bit later. That happened in the eighties. I believe that had something to do with the revolution of mobility. Young people were able to leave their little villages and communities to do things which they couldn't do before. And besides that bell ringing was always connected to church which was considered uncool. But there was a really really big effort by the head of the bell ringer associations to get all bells in the UK rung at the turn of the millennium on midnight of December 31st. That brought a lot of people in who finally stayed and what they wanted to do is to get involved in a heritage activity.

Julia:

If your parents are bell ringers it is more likely that you get into it, too.

Author:

But with Julia it worked the opposite way. She is now 51.

Julia:

Where we lived we had the noise of the bells every day and my dad hated it. So, when I turned 16, I decided to learn change ringing.

Author:

As an act of rebellion so to speak. Julia stuck to it.

Julia:

It is a cool thing now. A few years ago I stopped ringing for two years and when I returned, the tower was full of young people and it has been great being back to it.

Tom:

My name is Tom Benson and I am thirteen years old. I started at the harvest festival last year. The bell ringers had a little stall here. I stopped because it looked interesting. The following Wednesday I went to the practice night and it was great fun. I'd love to continue. It is very addictive.

Kath:

I was in my teens when I started bell ringing which is now 60 years ago. I especially like the social aspect of it and that it is a way to praise the Lord. Everybody can join us, there is no age limit. We have fairly young girls and boys in our bands. One week ago we went ringing to Bexhill in the county of Sussex and there was an old lady who was happy and content ringing. She was ninety-one. We all have different backgrounds. Whoever you are and where ever you come from, everybody is treated on a same level.

Morris:

I have rung for 61 years. It keeps us fit. Climbing the stair up into the tower alone, not talking about the actual bell ringing. All those joints and muscles which have to be used. And it keeps our brains working.

Brian:

What I have not mentioned is the keeping fit part of it. The smallest bell weighs about one hundred kg and the heaviest here in our tower weighs 1500 kg. The biggest bell which can be rung here in England is in the cathedral of Liverpool and weighs four tons. So, if you are going to ring a peal which is the longest change ringing concert we have, you ring between three and four hours and for that you need a significant level of fitness. It is like running a marathon.

Author:

In fact peals or quarter peals are smaller or bigger change ringing concerts. They take between three quarters of an hour and nearly four hours. Not all bell ringers are ambitious enough to ring peals or quarter peals, only the most skilled and the addicted ones, those many people talk about it in connection with change ringing. The record in the category of duration of continuous change ringing currently stands at 17 hours and was set in 1963 at the cathedral of Loughborough, which included providing food, beverage and discrete little plastic bags.

Since change ringing is something very British I am wondering whether that kind of hobby only attracts British people. I already met Jochen from Germany (but he is especially interested in English tradition anyway).

Brian:

We are starting to get more. As the EU is expanding many people with different cultural background live in England and some of those discover change ringing.

George:

My name is George William Murundi and I am living in Edmonton, North London. I am the tower captain of All Saints St. Michael. I started four years ago together with my daughter who is now fifteen years old. I am originally from Burundi and grew up in Uganda. My family migrated later to England.

George is training to become a heating engineer. George with his imposing stature is an impressive tower captain. He had been fascinated by the bells since he heard them for the first time and thought they would have been recorded and replayed. When the local vicar was looking for new bell ringers he instantly chose him.

George:

When the vicar picks you to do something you go ahead and do it. Actually he was pointing his fingers at me and I thought well, that is a sign and you must learn it. I feel very happy, energetic. With the bells we call people to come to the service. Yes, I do something to serve God. Come and praise the Lord!

Author:

George is a devout Christian and is heavily involved in the parish community. Is that a necessary pre-condition for becoming a good bell ringer within the Anglican Church? Re. Chris Davey from Coggeshall.

Vicar:

No, I don't think so. There are members in our band who are church members and those who are not. For those who are devout Christians ringing is certainly part of their spirituality. Then there are others who are very passionate about ringing which sometimes seems to be an obsession. And then you have people who fall into both categories. But as long as they really enjoy what they are doing I think change ringing is something very creative. I find it has a very deep spiritual core. It is as much a team activity as it is an individual hobby. You have to work together in a team and you have to blend in. Everybody is proud of what they are doing and strive to ring as well as possible and I admire that very much.

Jochen:

The Germans miss out!