

Don't plan a lie-in if you're near the Thames next Sunday. There'll be eight huge bells ringing out from the Queen's Jubilee flotilla. It will be very loud...

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How the Queen's flotilla will look, with the bells ringing out on the barge at the front



The flotilla for next weekend's Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant will be 7.5 miles long, and at the head of it will be these awe-inspiring instruments, hanging from a floating belfry. The noise will be extraordinary.

There are eight bells in all (each named after a member of the Royal Family – the biggest at half a ton is Elizabeth, pictured here). The bell ringers – and even the tugboat captain whose job it is to push along the barge – will wear ear defenders.

'The Queen has been moved back further down the flotilla,' says construction director Justin Clarkson. 'She was going to be on the Royal barge. But there is 105 decibels of noise coming from these things, so obviously there is some concern for her health and safety.'

To ensure everything goes to plan on the day itself, the bell ringers are showing up, as I visit, for a three-hour rehearsal, in a factory in Kent. 'We are waiting till the industrial estate is empty before the bell ringers come in to test them,' explains Clarkson. 'It lessens the chance of people being deafened.'

Responsibility for making sure all the components work – from the bells to the boat design – has fallen to Paul Ashwick of stagebuilders Steal the Scene.

'Planning has taken a year,' says Ashwick. 'Last year we mocked up the structure to mimic the height of the belfry and pushed the barge up and down the Thames so we could check the clearances against the tide on all the bridges. I believe that they are now closing the Thames barrier, which will calm the waters and probably help to lower the water level after all the recent rain.'

'The barge is the primary boat of the flotilla because you don't want any boats in front causing wakes – bells don't like to be rocked in the wrong way! We can't defy the laws of physics and gravity, and along the Thames your own wake bounces off the sides and comes back to you, so she will have to travel at seven knots to stay ahead of that. The bells themselves are aligned so that the swing is bow to stern so there is no side-ways movement.'

In a few days the whole structure will be moved to a dock in Kent. The bells will be re-hung, and the entire apparatus picked up and lowered onto the barge *Ursula Katherine* and bolted down (with long wooden bolts) to the large oak sleepers in the hold. Even though the weight of the frame with the eight bells will be 12.4 tons, the barge itself can hold up to 250 tons. However, it will take more than 100 tons of ballast just to get it low enough to pass under the various bridges.

It will be an amazing sight, but even if you can't see the flotilla on the Thames, if you're near the river on the day you'll definitely hear it coming. ■

By Phil Robinson

DING DONG  
- it's the  
Jubilee bells

The half-ton bell Elizabeth, which will be the biggest on the barge and rings in G sharp. The bells will eventually be hung in the tower of St James Garlickhythe, central London, hence the stamp on the inside.

PHOTOGRAPH ALEX HOWE