

The view from the bridge

by Dickon R. Love

The idea of ringing a full size set of bells in a tower on a boat passing down the River Thames always struck me as being a bit optimistic. But the Pageant Master for the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant was keen to have bells, and any other option just wouldn't have been the same. Therefore it was arranged with Whitechapel for the new ring for St James Garlickhythe to be used on the river before hanging them in a tower on dry land!

In order for the bells to be properly manageable, the engineering had to be substantial. The plan was to build a 6 metre tower, hang all the bells to swing in the same direction fore and aft (as this was the most stable direction of the boat), and hang them high enough so that they could be rung by ringers full circle, yet be short enough to pass under the bridges. The tower itself was designed by *Steel The Scene* and built by *JCC Engineering*. As a free standing structure, the forces exerted were modelled by computer allowing small adjustments to be made to minimise any movement. A large cargo vessel was procured which could accommodate the tower as well as enough ballast to lower the boat in the water as far as possible. (This not only helped fit the tower under the bridges, but lowered the centre of gravity thereby offering more stability.) This vessel, called the *Ursula Katherine*, didn't have an engine of its own, but was pushed by a smaller tug called the *Steven B*. Both vessels were tightly bound to each other so that they moved as one. The final attempt to maximise stability was the promise of the Thames Barrier being closed on Pageant Day and the promise that we would be the first boat in the Pageant, consequently avoiding the wash from any boats in front of us.

As for the bells, the contract was awarded to the *Whitechapel Bell Foundry*, which was able to provide pit widths to the tower and frame designers, and who worked with them throughout the design process. With the promise of the new Garlickhythe bells playing such a prominent role in the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, a request went to Buckingham Palace for a Royal Title, which was granted. Hence the new ring was to become known as "The Royal Jubilee Bells". The Palace also gave specific permission for the Royal Arms to appear on each bell, just as it had done some months earlier for St Dunstan-in-the-West on Fleet Street. St Dunstan's therefore gave their fellow City church permission to use the stamps that they had specially made.

Raising the Money

Fundraising for the new ring was led by Alderman Dr Andrew Parmley, who is both Parish Clerk and Organist at St James' Garlickhythe. He had also been enthused by another member of the church, Mark White, who is the son of past *Ringling World* editor, Tom White. (I had to take a back seat in the



St James Garlickhythe was adorned with the banners that hung from the Ursula Katherine during the pageant. Chief among them were those of the ASCY and the Parish
(Photo: Patricia Stoughton)

fundraising as I was already leading the campaign at St Dunstan's and didn't want to be faced with a conflict of interest. I did however help by providing much of the fundraising materials, and it is no coincidence that the posters hanging up in St James Garlickhythe bear a striking resemblance to those hanging at St Dunstan's!

Sponsors for individual bells came forward very quickly. The tenor bell was sponsored by the Vintners' Company, the seventh by the Dyers' Company and the sixth by the Glass-Sellers' and Looking Glass Makers' Company. These three livery companies, who are all associated with St James', elected to include their coats of arms in the inscription. The treble was sponsored by Tony Kassiomiotis, Andrew and Wendy Parmley and was dedicated to Tony's daughter, Nicole. The second was sponsored by Tony Stockwell and was dedicated to his granddaughter, Katherine. The third was given by Joanna

Warrant and was titled "The Crace Bell" after her family, and the fourth was given by Charles Bettinson (some ringers may know his brother, Henry). This just left the fifth, which was dedicated to the parish.

As well as receiving titles as proposed by the sponsors, each bell was given a dedication to reflect their Royal patronage. The largest bell was named "Elizabeth", with the other bells named after close members of her family. This is certainly a feature of the bells that caught the imagination of the Press, who would never fail to mention it in articles or interviews, and I soon had to remember by heart which was which! The foundrymen also clearly took the names to heart as they were soon overheard saying things like "Charles is being stocked up" or "Anne has just had a good dose of acid".

Ringling the bells on dry land

The Pageant was announced in April 2011, and the Garlickhythe bells (as they were still known) featured heavily in the opening press releases. The Press was in no doubt about the importance of this herald barge. By the time the first bells were cast in February the media attention was immense. Kathryn Hughes has already written about the dozens of press enquiries she has received in the past few months, and my phone was similarly ringing. The first bell to be cast was the tenor, and there was fierce competition amongst the broadcasters to be present. (Apparently the filming of any subsequent bells was simply not newsworthy enough!) But the attention was worthwhile as it really set the scene, with some excellent photographs appearing in a number of newspapers. Within a month, all eight were cast.

At about this time I selected a band of ringers, drawn from the Ancient Society of College Youths – a band of nine ringers to allow some rotation as well as a contingency. Very quickly the Press dubbed us "The Royal Jubilee Bellringers".

The bells left the foundry on Tuesday, 15th May, shortly after HRH The Prince of Wales visited. They were taken to a warehouse in Edenbridge where the tower had just been completed. The try out was on the Thursday when an invited band arrived to test the installation. The view of the yellow tower and the bells hung at the top of it was really quite a sight to behold, and literally took my breath away when I saw first it. The quality of the engineering was clear the moment we started to ring: the bells turned smoothly and the tower was rock solid! They were however very loud as there was only a matter of an inch of timber between ringers and bells and the sound echoed around the warehouse. Earplugs and ear defenders were necessary, and since the conductor could not be heard, various systems had to be designed to start and stop ringing. Needless to say no Stedman was rung! The bells handled extremely well though and some good ringing was achieved effortlessly.

Dismantling began the moment the try out was finished, and the tower, frame and bells were transported to Denton Wharf, Gravesend. Everything was reassembled on the quay side



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before the entire structure – tower, bells and all – was hoisted into the air by the dockside crane into the *Ursula Katherine*. It was bolted into the base of the boat with very long strong bolts!

The peal

Saturday, 26th May was the day of reckoning. The ringers met early that morning at North Greenwich Pier, beside the O2. They were equipped with life jackets and were ferried across to the *Ursula Katherine*, which was waiting for us in the middle of the river. There we could see the top of the tower and bells standing proudly above the side of the boat, the bells still in their protective jackets. There were a couple of lads still painting the outside of the boat black, and the project manager and lunch lady were already there to meet us. The sun was beating down when Robin Hall, Richard Smith and I climbed to the top of the tower to attach the ropes. With a fine view across the Thames to the O2, I remember commenting that this was the most pleasant belfry I have ever had to work in. The ropes had been specially made by Ellis Pritchard, were hemp all the way through, and had red white and blue sallies.

Once we had raised the bells, we set off for a half course of Cambridge Major: was it indeed possible to ring changes on a 9cwt ring of eight on a boat? We got to the end! The bells did not sound as loud as they did in the warehouse (as one would expect), and it turned out that the conductor was just about audible. Every now again the boat would heave about as it was hit by the wash of a passing boat, and it seemed to move more as a consequence of that than as a consequence of the swinging bells. The effect of this movement on the bells was slower than you get in a swaying tower, and the warning that the ground and the swinging bells gave was enough to allow each ringer to know whether to pull harder or check the rope.

The organisers were keen for us to chug into the City of London as they were concerned that the bells might be too loud for spectators on the bridges, so some Yorkshire Major was rung while we passed under Tower Bridge and then London Bridge. Quite clearly the spectators who had stopped to watch us were unperturbed by the volume, and thus the greatest worry of the organisers was allayed. We had other things to worry about.

Shortly after 1pm, just west of Blackfriars Bridge, we started for a full peal of Cambridge Surprise Major. Everyone knew the composition, although I, as conductor, screamed the bobs as I was now within the limit of audibility. Everyone except for two of us wore ear plugs. For me, ear plugs were an irritation, and I didn't feel that the bells were uncomfortably loud. The boat stood outside Blackfriars Bridge while we got the first course under our belts, although we were constantly fighting the rocking of the boat as other boats, ferries and barges sped past us. Then we were underway. Every time we passed under a bridge, the boat lurched as the water was more choppy, the "ringing room" was plunged into comparative darkness, and the volume of the bells increased as the

sound bounced back down from the underside of the bridges.

Despite being a very hot sunny day (with sun tan lotion being a necessity for people), the easterly wind was quite fierce, and it was getting gustier! Each gust seemed to shoot through the circle of ropes, carrying them anywhere except into the hands of their ringers. For the ringers of 2, 3, 4 and 5, who were arranged in a line with their back to the direction of travel, this had the effect of suddenly pulling the ropes way out in front of them, or occasionally causing the ropes to hit each other. At one point, Stephen Penney on the 5th was presented with two sallies in front of him as the wind had lent him Robin Hall's. The look on Stephen's face was one of sheer panic for a few moments, and Robin didn't look too happy either. Stephen Coaker on the 2nd carried a stern look of determination from beginning to end, and the 3rd rope was particularly unkind to Jennie Earis as it made her run around the tower further than anyone else. Richard Smith was on the treble which was pretty light set, so he was also faced with having to jerk and hold, jerk and hold, over and over again without hitting the stay. I was seriously starting to think that this was a bad idea. Either we were going to cause damage to the bells, or to ourselves, and the experience was clearly far from comfortable. Was Alan Hughes right when he told me 6 months earlier that I was mad to think we should even consider attempting a peal? Were we even irresponsible to consider doing so? Nobody looked happy, and I tried to read whether this unhappiness should be translated into "stop this farce now", bidding me to do the responsible thing and yell "stand!". I looked up again at Jennie Earis, and she gave me a wry smile revealing her willingness and dogged determination to press on. That was enough for me, and all thoughts of stopping left me.

Once we cleared London Bridge, that was the end of the bridges, and there were fewer fast boats knocking us about. However, the river started to get wider, which meant the boat started making longer and deeper movements. The lack of shelter also meant that we could feel the wind more keenly. It must have been at about that time when David Macey completely lost his sally on the 6th. The bell bounced hard off its stay and then continued to evade David as he chased after it. A feeling went round the circle that this might be the end. "Keep going!" I yelled, as if anyone could hear me, and sure enough we managed to resume with nothing more than a somewhat raised heart rate. David learned from the experience and worked out that if he stood facing east rather than north, he stood a better chance of catching the sally. Interestingly David House, on the tenor facing the east, decided it would be easier to catch his sally if he faced south, scooping up any recalcitrant flicks of the sally with his right hand. Each to their own I suppose.

The wind seemed to ease as we moved from north to south round the Isle of Dogs, and then south to north, but it then started again with compounded fury as we sailed back past the O2. I was wondering why we

were heading so far east when it was clear that the boat was getting less and less stable, and the wind getting stronger and stronger. One of the captain's lads was sunning himself high up on the edge of the boat, occasionally looking at us and then looking at the view, and I toyed with the idea of beckoning him down to ask for a more suitable place to moor while we finished. However it was only after we sailed right through the Thames Barrier, and the sea suddenly got noticeably choppier (and yes, it now felt like the sea), that a feeling of intense annoyance hit me. I managed to catch the lad's eye and beckoned him over. "Take us somewhere less windy" I shouted. He nodded, and went off to speak to the Captain. From my perspective, we didn't seem to move anywhere other than further and further into the North Sea, but the wind did seem to die down a fraction.

Another hour went by and we settled down, or perhaps we just got used to the tower. The final few leads of the peal presented a more intense period. A bell could drop at any time, and the worst scenario would be for this to happen at the moment the peal should have come round – and we all knew it! But rounds did come up, and perfectly. We lowered the bells, and there was some stamping and cheering while we did it. This was a peal earned like no other peal. We only had one chance to do this, and we did it, and the feeling of achievement and accomplishment was as great as I have ever felt for any other peal. 3 hours 6 minutes.

There was another silver lining to ringing this peal: we learned how to ring the bells. It gave us real confidence about the ringing on the day in so far as we knew that the conditions were going to be so much better, and that we could even implement some contingency plans regarding the wind. Our concentration and the level of distraction was so great, it was difficult to assess how good a peal it had been. However a few days later videos started appear on *Youtube* of the bells and the ringing at various stages. This revealed two things. The first was that the standard of striking was actually pretty good, and consistently so. The second was that on the approach to the Thames Barrier we had been going at some speed, and so my request to the Captain via his lad had resulted in the boat slowing down, thus reducing the wind speed by a few knots!

Tollard 'Royal' in Wiltshire

Following the Thames Pageant a service of thanksgiving for the Diamond Jubilee took place at St Peter ad Vincula, Tollard Royal, Wiltshire. The bells pulled off in Queens and rang in Queens before standing in Queens! Following the service the ringers and congregation were invited to King John's House for a celebratory drink and a toast was proposed for 'The Queen'.

JACKIE CARLYLE-CLARKE
Churchwarden & Tower Captain