The Royal Jubilee Bells herald Her Majesty on the River Thames

by Jennifer Earis

The Belfry Barge leading the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant through Westminster on Sunday, 4th June 2012 (Photo: Lindsay Seager)
Back in 2011, I was approached by Dickon Love with a rather unusual request. Would I like to be part of a College Youths band ringing for the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 2012 ... on a boat ... floating down the Thames? My diary was empty and the idea of a peal / cruise hybrid sounded rather attractive, so naturally I said “yes”. Looking back now, I realise that I had little idea about how extraordinary this project would become, or how fortunate I was to have the opportunity to be involved.

The practice

Several months later, on Saturday, 26th May, nine members of the Ancient Society of College Youths met at North Greenwich Pier in blazing sunshine eagerly anticipating the first onboard tryout and peal on the Royal Jubilee Bells. Bells or not, cruising down the Thames to Westminster Pier and back was clearly going to be an excellent way to spend the day.

Boarding the Bell Barge was an exciting process in itself. We were all given a (rather flimsy looking) lifejacket and herded onto a small tugboat called Alfie. We sailed across to the Bell Barge, also known as the Ursula Katherine, moored on the opposite side of the Thames where, after shuffling along a ledge along the side of the Bell Barge, we descended several metres down a ladder into the ringing area. There were some rather worried looking facial expressions during this process, but happily we all made it safely onto the barge.

Contrary to the naive expectations of some (including myself), the Bell Barge was not an over-sized rowing boat with a frame and bells teetering above it. The Ursula Katherine weighs over 250 tonnes (pre cargo) and was more than up to the job of carrying a 9cwt ring of bells to be rung full circle. The practice was particularly memorable owing to the swell of the river in our practice.

Several months later, on Saturday, 26th May, some rather unenviable tasks were set, such as rigging the ropes, behind all Dickon, had (unbeknown to us) gone into the water. Disastrous incident: eight ringers had two onboard lavatories!

Basking in our luxurious set-up, it was time to get down to business. Dickon Love, Richard Smith and Robin Hall completed the unenviable task of climbing around on the frame to put the ropes on whilst everyone settled down with a cup of tea and the morning papers. We rang the bells up without incident. The bells, whilst extremely loud, sounded glorious and were easy to handle whilst the wind was calm at the start of the day. We rang a few touches of Surprise Major and Stedman whilst cruising from Greenwich to Blackfriars Bridge, enjoying the opportunity to observe bemused onlookers on the banks of the river between touches.

The peal

(see p.576)

Once sultan lotion had been applied (bad spots must be protected) and ear plugs had been inserted, we began the peal. Starting at Blackfriars Bridge, we rang a peal of Middleton’s Cambridge Major. The composition and method were carefully selected to suit conditions where ringers cannot hear what the conductor or anyone else is saying!

Whilst a peal of Middleton’s wouldn’t usually be an exceptionally difficult undertaking, this peal ranks at the top of my scariest and hardest peals yet rung! Not only had the wind been benign throughout the morning, a strong breeze soon seemed to be howling through the boat. The direction of travel meant that it was sometimes necessary for me to take several paces forward to retrieve my sally, irrespective of how tightly I tried to handle my bell. Maintaining the level of concentration needed to catch the sally in these conditions was extremely challenging.

The sense of achievement when the peal came round was palpable and we were all delighted, though exhausted, that we’d made it through with eight bells in the right place at the end of it. The quality of ringing was actually very good and I believe exceeded all our expectations when boarding the boat at the start of the day.

We were confident. We knew we could ring the bells and we knew we could ring them well. We just had to pray that it wouldn’t be a windy day on 3rd June.

The big day

Sunday, 3rd June arrived and whilst it isn’t supposed to be excessively windy it was, as we all know, just about everything else that is not ideal when spending the day on a boat. The beautiful conditions of the previous weekend were a distant memory as we all stood shivering and damp on North Greenwich Pier at 8am, waiting for the Bell Barge to arrive. We boarded the boat shortly before 9am and quickly headed for the comfort of the cabin.

The Bell Barge needed to travel from North Greenwich Pier to the Albert Bridge in the morning and we would ring up and test the bells during the journey. The ringing up process was particularly memorable owing to an unfortunate incident where eight ringers tried to handle my bell. Maintaining the level of concentration needed to catch the sally, whilst ringers were already on the boat, was sometimes difficult.

Dickon, had (unbeknown to us) gone into the boat to tidy up. Thankfully, he alerted us to his presence by clinging to the tenor which shook Dickon could climb down safely to retrieve my sally, irrespective of how tightly I tried to handle my bell. Maintaining the level of concentration needed to catch the sally in these conditions was extremely challenging.

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Disaster averted, we rang up and were relieved to find that the bells seemed unaffected by the inclement weather and were fairly easy to ring. The lack of other boats moving past us on the river and closure of the Thames Barrier led to calm conditions, with little of the rocking we had experienced owing to the swell of the river in our practice.

By mid-morning, we had reached the Albert Bridge and settled into our position to lead the Pageant down the Thames. We still had five (cold) hours to kill, but we did have a celebrity other than Dickon to entertain us (see Youtube for further details). John Barrowman (of Doctor Who and Torchwood fame) joined us as the BBC presenter on the boat. An exuberant character, John rang rounds (backstrokes only) with a good degree of success having received a few handling lessons in the previous few weeks at St Magnus the Martyr. John had clearly made an effort to learn about change ringing and
was enthusiastic about being with us on the Bell Barge.

We kept ourselves entertained by periodically climbing up the ladders and waving at the vast crowds who, despite looking significant colder and wetter than us, were perfectly happy to wave back. Despite the cold and damp, everyone involved in the Pageant seemed to be in excellent spirits. We also took the opportunity of the free time to erect a shiny new peal board on the boat, marking our achievement of the previous week.

Several hours later, during which time John had significantly expanded my knowledge of all things related to the Eurovision Song Contest, our start time of 1440 was fast approaching. The noise of the crowd was building, particularly during the boarding of the Royal Barge, and I for one was struggling to think about much other than the number of people that I knew would be listening to our ringing.

As requested by the Pageant organisers, we were opening the event by ringing the treble on its own at first before bringing in the other bells one by one until we were ringing rounds on the full octave. All this would be opening the event by ringing the treble on its own at first before bringing in the other bells one by one until we were ringing rounds on the full octave. All this would happen whilst the Bell Barge was pulling out into the centre of the Thames, ready to lead more than 1000 other boats through the crowds to Tower Bridge.

At two o’clock, tensions were rising on the Bell Barge, not amongst the ringers but with the camera crew who seemed to be experiencing a wealth of technical failures. With 20 minutes to spare and after several spare parts had been ferried over to the Bell Barge, the camera finally seemed to be working and we all got ready to ring. The BBC cut to us just in time for John to introduce the ringing, before we commenced our performance and, once all bells were ringing, started a quarter peal of Cambridge Major as we travelled down the river.

We rang the bells for the next 2½ hours until we had returned to Greenwich, ringing long touches of Cambridge, Yorkshire and Bristol after the opening quarter peal had been scored. The reception that the bells and barge received was overwhelming with huge cheers and expressions of support received from the banks of the river. Strangely, a highlight for me was actually during the touch which I did not ring in, where I was able to climb a ladder and peer over the side of the boat, taking in the full extent of the celebration taking place on the banks. It was a spectacle that I am never likely to see again but am delighted to have witnessed.

The quality of the ringing was high throughout, even when the rain started driving down during the final hour of our journey. This is testament to the teamwork, skill and effort displayed by the band as well as the exceptional quality of the bells and frame structure on the barge.

Arriving back at Greenwich shortly after five o’clock, we were cold and dishevelled yet elated and universally proud of what we had achieved.

**My favourite bits**

- The superb bells. Thank you, Whitechapel!
- The excellent support and camaraderie amongst friends on the boat.
- The atmosphere and being at the epicentre of a unique historic event.
- Being on Have I Got News For You … if only for two seconds!

The Tower being lifted from the quay side onto the barge (Photo: Neil Thomas)

The Tower stands in the warehouse at Edenbridge in Kent (Photo: Neil Thomas)

Gathering in the “ringing room” on the river (Photo: Dickon Love)

Ringing the bells for the first time at Edenbridge (Photo: Neil Thomas)

Ringing on the River (l-r): David House (on the tenor), Dickon Love, Stephen Coaker, David Macey, Stephen Penney and Fr David Gibbons (Photo: Robin Hall)

The tower is lowered into position on the Ursula Katherine (Photo: Neil Thomas)