

Two Rusties and a Handbells Virgin

There has never been a strong handbells culture in East Yorkshire, the peak of achievement was back in the early 1970s when a dozen or so peals were rung, the last one being in 1979. Since then there has been a trickle of handbell quarter peals, and that's it. I put my bells away in the early 1980s when children came along, and then promotions at work, and then Fair Trade, and then outsourcing. It wasn't a bad life, no complaints, but no ringing.

And then in 2015 during the Central Council meeting in Hull, an old friend came to stay, and during the time we visited Roddy Horton who had kept the handbells light still shining a little. The light re-ignited my interest in handbell ringing which had been dormant for 30 years. Handbell ringing is something that I can do, it suits my logical brain, double handed ringing has hard bits, lots of hard bits, and music.

So in March 2016, I talked a friend and my wife into starting a weekly handbells session. We all have white hair and creaking joints, plus serious responsibilities to others. Two rusties and a handbell virgin is not a good way to start a major project, but progress was made, slowly, and Plain Bob Minor became ringable by the end of June. It was at that point I realised that significant progress would only be possible if we involved more ringers.

In spite of advice to the contrary I organised a regional handbells workshop for late October 2016. Along the way we discovered a local ringer who had a copy of Handbell Manager on a laptop, with a couple of motion detectors. Instantly I could see the benefits of the system. Able to practise any time, any day, with "ringers" who never make mistakes. Any method, any speed, any number of bells. I was hooked.

The October workshop was very successful. 15 ringers had a great day refreshing Plain Hunting and Plain Bob skills, and everyone achieved at least one step forward. Some had a go on the simulator. Part of the success was the discovery of 4 local towerbell ringers with some handbells experience.

But then the real work started. The ringers were spread out across the county, there was no way they would all come together on a monthly basis, let alone weekly. However, by then the two "rusties" had been polished a little, and the handbells virgin had had some experiences. So we started travelling out and ringing with people at every opportunity.

A second handbells day was arranged for end January 2017, and the progress in 12 weeks, in spite of Christmas intervening was tangible. Plain Bob Major was being rung by most people, some were turning out courses of Kent and Oxford TB and Cambridge Surprise Minor. 4 people decided to shoot for a quarter of Plain Bob Major. 2 good quarters were scored in the February.

And so we arrive in March 2017, the first birthday of the project. Some people fell by the wayside, some never got their legs going, but 4 people have rung 2 good quarters, and there are 7 more who are progressing in spite of only being able to ring once each month. Ringing is taking place in 4 locations, and it would be good to build a handbells band in each of them. Towards that possibility we plan to consolidate our progress with a number of quarter peals, and then to move on by running another workshop: "Going beyond Plain Bob" in July 2017.

What have we learned?

We have learned a good deal about the learning process, and whilst it's OK for the teacher to be impatient, it is also very important to get the basics right. Standing up might not look like much of an achievement, but falling over because you're trying to go too fast too soon is totally useless.

We have learned a lot about the skills involved in handbell ringing. We have also learned a lot about how the brain works and the importance of driving stuff down into long term memory.

Above all we have learned that there is still much real enjoyment to be had in creating the mathematical music of the bells.

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www.handbellringing.org.uk