

The Ringer's Return

David King

I can't remember exactly when I started bellringing, but at the latest, it was soon after my fourteenth birthday. It was a natural progression from the church choir, and my older sister had already been ringing for a few years, though left later that year for university. There were though still a few old hands around to pass on their knowledge to a whole pack of us youngsters who began at the same time. Very quickly though they retired, leaving behind what must have been one of the youngest bands in the land. I think that Fred, unusually named in those days for a 22-year-old, was just about the oldest of the regulars. So we grew up together in the tower, friends from primary school days, and one or two incomers.

However, I stopped ringing around seven years later, having moved to London and finding myself for various reasons out of step with the church. And anyway, there were by then many other activities to engage my attention. I didn't mean to give up permanently, but that's how it turned out, at least until I made the decision last September to contact the Hertford tower master and attempt to pick up from where I'd left off 35 years earlier.

Everyone said that bellringing is like riding a bicycle: you never forget. I've found this generally to be true of the physical side, that is handling the rope and not endangering yourself or your fellow ringers. I had however forgotten the special end-of-rope knot, as well as a few other finer points. Mentally though it's a different prospect; most things you learn you're able to slow down and take stage by stage. It doesn't seem to apply to bellringing though; you can study it on paper and look at where your bell should be, but when you're actually doing it, you have to think half a second at a time. Or at least, I do; you have to know which bell you're following, and which bell they're following, in case a call change puts your bell into their position. To the established crew it all seems to come

intuitively, and here is my chief frustration as a returner: I want to be a reliable member of the band as soon as possible, and not the 'weakest link'. But now, with many other commitments, I no longer have the time available to my former teenage self. And here's something else; I like to think that I can write with reasonable clarity, and as a former English teacher I certainly should be able to, but describing bellringing taxes this skill considerably; a general description for the lay reader without the special terminology is quite an exercise.



I have found all the Hertford ringers very friendly, tolerant and encouraging, and would like to place on record my gratitude to them and especially John Kemp, the Tower Master. He is a true role model, still ringing in his mid-eighties. It gives me hope that, for as long as I too am able to make it up the spiral stairways, I can look forward to another thirty or so years as a part of this fascinating and very British tradition.

David, as he explains, has just returned to ringing in his mid-fifties. Although he downplays his abilities, he is re-learning fairly quickly and in the year since he returned has made himself a valued member of the Hertford ringers. Needless to say we were pleased to welcome someone who could already handle a bell and was able to take his place for service ringing almost immediately. David also has the valuable asset that he has a musical ear and can hear his bell – something that many ringers cannot do, even after many years of constant practice.

I am sure that David will be delighted to talk about his recent experiences with any member of the congregation.

Alastair Stracey