

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

I Ring Bells

Alan Hines · Wednesday, February 6th, 2019

“You must be married to the American who rings bells,” someone said to our friend Cindy when they heard her accent and found out she lived in Timberscombe, too. She was at a social event in the next village over from ours.

“No, *I’m* married to the American who rings bells,” Tommy says when I tell him about this later. He’s entertained – because someone who doesn’t know us assumed I’m Cindy’s husband? Because I actually *am* a bell ringer?

My grandfather, like most farmers, stayed on his farm in northeast Texas when the US sent troops to fight in World War I. Producing food was an essential part of the war effort. He would walk over to the Methodist church in town every Sunday morning, while everything was still quiet, and a short time later people would hear the single bell he was ringing before the morning service. This was his duty, week after week, for the rest of his life. When I was a boy, I heard it, too.

Bells were ringing at a village church one night when Tommy and I were coming out of a pub in Cornwall, thirty years later. It was practice night, and we went over to watch. These bells were different than the single bell my grandfather rang. Eight people stood in a circle, one behind each rope. They were ringing bells one right after the other in succession. When the leader gave a command, the bells changed to a more complicated pattern.

They took a break and the leader asked if we’d like to have a go at it and the next thing I knew he was showing me how to hold the rope, the tail end in my left hand and then both hands on a woolen woven part of the rope called the sally. He pulled the sally down for the handstroke and then let me pull the rope down for the backstroke. Another ringer leaned toward Tommy and whispered: “He’s a natural.”

“She said you’re a natural,” he told me later.

“Oh, they tell everyone that,” a ringer in our village church told me sometime later.

Not long after we settled in our village in Exmoor, I was working in the garden one summer evening, when the bells in St. Petrock’s started to ring. I went over there straightaway and told them I wanted to learn how to ring bells. They were stunned. I don’t think they quite knew what to say. Here I was, a tall enthusiastic man with a twangy American accent barging in to say he wanted

to be a bell ringer.

Since the early 17th century, bells ringing in English village churches have called people to pray, to work, to come together for a feast, to announce the end of the war. In the beginning, I would go through the technique in my head all week long before the Thursday practice, handstrokes, backstrokes, let the rope go all the way up, slow down, speed up, grab higher up on the sally. Tommy would look at me suspiciously. “You’re overthinking it,” he would say.

In the middle of winter, it’s been dark for several hours when I walk past the The Lion Inn. Lights from the pub shine out over the square and up the wide cobblestones steps leading to St. Petrock’s. Some headstones in the churchyard that have been there since medieval times.

Ringling chambers in many churches are up narrow and winding stone staircases that lead to the tower. Our ringling room is on the ground level.

Elisabeth, our tower leader, is already there, lowering the ropes. St. Petrock’s has 8 bells in its tower. Allan is often here, too, sometimes cutting a cake that he’s baked and we’ll have on our break. His passions are the classics and cookery and his knowledge about these subjects, among others, intimidates the rest of us. Martin is usually here, too. Martin is an engineer who is more mechanically gifted than the rest of us put together. He thinks nothing of climbing the ladder, straight up the stone wall and into the tiny opening of the loft whenever some bell adjustment needs to be made.

Others begin to arrive, Andrew and Jennie from Minehead, others along with them, including Simon, the vicar. When Simon conducts a worship service he obviously can’t ring but he still likes to come to practice where he has the opportunity to be a regular person, minus the clerical collar. By the time the bells have been rung up, Gwynnie has heard them and now rushes in. She’s been at home, sitting by her woodstove, waiting until the very last minute so she can see the end of Emmerdale, her soap.

Andrew is the tower leader from St. Michael’s in Minehead, and he comes to our practice every Thursday evening. He’s been ringling since he was 9 and he can tell if one bell is the slightest bit off. Every time I’m away in America for a few months and then come back, he helps bring me up to speed again. Handling the rope, figuring how to work with the bell’s momentum. He’s very patient.

Elisabeth, who’s a former school teacher, keeps the practice session moving. We reach to grab ropes with both hands high on the sally. Most often I ring the #7. Elisabeth rings the #1 bell, the Treble. She calls out: *Look to – Treble’s going, treble’s gone*, and then we ring rounds. Me on #7, anticipating, about to ring when it’s #5’s turn, then more so when it’s #6’s turn, and then pulling off when it’s my turn. We ring in sequence and that usually leads to call changes, where the order varies. Bell ringers more skilled than I do method ringling, which are complicated changes rung from memory. It’s necessary to time the swings so that the strike occurs with precise positioning within the overall pattern.

Most Americans forego this remote pocket of Somerset for more popular tourist sites and so the people who live here haven’t been exposed to that many of us. Afterwards, in the pub, the other ringers are familiar enough with me now to ask questions. In the beginning, if I joined in the

conversation, they would all stop talking and stare at me, as though I was about to reveal something important – my reason for being here, living in their village, ringing bells. An insight about America. Our work often brought Tommy and me to England and we had been looking for a place here to live for some time when we found our cottage. Actually, their questions were more everyday: Do you live far from Disney World? Do you like Oreos? When I would look at a 20p coin a moment too long, they would burst out laughing.

That I'm a bell ringer is not much of a conversation starter when I go to dinner parties in America. The others keep waiting for the rest of it, the punchline. They assume I'm talking about ringing handbells at Christmas or on a street corner for the Salvation Army. I'm not sure what to liken it to. It takes place in a church but it's not particularly religious. It's an ancient art, it's music, it's a group of people ringing a set of tuned bells through a series of changing patterns. It's a tradition that in some way touches every facet of English life, and like nothing we have in America.

The bell my grandfather rang is mounted on a slab of concrete now, in front of the new Methodist church in Wolfe City, Texas. It's still a small farming community, the same only more worn and rusted. Traffic passes back and forth by the church every day. People may know where the bell came from and why it's there or they may think it's just part of the landscaping.

Many people in England found out that World War I had ended through bells ringing all over the country. 1,400 bell ringers had died during the war. On November, 11th, the 100th anniversary of Armistice, 1,400 newly recruited bell ringers, including me, rang in their memory.

The bell ringers file from the ringing room and out the church door after most Sunday services. Sometimes there are as many of us as there are people in the congregation. But on this Sunday, the church was as crowded as it always is at Christmas, and we bellringers sat on the back pew, just outside the ringing room. Everyone had pinned red poppies to their lapels.

At one point, all of us turned to face the war memorial tablet honoring the young men who left for what they believed would be an adventure but then never came back. Some of their descendants were present today. Everyone sang the national anthem at the end of the service, "God Save the Queen".

At 12:30, we started to ring again, but now we had company. Bells were ringing in towers all across England at the same time. We rang for half an hour. Timberscombe is a village of about 400 and the population has held steady for hundreds of years. These people facing the war memorial tablet have something in common, something lasting.

The names of the young men were inscribed on the tablet and printed in the program, too. Everyone read each name aloud, in unison, like we knew all twelve of them by heart. Then an elderly man who had served in the Indian Army stepped forward. He was elegantly dressed, a distinguished English gentleman in every sense of the word. He went over and hung a cross made of poppies below the tablet.

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