

Newton's Unsung Heroes

Our series on Newton St Cyres volunteers working behind the scenes continues with a trip up to the top of St Cyr and St Julitta to meet the church's volunteer bell ringers. And a motley group of enthusiasts they are too. Words and pictures by Ann Quon Cordingley.

It's Monday evening and the sound of church bells echoes across the rooftops of Newton St Cyres. Up in the church bell tower, Mark Bertam is calling out to eight bell ringers who are pulling on lengths of thick rope.

"One to two, one to four, three to two," Mark shouts. It is practice night and Mark, the session's group leader, is calling out the changes. "Each bell has a number, and you call two bells that follow each other. There are lots of combinations of peals," he says.

Normally, Monday night practices are held in Stoke Canon, where Mark is the tower captain, but tonight they are in Newton St Cyres. "This is the most accessible tower where we don't have to go up a small spiral staircase to get to the room where we ring," Mark says.

There are about 4,000 churches with bells in Britain, and of these, 400 are in Devon alone. "We have more churches with bells than any other county in the country," says Mark. Bell ringers, called campanologists, number about 40,000 throughout the country.

Tonight's group is a motley gathering of enthusiasts who come from further afield than just Newton St Cyres. There's an antique restorer from Exeter, an accounts manager from

Tedburn St Mary, a family counsellor from Brampford Speke, an agricultural manager from Cadeleigh, and an environmental science student from Thorverton, among others. All of them ring bells for the joy and satisfaction it gives them.



Mary Quicke

Mary Quicke is the parish church's tower captain – and her passion for ringing is clear. "It's a lot of fun. It's social, musical and ancient," she says. As tower captain, her role is to organise bell-ringing practices, ensure the bells are in good ringing condition and, occasionally, find new recruits.

A few in the group have just started, while others, like Mark, have been ringing for most of their lives. "I have been doing this for 45-plus years," he says. "I started when I was 11 or 12 years old. Nobody in my family was a ringer, only me. There was an advert in the local church magazine and I turned up. I haven't stopped since."

Halcyon Pughe is one of the newcomers. “I’m an L-plate learner and have been learning for about two months,” she says. A retired nurse and midwife who moved to Newton St Cyres from Exeter two years ago, she breeds, shows and judges wirehaired dachshunds as a hobby. She joined the group at the behest of a very persuasive Mary Quicke. “She said, ‘you would love to learn to ring bells, wouldn’t you?’ and I said, ‘as long as I don’t have to be musical, that’s fine.’ And now I love it, just love it, it’s great.”



Halcyon Pughe

Simon Tempest Brown is also new to bell ringing and a Quicke recruit. “I was a chorister for most of my childhood, so bell ringing was never something I considered doing,” says Simon, who lives in Thorverton and is studying environmental science. “I’m kind of hooked really. Bell ringing is under threat because people are no longer taking it up as a hobby. It’s one of those aspects of country life that I want to see continue.”

For Juliet Bell, who supports families with young children who are struggling to cope, it is the history of bell ringing that appeals. “It’s a tradition that’s been pretty much unchanged for centuries,” she says. “We are doing something that has been going on for 600 years.”

“Some of the bells we ring are centuries old,” says Jenny Codling who has been ringing bells for over 20 years and is tower vice-captain at Tedburn St Mary, where she lives. She is partner to Mark and works as an accounts manager in Exeter.

At Stoke Canon, the bells date back to as early as 1641, while Newton St Cyres’ are from as early as 1733. “In St Petrocks in Exeter they are 500 to 600 years old, and you can still ring them,” says Mark.

Church bells are described as the soundtrack of historic and momentous occasions, calling people to worship, to celebrate, to wed, to mourn, to battle, and in times of crisis, to come together.

“When my mother and sister-in-law died, I was just so happy to be able to come in and toll the bell,” says Mary Quicke. “When the Duke of Edinburgh died, I came in and tolled the bell 99 times. I think it’s great that I can make that contribution to the community. And there’s the mischievous thing of naffing off the atheists. If people are really anti-church and think the bells are horrible, that just amuses me.”



Wedding Bells

Church bells are associated with weddings. At Newton St Cyres, if the wedding is for a couple the church doesn't know, then there will be a fee, which is used for the upkeep of the bells, not for the bellringers, who are volunteers. "We have to make sure the bells are in a fit state to be rung, so we do a bit of bell maintenance, or what I call bell yoga," says Mary.

Bell ringing has also become a way of socialising and bringing people together. "I love that side of it," says Jenny. "We all enjoy it and we all enjoy socialising and getting together. After 20 years or so, it's become my way of life. I just look forward to ringing bells wherever I can."

When lockdown forced the closure of churches, bell ringing and practice came to a halt. But with lockdown lifted, things are picking up. "We're getting back into it, practicing and learning again," says Mary. It may take some time, but she is determined to get back to the pre-Covid schedule. "My aim is to get the bells rung for the four Sundays of the month at Newton St Cyres, Thorverton, Brampford Speke and Stoke Canon," she said.

Mary started learning the art of bell ringing at the age of 12 at the parish church. "The vicar was the very distinguished bell ringer, John G M Scott, who has written textbooks about Devon bells. Bell ringing was a very male thing back then and he was very keen his daughter, Rebecca, should do it. So I started learning with her. I stopped learning at the age of 15 because I was a very stropky teenager. But I came back to it 43 years later."

That's because Pita Burt, the secretary of the parish church, got talking to her about the bells. That inspired her. "There was this extraordinarily ancient craft which has been going on pretty much in the same way since the 15th century. It's sociable and requires a minimum level of musicality. It's quite physical which is enjoyable, and it's got its intellectual bit. It's an ancient craft that must not die on my watch."

In the old days, all towers would have their own group of bell ringers. But with not enough ringers to go around, they started ringing in other churches. Newton St Cyres is part of the Netherexe parishes, a community of 10 churches in the Diocese of Exeter, that serves Brampford Speke, Cadbury, Newton St Cyres, Rewe with Netherexe, Stoke Canon

with Huxham, Thorverton and Upton Pyne.

While bell ringers from Netherexe parishes will ring at each other's churches, they also ring outside the group and help each other out. "Chris Roe comes from Cadeleigh, which is not part of Netherexe, so I help him at Cadeleigh and he helps me out," says Mary.

"If there is a special occasion like a wedding, then every member of that tower who can ring will, and if they can't, they will get someone from a neighbouring tower to help out," says Chris Roe, who runs an agricultural contracting business and is the tower captain in Cadeleigh.

He is also proof that you don't have to have a musical touch to ring bells. "I'm not musical but I've always wanted to play a musical instrument – this is the nearest I can get to doing it," said Chris. "What I find most satisfying is hearing the bells ringing well and you can hear them hum. It's a lovely, lovely sound. And when it goes wrong, it's horrible."



Jenny Codling

Jenny and Mark don't play any instruments either. "You learn technique. It's repetition," says Mark. Both keen bell ringers, they have taken several bell ringing courses and share their knowledge with others.

There are different styles of bell ringing, with the most common being 'rounds', where bells are rung repeatedly in sequence, and 'call changes', where bells are called by a leader to ring in a different order. Like scones, jam and clotted cream, Devon has its own style of call changes. "It's called Devon call changes, which is unique to Devon and we are very good at it," says Mark.

"We learn patterns," says Jenny. "That's how we ring the bells. We usually have a caller who will call where the bells have got to go – behind each other or in front of each other."

To keep things interesting, the group came up with a call change called 'vegetable stew', where each bell is named after a vegetable instead of a number. "Number one might be potato, number two might be tomato. And it makes you concentrate, so rather than getting used to the numbers, we call it differently. It makes it fun, and if it goes wrong, that's a vegetable stew," says Mark.

On average, with practice once a week, it takes about six months to learn the basics and ring in a group. "You've got to take the bell up, then you've got to control it, then rest it and then there are things like bringing the bell down so that it's down at rest," says Halcyon. "So all those things we've got to achieve before we can be included as part of a group."

“We just let everyone take their own time,” says Jenny. “There is no pressure. We aren’t forcing people to be able to ring quickly. Everyone goes at their own pace. Some people learn a lot quicker, some people take ages, but it really doesn’t matter. Simon was saying he hopes to be ringing by Christmas and he probably will, as will Halcyon and Juliet.”

While you don’t have to be musical, bell ringing is physically demanding. “You need upper body strength, and you need technique and rhythm,” says Halcyon. The bells at NSC weigh anywhere from a quarter to two thirds of a ton, so having some strength does help. But technique is what really counts. “You are controlling a massively heavy bell and it’s a technique that I think as learners you begin to appreciate. It’s mastering that, and then you get to a stage where you get to be included in a group, and that is absolutely wonderful.”

Not all bells sound the same, according to Eric Henley who lives in St Thomas and is a bell ringer of 51 years, “some bells are easier to ring.” “It’s funny, but if the bells are heavier, say over a ton, they are actually easier to ring than lighter bells. Not because of the weight but because they are more reliable in the way the rope comes down.”



Mark Bertram

You don’t have to be religious to be a bell ringer. “It’s a group of people who gather and come and do it for fun,” says Mark. “There is a religious aspect to it, of course, but you don’t have to be religious. In fact, many bell ringers who ring on Sundays don’t stay for the service and slip out the back door.”

If anything, bell ringers have a reputation for having fun and being mischievous, and this group is no exception. They enjoy each other’s company and go on outings together, as well as with other groups. On one outing, they took the steam engine from Buckfastleigh to Totnes. “We got on the train at Buckfastleigh and went to Totnes and rang the bells there. Then we came back to Staverton and rang the bells there and then back to Buckfastleigh on the steam train and rang the bells at the church there. It was wonderful,” says Jenny.

It seems you are never too old to be a bell ringer. One-time Newton St Cyres resident Reg Bray was famous for ringing until the age of 102, having learned the art during the First World War. He appeared in the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest active bell ringer, and longest serving ringer at any tower for more than 90 years.

Will any in the current group be ringing until Reg’s ripe old age? “This is my life,” says Mark. “I wouldn’t know what to do if I didn’t have this. I will be doing this until I die.”

Says Mary: “What I really want is not to be the last captain of this tower, and that we aren’t the last generation of bell ringers.”



*Back row: Mark Bertram;
2nd row left to right: Juliet Bell, Simon Tempest Brown, Ed Sanders, Eric Henley,
Sandy Harrison, Jenny Codling, Russ Cummings;
Front row: Sheila Jefferies, Mary Quicke, Halcyon Pughe, Colin Prentice, Chris Roe*