

Master's Report 2020

At any other time, this would have been written during the run-up to our annual striking competition and AGM in July at Sketty; how different now! We'll have to hold our annual meeting this year by video platform and I trust members will join in if they can and forgive any shortcomings.

With things as they are, it's quite easy to forget that Guild activities did go ahead until earlier this year. Many of us remember that 7 teams participated in our striking competition at the last AGM: the largest entry for quite a few years. We were represented at September's All-Wales competition in Carmarthen in both 6-bell and 8-bell categories. We look forward to improving our collective 8-bell striking in future events once we've been able to practice together again. A successful joint session with Llandaff & Monmouth and St David's Guild went ahead at Brecon Cathedral in September, led by David Childs. Other monthly Guild practices were held in Gorseinon, Llanbedr (plus meeting), Swansea St Mary and – the last, together with a meeting – at Brecon Cathedral in February. My thanks to all who made us welcome and provided refreshments at these venues.

Two of the planned four training sessions for 2019/2020 took place, thanks to the hard work and dedication of our Training Officer, Kath Johnson. These were: a Surprise Minor Day in October and a Doubles Day in February, both greatly enjoyed by students who attended.

Paul Johnson's great idea of using the website to highlight particular quarter peals has shown quite a few 'firsts' and other milestones reached since July last year. Some were rung for the Guild but by no means all – it's been an excellent way of celebrating individual members' achievements. I have to mention Hal Drysdale's extraordinary energy in organising a whole series of quarters intended to get David Childs up to his 50th quarter for the year and his 500th overall by the end of 2019. You couldn't make it up: both targets hit in separate quarters at Presteigne and then at Glasbury on New Year's Eve!

I'm most grateful to the other Guild officers for their valuable contributions. Laura Childs kindly took on the task of Hon Secretary last year despite other important personal commitments. David Childs has continued as Treasurer and also functions *de facto* as Membership Secretary. He's had to deal with the fallout from data protection requirements (see also below). Paul Johnson has continued as Peal recorder, also managing the website's content, though it's a job he's made clear he wants to relinquish. Hal Drysdale agreed to take on the technical aspects. Kath Johnson, who has served for many years as both Training Officer and Public Relations Officer for the north of our Guild, wishes to step down from both roles. Enormous thanks to Kath for her longstanding and thoughtful approach to this work. Hers will be a very hard act to follow.

We were informed by the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers that a falling official membership now entitles us to a single representative (me at the moment), whereas for many years we had two. Our Treasurer will have his own thoughts on this, of course but it seems likely to me that one factor involves the relatively recent need to formalise membership with signed consents etc because of Data Protection demands. It's probably pruned a list previously inflated by lapsed former ringers who are now either impossible to contact or else simply unwilling to deal with red tape. We need to keep a close eye on the trend.

It's worth recording that 2019/2020 not only spoiled Guild events. The year also ruined members' own plans made at tower and local cluster level. A Brecon tower outing in Herefordshire towards the end of October was hit by unexpectedly bad flood water and had to be abandoned. Access to the day's first tower proved impossible, several cars suffered minor damage and then, later on, the re-scheduled outing was caught out by the lockdown. February's Storm Dennis caused significant damage; in places road access still remains limited following that tempest. Andrew Williams worked very hard indeed planning a complex bellringing and history trip to Lincolnshire at the end of April, but obviously had to cancel it all. I'm sure others suffered disappointments as well.

Of course, it's COVID-19 that dominates everything now. Full-circle tower bell ringing came to a sudden halt after March 16th and churches remained closed for a long time. In some places where priests and wardens were supportive, it was possible for single bells to chime. Support from our President to chime on Easter Sunday was most important and a number of churches did manage to do it. A few gave their church buildings voice by sounding at least one tower bell to supplement their communities' local Thursday evening appreciation of NHS and other front-line workers. VJ Day was another such opportunity. With services having restarted some weeks ago in many churches, it's become possible to ring more than one bell full-circle on Sundays, though there are significant limitations. Some churches aren't yet holding services and, even in those that are and have capable ringers, some are in vulnerable groups and may not feel it's safe enough to help out. And then of course there are problems to overcome with small ringing chambers and awkward access to them; nothing is easy. Arrangements in England had to be modified to fit alongside Welsh legislation and we're grateful for the liaison work done with the Church in Wales by Matthew Turner (Llandaff & Monmouth) and for John Vesey's (Llandaff Cathedral) risk assessment template that we've adopted – and adapted - for use in our Guild.

When we eventually return to something nearer to normal, we'll have to work very hard to see bell ringing flourish again. We don't know how many will come back to it, so challenges in recruitment and retention will be greater than ever. Against that background, we'll probably have to consider planning even more cross-boundary training.

Some ringers have kept themselves going during lockdown by concentrating on handbells and some by using virtual platforms such as 'Ringing Room.' Of course, we can't yet gather together for normal weekly tower practices. But many still hold a return to full tower bell ringing as the principal goal. Experience over the last few months has demonstrated our dependence on churches and, particularly at the moment, on service ringing, basic though that has to be at the moment. But church authorities also need to recognise our ability to help make these important buildings shout against the silence with only a few bells or perhaps even only with one. The relationship is or should be symbiotic. Let's make it clear where we can that helping our church towers to speak out not only for services but also for other important community events, celebrations or commemorations is something that most people welcome, whether they're churchgoers or not. And it's especially important now, when it looks as though general restrictions will tighten again and silence might otherwise reign once more.

David Katz (11th September 2020)