

Bells for Blenheim

by Phil Gay
Photos by the Editor



Peter Jasper (3rd left) and Phil Gay (in braces) supervising youngsters

In the autumn of 2015, the Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry received an enquiry from a BBC Contents Producer about the availability of the belfry to appear at Countryfile Live, a four-day event celebrating country life, to be held at Blenheim in August 2016. What an opportunity! Several months of email and telephone conversations led to an exchange of contracts between LDMB and an events company in June.

Delivering good quality demonstrations of ringing over a four-day period is not a trivial commitment. The usual practice when LDMB is hired is for the hirer to be responsible for providing ringers, but clearly in this case that was not possible. When local associations take the belfry to their county shows, they negotiate twelve free tickets for each day, so that ringers spend half a day staffing the belfry and are free to enjoy the event for the other half. We wondered whether a total of forty-eight free tickets would be regarded as a cheeky request, but there was no problem. We were also offered complimentary tickets which I thought could be used to thank non-ringing drivers and other supporters.

Recruiting helpers

Where does one get forty-eight competent ringers on mostly weekdays in the holiday season in an area away from home? We had already decided that we needed a good age range, but particularly plenty of young ringers, to convey an attractive image of ringing, and this turned out to be an opportunity rather than a constraint. I decided to approach people responsible for organising young ringers' groups in areas close to Blenheim. For the

ODG it was suggested I approach Alan Marchbank, who usefully is also a member of the Central Council's PR Committee. He was able to recruit Robert and Tricia Newton and some of the Guild's young ringers to cover Thursday, the first day of the event.

At about this time I noticed that Simon Edwards of the G&B Swindon Branch had organised a peal by a band of under-21s, so he seemed to be worth approaching. It turned out that he was organising a young ringers' week at the beginning of August, and offered to bring a band on the Friday, and possibly come back himself on the Sunday. For Saturday I approached Linda Garton and John Loveless who organise the Bedfordshire Young Ringers, and they agreed to bring a band. On Sunday several of the belfry's trustees and other regular supporters offered to come, which also provided a team to dismantle the belfry when the time came. Towards the end of June Simon Edwards told me his group were not able to get to Blenheim on the Friday, but he and



Over the four days people of all ages came along and had a go ...

others could still help on Sunday. By this time it was clear how many were needed for Sunday, so I was pleased to be sure of a full turn-out for that day, with a reasonable age distribution. I asked Simon's advice about possible help from the G&B young ringers, and he put me in touch with their organiser Ian Bucknell, who turned out to be very helpful and organised eight of the required ten ringers within a day.

Although I had originally understood from Alan Marchbank that the CC PR Committee would be interested in contributing to the event, that, to my surprise and disappointment, turned out not to be the case. It made me wonder what the Committee thinks it is for. Here was an opportunity to promote ringing at a major high-profile public event, and they weren't interested. Perhaps I should take their attitude as a compliment – they were confident I would do a good job without their help. At least I wouldn't need to offer any of the committee a free ticket!

Liaison with the organisers of the young ringers groups was made easier by the fact that I was going, in company with grandson Thomas, to the striking competition on July 2nd. I had useful conversations with Robert and Tricia Newton and Mary Friskney of the ODG, Ian and Carole Bucknell of the G&B, and John Loveless and Linda Garton from Bedfordshire.

Transport challenges

By the beginning of August I was ready to go, but on the evening before I was due to drive to Blenheim I received a phone call from David Large, who was towing the belfry. He said "I've got a problem." I assumed that there was something amiss with the belfry trailer, probably a puncture. But to my surprise it was David's Land Rover, which had developed a fault which couldn't be fixed immediately. Fortunately he had managed to get the belfry as



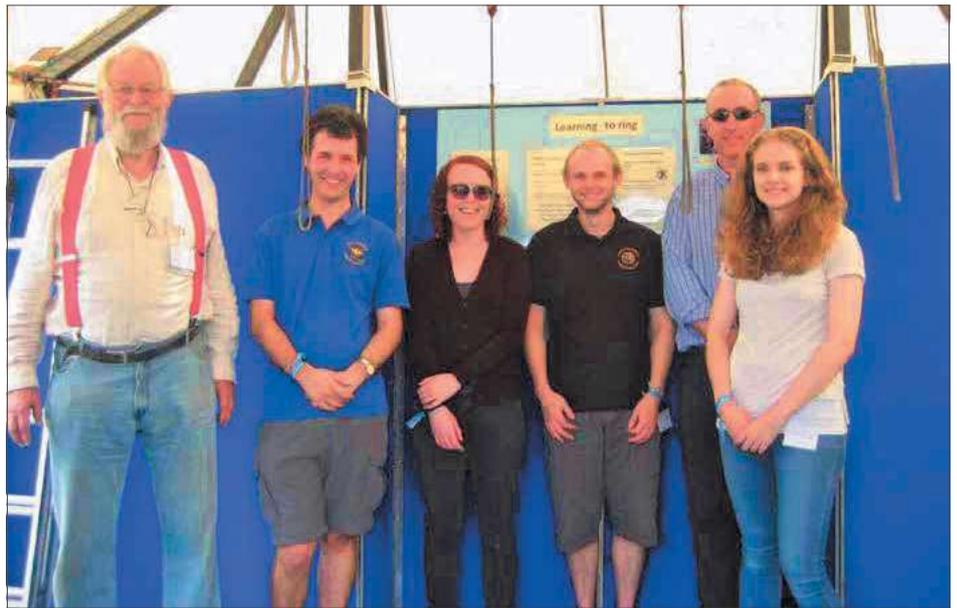
Which one is the boss? (Photo by Phil Gay)

far as his home in Walsall, so I said that first thing in the morning I would go to Keele Students' Union, whose minibuses we often hire, to see if there was one available for immediate use. There was, so I was able to be in Walsall by 9.30 to pick up the belfry and David, and we arrived at Blenheim at about one o'clock, more or less as planned. We were then kept waiting for over an hour while the site management team decided exactly where the belfry should be erected. LDBM trustee Liz Beardmore and her husband David had also travelled to help with putting the belfry up, which was achieved by about seven. I hadn't expected to be driving home that night, so it was a long day, followed by an early start next morning. I left home soon after six, but traffic problems on the roads approaching the site made me embarrassingly late arriving. Fortunately Robert and Tricia Newton were there on time and were able to make a prompt start. They had assembled an excellent team, and we had a very successful day, giving around two hundred members of the public an idea of what ringing is about. We also rang some very good and enjoyable demonstration touches, assisted by Colin and Nicola Turner who were visiting the event. Former belfry trustee Paul Lewis was also able to join us for the day, and we were also visited by Robert Lewis, to whom I had offered one of my complimentary tickets.

Learning on the job

The Friday support team had been organised by Ian and Carole Bucknell of the G&B, and once again we had a very good day. One thing which became apparent was that there is no uniquely correct way of running an event like this, and each day evolved slightly differently. This experience continued on Saturday when we were joined by John Loveless and Linda Garton with a group recruited mostly from Campton and Marsworth, and once again we had a very good and enjoyable day.

On Friday evening I phoned Simon Edwards to check that all was in order for Sunday, only to discover that he wouldn't be



Phil Gay with some of the Oxford Diocesan Guild helpers

able to join us after all. I was not in a position to look for replacements, which meant that we were going to have to do Sunday with only eight people, a far from ideal situation. The eight, who consisted of trustees and other supporters of the belfry from the Lichfield Diocese, rose to the occasion magnificently, and although we had fewer young ringers than I had hoped, Ben Curwen, there with grandparents Wendy and Ray Daw, did a splendid job of lowering the average age and looking after the youngsters. David and Denise Large, with Land Rover restored to working order, were able to be there, and so were Biff Patterson and Edric Broom. The smaller team meant that there were fewer opportunities for individuals to enjoy the event, so it really was a working day for everyone. We were very pleased that the event closed at five o'clock rather than the six o'clock finish on previous days, as we had to dismantle the belfry before going home.

This was achieved impressively quickly, but the continuation of the poor traffic management which had been evident all week meant that we had to wait for an hour after we were ready before we could get away.

LDBM's biggest event to date

Everyone was agreed that this was a very worthwhile event. Over the four days we were able to present ringing, with hands-on experience, to around 1,000 people of all ages. Small children enjoyed chiming the bells, and anyone who was big enough was given a chance to ring backstrokes under supervision, in some cases while ringing rounds. People of all ages were pleased to be given stick-on badges announcing that they had rung on the belfry. We have grown accustomed over the years to discovering significant numbers of lapsed ringers at events such as this – the record length of time since last ringing was seventy years. They are of course the best recruits, as much less teaching is needed, and a number of them were encouraged to make contact with their local towers. Something which I was less prepared for was the large number of active ringers who came along for a ring, many of whom were pleasantly surprised to discover that the belfry is listed in Dove's Guide and therefore available to be ticked.

This event exemplifies what the belfry was built for, and it is very pleasing that everything went so well. All the helpers enjoyed it, and it was good to have so many young ringers among them. Countryfile Live is almost certainly the biggest event the belfry has been to, with a total attendance of around 125,000. The dates for next year have already been announced, and we are looking forward to being invited back.

PHIL GAY

The following was written by John Loveless and describes the event as he saw it:

"Phil Gay here. BBC *Countryfile Live* is at Blenheim, 4th-7th August. Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry is there. Wondered if you could you fix for some of your people to



The belfry was set up in a central area named 'The Village Green'