John Girt

My name is John Girt.

I was born in 1935.

*How were you first introduced to ringing?*

Father was a bell ringer at Eye and that was where I learnt. One of the most significant points was being hauled out of school aged about 15 or 16, by the headmaster wondering what on earth was going on and sent up the church tower at Eye to toll the bell upon the death of King George VI. In technical terms, that was what was known as whole pull and stand on the tenor bell which was a heavy bell of over a ton and that was quite a daunting experience. I managed it. Dare I say, it requires quite a lot of skill to have two pulls on the rope and then set the bell and wait. And I did that for the number of years of his reign and his age.

*Why have you stayed bell ringing? What do you enjoy?*

It is one of those hobbies that once it’s there, you never want to give it up. It has a number of basic skills that need mastering and once you’ve got those sorted out, you’ve got a lifetime of new things to learn. By no means do I know it all and I never shall know it all. I’ve known far more skilled ringers than I am who likewise would have admitted that they would never know everything that there is to know. There is always that challenge of something new should you wish to take it up.

*What are the skills, and how do you begin to ring?*

You need to master the skills of controlling the rope. The bell turns in a full circle so in one direction the rope winds itself around the wheel and then you pull the rope again and it unwinds. It’s a technique of catching the rope and knowing how much to pull and when to pull. You then move on to skills of controlling the speed and timing so that you can ring amongst other people rather than on your own, which it is of course a team effort. You then move on to learning what the ringers call methods which the general public might call tunes, a mathematical permutation of the numbers and you learn how to learn those permutations, and that’s where the ‘never know it all’ side of things comes in. There are so many permutations that you can never physically remember the lot of them.

*How did you come to St Margaret’s?*

I started ringing at Rushmere St Andrew because they had six bells there and I felt that that was within my capabilities and one of the people at Rushmere also rang at St Margaret’s. He said ‘why don’t you go to St Margaret’s we’re short of people.’

We’ve got eight bells at St Margaret’s. We’ve got probably about a dozen ringers but we desperately need more. In my estimation you need at least twice the number of ringers as you’ve got bells, that covers holidays and sicknesses and other reasons for not attending.

*It is quite a commitment?*

We hope that everybody will attend to ring for morning service, and one night a week for practice. You can extend that to visiting other towers on their practice nights, if you wish. There’s no commitment to do that. A number of people commit themselves to service ringing at more than one church, which is why sometimes the congregation think the ringers clear off at the back of the church, but in actual fact they are often going somewhere else to ring for another service.

*What about the different types of bells?*

In different towers there are different numbers of bells each with a different weight and a different note. St Mary le Tower here in Ipswich has, basically, twelve bells with a 35 hundredweight tenor. St Margaret’s has only eight bells with a 15 hundredweight big bell. So it is the skill of controlling a bell of a different size and, with the different numbers in a ring, then you have more, or maybe less scope for the permutations.

*Are there particular characteristics of a person who becomes a bell ringer?! What qualities do they need?*

We have one little girl who has just passed her 11th birthday who rings with us and we have old folks like myself, male and female, all ages and sizes in between. You need a commitment to it. You need a sense of rhythm, the ability to count. If you want to ring and you can do those things, we can teach you.

*How long will that take?*

We’ve taught some schoolchildren to ring in probably about a total of two to three hours, actual handling the rope. After that it’s an extended learning programme, learning all the methods.

*You’ve kept records of bell ringing at St Margaret’s?*

I was given what I call a day book which began in the mid-1800s and was kept by the then steeple keeper, who ran the ringing. He kept records of events that took place up until the end of the First World War. It includes such things as the death of Queen Victoria, the end of the war, First World War celebrations, local weddings, funerals

When that book came into my possession, I started a day book which would have started in 1994 and I recorded various events which may not have seemed very important at the time - somebody’s wedding and ringing for Christmas, but having looked back at the previous day book, to me they seemed historically important.

The other type of record which was kept was simply a record of the number of peals, which is a particular length of ringing, which have been rung since 1899-1900.

A peal is 5,000 or more changes, ie these permutations that I spoke about. It takes about three hours of ringing. The bell ringing fraternity keeps a record of such things nationally and most towers keep their own record of peals that have been rung.

*What friendships have you built up?*

We try to instigate a social atmosphere. For example, last month several of the band went on a bell ringing outing. We visited three other towers had half, three-quarters of an hour ringing at each tower and ended up in a pub for lunch. We also try and go once or twice a year on a walk, a few miles out in the country. Again having a pub lunch. We’ve recently had an evening pub meal. We want to try and make it more of a ringing community.

*What about links to other towers?*

In Suffolk we are organised into four areas. Each area holds ringing meetings, practice meetings once a month in different places. Also we socialise in terms of going out ringing and then having a meal somewhere. The Guild, which is the overriding body in Suffolk, organises an annual meeting, and every five years we hold a formal dinner. There are ringing competitions to bring people together, to see who can ring a certain length without making a mistake. For a number of years I was in a band at St Mary the Tower which competed in the national twelve bell competitions. The best we ever did was fourth, in the whole of the country. So, we didn’t think that was too bad. We were up against cathedral bands. For example, St Paul’s in London and Birmingham, which are really top notch bands.

*The vicar considers bellringing an act of worship – why would he think that and what do you think of that?*

The sound of the bells before a morning service at least reminds those within hearing distance that there is an act of worship going on. It is known from time to time that we actually attract people ‘Oh, I heard the bells, I didn’t know where to go so I’ll go to St Margaret’s’. The regularity of turning up and ringing for these services, is regarded as a contribution to the service.

*The beauty of the sound in itself – the bells are quite distinct?*

The bells are quite distinct. There are those who complain bitterly that they interfere with their Sunday morning lie in. There are those who tolerate them and there are those who enjoy it. I get comments from people ‘I loved to walk through Christchurch Park to the service this morning, it was lovely to hear the bells as I walked along’. There are those of us who appreciate the ‘music’, because it’s not a tune, of the bells. To some of us they sound joyful if the occasion is joyful – Easter, Christmas. To others of us they sound mournful, for example ringing on Remembrance Sunday. They just seem to have that effect on people.

*At significant times in history, what other times when the bells were rung?*

At Diss I rang a peal for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth. I was not ringing obviously in Ipswich at that time so I don’t know what they did here. We were in a panic one Sunday morning when the death of Princess Diana was announced. In actual fact I don’t think we did ring at all, because we felt that that was the most significant thing we could do given such a short notice.

*Was there some sort of etiquette?*

If there is a death of the sovereign, we ring bells fully muffled – that is to say, we put leather pads on the clappers so that each time the clapper strikes the bell it is a much softened note. If it’s another death then we ring half muffled – that is to say, only one side of the clapper is silenced or quietened and we do that on Remembrance Sunday as well which is quite an amazing effect if you have never heard it before or realised what is going on. We rang for the Queen Mother’s 100th birthday.

*How do you put a muffler on the clapper?*

You had to climb the stairs and climb the ladder and go amongst them in the bell frame and physically attach these pads to the clapper of the bell. So it takes time, it takes effort, which is why the Sunday morning with Princess Diana, there just wasn’t time to do that before the morning service.

The bells are not there anymore because we are in the middle of a restoration project. The whole bell frame and bells will be lowered in the tower. Currently the eight bells have been taken away to works for refurbishment and there will be a new frame built .

*What had happened to the bells to need repair?*

Probably eight or nine years ago, I started talking to the vicar about having bells restored but nothing really took off until about three years ago when the vicar said, ‘I think we can manage to tackle this’. So yes I instigated the whole thing.

The bells themselves are OK. Five of them have been there since 1630. Bearings wear out, wheels get worn and tatty. The wheels are about 100 years old. The reason also is because the Victorians put about 11 feet on the tower in height. The bells were hung in such a way that they are currently beginning to cause damage to the tower itself and so lowering the whole lot reduces stresses and strains

*Where have the bells gone?*

They’ve gone to a firm in Bridport, Devon.

*What will they do?*

We’re having to build a gallery lower in the tower instead of ringing from the higher room where we used to ring. That means the congregation will be able to see the ringers, not the bells, which we believe is a good thing.

When the bells were taken away at the beginning of May, they were stored in the church overnight. The congregation was invited to come and have a look at them as they sat in the church. I think about 60 people turned up to have a look. I didn’t count them but quite a number turned up the next morning to see them loaded on to the lorry.

*It was quite an unusual occurrence?*

Oh yes, literally once in a lifetime. You’ll probably never see St Margaret’s bells again.

*The heritage project at St Margaret’s is extensive, you have been involved in instigating that. How long has it taken?*

*Why is it important to you?*

It’s the place where I worship. I’ve become associated with St Margaret’s and that is where I like to be. I like the form of service. We do have a sociable band of ringers. We like to engage in the church activities beyond the acts of worship as well.

*Your son was a bell ringer, can you say more about that?*

He became a much better ringer than I am. He had more skills. He had more knowledge of ringing than I have. I suppose he had opportunity. He went to university and joined in university ringing and later he was elected Tower Captain at St Margaret’s. This means taking on the teaching, arranging special ringing for any service, maintaining the bells, looking after ropes and all those sorts of things.

*You just don’t do the bellringing, you are also responsible for the church clock?*

I was responsible for the church clock. Part of the heritage project is to electrify the clock whereas I had to wind it by hand. I had to make sure that the clock kept reasonably accurate time. The current proposals are to install electric winding gear and devices to keep the thing absolutely accurate without me or anyone else having to worry about it.

*How do you do it?*

The clock was and still will be in its current location – it’s gone away for restoration work – but it was in the same room where we actually rang the bells, where the ropes were, so it was just a matter of opening the case and getting a handle and lifting a whacking great weight up the tower.

*Is that once a week?*

It would go once a week – it’s about an eight day clock – but I would do it twice a week on the practice night and the Sundays to even the load a little bit. It was quite strenuous.

*How long does the process take?*

Oh, it’s roughly two turns for each day. There’s a clock mechanism and a striking mechanism, so I have two lots to wind at the same time.

*Has it ever stopped?*

To my knowledge, no. It was put in in the late 1700s, it’s the oldest public working clock in Ipswich.

*How did you discover the teaching methods you’re using now?*

We learned about the Association of Ringing Teachers ART, which was established about two and a half or three years ago. They devised a teaching programme based on research into teaching methods used at places like Loughborough University where they train athletes. They developed this ‘Learning the Ropes’ scheme which has received quite a lot of recognition nationally. They run a scheme whereby students are awarded certificates at various different levels of skill and they teach the whole thing in a much more sensible way.,

*Looking to the future – what do you hope for with bell ringing?*

I hope that at least we can extend the ringing experience. It really is quite a fantastic type of exercise. A friend of mine, who was a consultant at the hospital, claimed that it was probably the most difficult skill that any human could master simply because you have an input of various senses – you’ve got sound, you’ve got vision, you’ve got touch, you’ve got rhythm and you’ve got mental activity and all of those five things put into the system each time. It’s not sitting and listening. Each one of those five is active at the same time and therefore that makes it particularly difficult for a human being to knit all those together.

*Do you go and visit towers when you go on holiday?*

Generally, we take a break from ringing but on the other hand we do visit other towers when we’ve been abroad. We’ve visited towers in Sydney, Perth, Toronto and Boston and in New Zealand and you get a welcome. You’re accepted! For example, we walked in Perth Cathedral, opened the door of the ringing room before the morning service. Hello, you must be John and Shirley, come in! We were unannounced as far as we knew, unknown. Such is the fraternity!

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