

St Albans District Newsletter

Volume 29 Issue 4 – October 2023

Ben and Laura's Ringing tour of N Ireland (first week of Sept 2023)

By Susan L'Estrange

17 of us have recently returned from a ringing tour of Northern Ireland – originally planned for 2020 but postponed due to covid. In 2020 there were 17 ring-able towers. For our trip there were 15 – Christ Church, Lurgan is permanently closed, but by the time you read this the ceiling should be repaired at St Marks, Sydenham Ave. There's also a mini-ring which we would have missed on both occasions. In the meantime, Hillsborough had been granted Royal status, but sadly one of the tower leaders had died, but her son gave us a warm welcome. In fact we were very warmly welcomed everywhere.

Like most places, N Ireland is suffering from a shortage of ringers, which (as we discovered) brings with it an attendant problem of not necessarily having people to keep bells and ropes in prime condition. A bonus was that ringers at many of the towers were keen to ring with us – and we were equally happy to accommodate them.

We were a mixed-ability group, ranging from extremely experienced and competent ringers, through perennial learners at all levels, to a very new ringer who had never rung at any other than his home tower but since that tower is St Helen's, Wheathampstead, the only time he had a bit of a struggle was on the first set of 'light' bells – and he mastered that within his first ring. Everyone bagged at least three new towers, and despite various health challenges everyone rang at 14 towers, and some at 15 (see Newcastle, below). Special thanks to the experienced gang for being so generous to the occasional struggles of the rest of us.

DAY 1

Kick-off about 3.30am for 6.15 flight from Gatwick to Belfast. First ring 10.15:



Lto R: Christine Nutton, Ron Titmus, Judith Titmus, Vivian Nutton, Dianne Crowder, Rob Goss, Mary Goss, Virginia Kennard, Laura Hill, Emily Palmer, Graham Figg (partially hidden), Ben Quinn, Bob Crocker, Gill Clark, Susan L'Estrange, Max Hebington, Keith Lewin

- **St Thomas, Eglantine Ave, Belfast** (ring of 8; tenor 18cwt)
The A team rang up successfully, then 8 of us started to pull off, and in the first set of rounds the sally on the 4th broke into two parts – something no-one on the tour had ever heard of. No problem. Bob Crocker and the very nice local chap (who had



said to me as we were going in ‘The ropes are quite old, but you should be fine’) whizzed up top and changed the rope – and ringing continued. I took a picture of Ben on his phone at this point which I’ve labelled ‘Ben calling his solicitor’. All rang cheerfully thereafter – they sounded lovely once we got going. Gill (Clark) last rang here in 1967!

Slight hiatus when we got back on the coach until we could get a passer-by to shut the door from the outside. The door had an interlock on it which prevented the driver engaging gear if the door wasn’t closed properly. Hmm, is this an omen of what’s to come? (Yes!)

- **St Donard, Bloomfield, Belfast** (6; 9cwt)
Tiny ringing chamber with steep access, but a good handrail. Fairly light bells – good fun.

- **St Philip & St James, Holywood** (8; 12cwt)
Very light trebles.

- **St Comgall, Bangor** (8; 21cwt)
Rang Plain Bob Doubles with 7,6,8 cover.



DAY 2

- **St Saviour, Greyabbey** (6;2cwt)

Metal stiffening structure around the tower, which was separate from the church. Discovered afterwards they also have metal stays.

Trapdoor entry and very small ringing chamber – I was with the second group to ring and as we put down the trapdoor we realised we didn’t know which was the treble – so pulling off was more interesting than usual, especially when it turned out that we’d started on the tenor. All fine after that. (Note to self: always check position of treble and tenor in new towers!) Apparently the 3rd is hung above the others and can sometimes give a jerk – which a couple of our ringers had the joy of experiencing.



Stiffening frame around the tower at Greyabbey.

- **St Mary, Kilmood** (6;2cwt)

Bells installed in 2018. Curved staircase then short ladder, with another trapdoor entry. An easy light ring – especially since we were now practised. The fun picture of the vicar and ringers in the bell tower apparently hides the drinks cupboard. (Don’t tell anyone.)



The cupboard door at Kilmood.

We were a bit startled as we finished a ring and stood the bells when the ringing continued – until we realised it was just the clock striking on a separate clock bell.

• **St John, Newcastle (6;3cwt)**

This turned out to be one of the most interesting towers, even though most of us didn't ring. We'd heard a rumour in the previous two towers that Newcastle bells didn't have stays – which turned out to be true. Nor did they have a regular ringing band or anyone who knew how to maintain the bells. So those who were confident of ringing up and down and ringing without stays went up the tower – to find that one bell also didn't have a rope. Rope was found and attached while the rest of us were outside explaining what was going on to all the locals who had come to hear their bells being rung – one lady had donated one of the bells in memory of her husband and hadn't heard it rung for 40 years! There was definitely a party atmosphere, enhanced by the cream tea organised by Vicar Myrtle, in the midst of which 120 Stedman Doubles duly rang out. And then the bells rang down and all went quiet. Apparently, another rope had broken and had to be replaced.

Lots of advice was offered to the Vicar and a group of local fit-looking men (ie strong, healthy!) who were interested in learning to ring and getting the bells going again, and we look forward to hearing that they've been successful.

• **St Bronagh, Rostrevor (6; 13cwt)**

Straight to another party – but not for us this time. The organiser's mother Joan was celebrating her 90th birthday in the church. Curious partygoers, including 4 or 5 children kept coming up and down the stairs to the ringing chamber and organ loft, which was a little nerve-wracking safety-wise and made it difficult for ringers to be easily available when called. Rang London Surprise Minor.

DAY 3

Day off. Bus tour of Belfast and visit to Titanic Exhibition Centre – excellent!



DAY 4

• **Holy Trinity, Ballylesson**

(8; 11cwt)

Well-maintained stable ring. Lovely. Rang Cambridge Minor on back 6, and later Stedman. Everyone in our souvenir shirts for the group photo.

• **St Malachi, Royal Hillsborough (10; 18cwt)**

Ropes quite close together. Mats on the floor showed the number of each bell – which is great if you're ringing on 10, but confusing if ringing on anything less. A local quirk is that they ring and call according to the numbers on the mats so latecomers (apparently a common occurrence) just join in. We rang Plain Hunt on 9 and Bob Doubles for all those who wanted and then Stedman Triples on back 8 to finish with.

It was a first ring on 10 for Emily, who deserves a special mention because she brought a different tray bake each day for everyone to share!

• **St Macartin, Enniskillen (10; 20cwt)**

This would have been the 13th tower according to the original plan which may have had something to do with the overall experience. The long drive to get there was made longer by diversions due to road closures, and on arrival the first things we saw were notices warning of death and injury and inside we passed a plaque to the brave ill-fated Captain Titus 'I may be some time' Oates. After a (very) late start and ringing up, we had about 16 minutes ringing time. But the new ropes were damp and stiff (a bit like ourselves after the long hot bus journey), the 3rd was a bit awkward to handle, especially at backstroke, the treble didn't seem easy, and the clapper stuck on the 6th so sometimes it didn't sound. They were no one's favourite bells, and the final steep short ladder to get into the tower could do with some sort of hand rope.

However we were very warmly welcomed and we were very grateful for the bottle of cold water they generously distributed to each of us.

• **St Columba Cathedral, Londonderry (10; 32cwt)**
All bells quite deep set, nice large ringing chamber.

DAY 5

7.30am on the road to see the Giant's Causeway, where a boulder had fallen into the road the night before, so the tourist bus was unable to ferry us down, or, more importantly, back up the hill.



Followed by a tour of the Bushmills distillery, which (of course) was having its annual 'silent period', ie they were doing cleaning and repairs so weren't

operating. However, in recompense, we did each get a small bottle of whiskey (note the Irish spelling) – and it was still very interesting.

• **St Patrick's, Coleraine (8; 20cwt)**

Bells deep set, and very hot, stuffy ringing chamber with no ventilation so ringers kept going awol and we finished slightly early.

• **St Patrick, Ballymena (12; 14cwt)**

First on 12 for Emily and Graham. Lovely ring – but they usually only have five ringers, so tend just to chime before morning service.

Rang Plain Bob Major & Stedman Triples with locals. They'd mislaid their visitors' book but promised to include the list Ben provided when it's rediscovered. They insisted on a group photo with us for local publicity purposes.

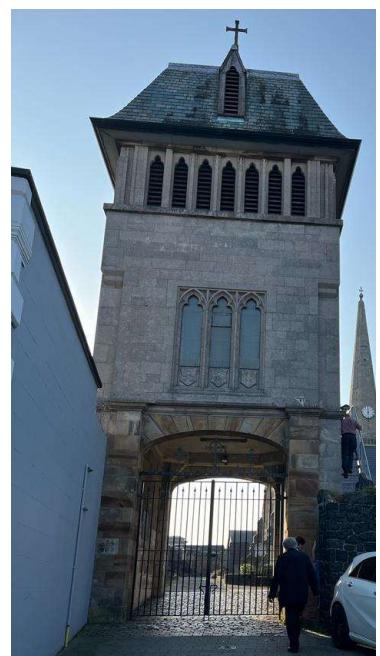
• **St Nicholas, Carrickfergus (8; 13cwt)**

Detached bell tower. Rang Grandsire Triples quite well. A nice steady ring on which to finish.



And from there to the airport – where I was delighted to be served a meal by a mechanical waitperson. Home by midnight, tired but happy.

Huge thanks to Ben Quinn and Laura Hill who managed all the organisation – flights, coach transport everywhere, bell towers, accommodation, breakfasts, dinners and sightseeing. A great trip was had by all.



Vernet-les-Bains

by Laura Hill

I have twice been fortunate enough to visit Vernet-les-Bains in the Pyrénées-Orientales, and join in with the ringing of France's first set of English change-ringing bells and the second lightest ring of ten in a church in the world. These lovely bells are a joy to ring and, having a shortish draught with guides, are perfect for anyone who, like me, is not happy with a long rope.





The small church of St. George was built by the English in 1912 at a time when the village was popular with British visitors who came to take the waters at the spa. It was built with a tower but no bells. The project to install bells was then driven by dedicated bell ringer, Jeff Ladd, who had moved to the village in 2019, to live in the holiday home which he had bought with his late wife in 2001. The bells were cast by John Taylor & Co, installed in April 2019 and dedicated in Sept 2019.

I first rang there whilst on holiday in August 2019 although as Jeff was back in England, I didn't get to meet him. I joined a visiting family and some local (living up to an hour away!) ringers, for rounds and call changes before Sunday service. One of the ringers, Daniel, a local Frenchman was just beginning to learn to ring. Can you imagine French being your native language and getting your head around the vocabulary involved in learning to ring?! But I'm guessing he will have the record for the first Frenchman to ring full circle in France. The bells were still a novelty then and, as they are a ground floor ring, we had quite an

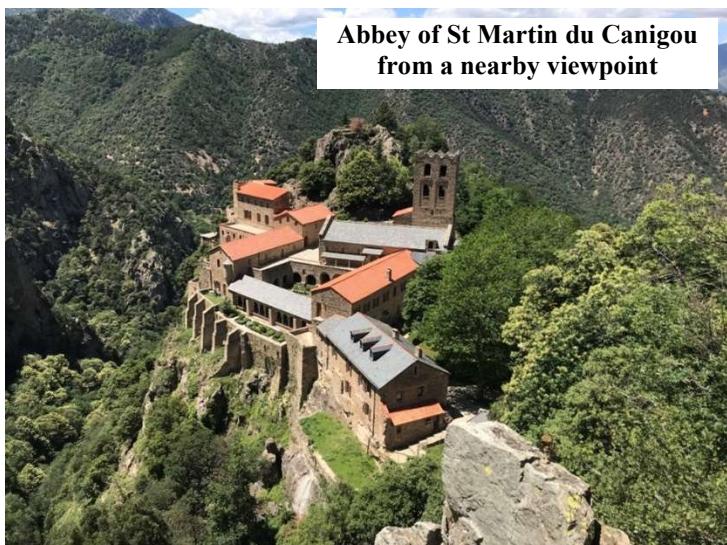
Abbey of St Martin du Canigou from a nearby viewpoint

audience gathered round with many of members of the congregation thanking us afterwards for ringing. It was really special.

This year in early July, as we were passing by just an hour away, I visited again (it would have been rude not to) and met Jeff and a group of visiting ringers from Leeds University Society. The majority of the group had been ringing for 50 years, so myself and Daniel (who has come on in leaps and bounds) were very much the beginners in the band. I was welcomed to ring at Saturday evening practice and for Sunday morning service. I managed plain hunt and call changes, but the Leeds ringers performed much more exotic methods and even fitted in a peal and 3 quarter peals during the weekend.

On both occasions in between ringing, my husband Richard and I spent several days enjoying the majestic scenery surrounding Vernet. Our first visit coincided with the famous and testing annual race to the summit of the Canigou and back, 34km and a climb of 2180 metres. We didn't partake, but we enjoyed the atmosphere at the finish line. Many runners choose to run with an 8kg pack on their backs to represent blocks of ice which used to be brought down from the mountains to preserve food in the days before fridges were invented!

We took a self-guided tour walking in the steps of Rudyard Kipling taking in the medieval centre and 2000 tree/320 species arboretum. We also walked up to the beautiful Abbey of St Martin du Canigou with its stunning views which were well worth the climb. The next day we took a trip on the historic yellow train from Villefranche-de-Conflent, a short bus ride away and one of France's most beautiful



villages, which took us through the incredibly scenic Regional Nature Reserve of the Catalan Pyrenees.

There are so many things to do in the area. Next time (and I hope there is!), we may get to relax and perhaps take in the thermal waters of the spa, allegedly supposed to help with Reumatism.

I'm sure this sounds like an advert for the Vernet tourist office, but if you ever get the chance to go, then do, as I'm sure you would love it as much as we do.

Contact: Jeff Ladd Tower Captain, St Georges Church Vernet-les-Bains
<https://vernetbells.com/en/contact-en>

A Treat at The Bull, Wheathampstead

Susan L'Estrange was given this report by local historian Ruth Jeavons. It was originally published in the Herts Advertiser more than 150 years ago. They clearly knew how to show their appreciation for ringers in those days!

August 29th 1863

The ringers of Wheathampstead had an excellent repast given them by R.B. Baxendale, Esq. at the Bull Inn, prepared by my hostess, Miss Elizabeth Hooper, on Thursday evening the 27th inst., for their great improvement of late in the art of bell ringing. We are happy to add that there is now a complete set of ringers, and that we often hear with considerable pleasure a merry peal rung out upon these hitherto neglected bells, which certainly for brilliancy of tone possess musical powers that all must admire if they are lovers of music.



Dates for your diary:

2023 County Surprise Practices

Date	Time	Tower	Comments
5 Nov Sunday	3.30 to 5pm	Bishop's Stortford (12)	Special method: Bristol. Parking: a few spaces in the churchyard. Basbow Lane (CM23 2NA). Jackson Square (CM23 3XQ)
17 Nov Friday	7.30 to 9pm	Welwyn (8)	Special method: London. Parking: High Street (AL6 9EQ) or Lockley's Drive (AL6 9NT)
1 Dec Friday	7.30 to 9pm	Hunsdon (8)	Special methods: Lincolnshire & Ealing. Parking: car park opposite church

2023 District Practices

Date	Time	Tower	Comments
14 October (Sat)	10 to 12 noon	Monken Hadley (8)	
18 November (Sat)	10 to 12 noon	Hatfield (10)	
16 December (Sat)	10 to 12 noon	Kimpton (8)	Nominations

Young@Herts Conquer St Albans!

On Sunday, 27th August 2023, Quarter Peals were rung at every tower in St Albans in one day to challenge our young ringers in new methods and conducting.

The Abbey

1296 Little Bob Royal

1. Christine M Carter
2. Julie R Grimwade
3. Bjørn E Bradstock
4. Thomas R Groves
5. James A Coleman
6. Lucas J Williams
7. Andrew M Reeve
8. Claire C Nicholson (C)
9. Brian D Crawley
10. Stephen J Crawley

First Little Bob Royal - 4 and 6

St Michael's

1260 Grandsire Doubles

1. Nicholas Groves
2. Christopher A P Gill
3. Michael C Below
4. Lucas J Williams
5. Thomas R Groves (C)
6. Joseph Soden

First of Grandsire as Conductor: 5

First of Tenor behind: 6

St Peter's

1280 Lincolnshire Surprise Major

1. Christopher A P Gill
2. Lucas J Williams
3. Thomas R Groves
4. Ann Evans
5. Claire C Nicholson
6. Bjørn E Bradstock
7. Brian D Crawley
8. Richard Sales (C)

A Young@Herts Quarter Peal

First treble to surprise major: 1

First Lincolnshire: 2 and 3

St Stephen's

1260 Plain Bob Doubles

1. Christopher A P Gill
2. Lucas J Williams (C)
3. Joseph Soden
4. Nicholas Groves
5. Michael C Below
6. Thomas R Groves

First inside: 3

Other Selected Quarter Peals

St Stephens, St Albans

Tuesday, 5 September 2023 in 42m (8–2–4 in A)

1260 Mixed Doubles (1p/2m)

Stedman, Grandsire and Plain Bob

1. Thomas R Groves
2. Christopher A P Gill
3. Callum Hayes
4. Hana Booth (C)
5. Lucas J Williams
6. Lucy A Pether

First of mixed doubles: 3, First as cover, Circled tower: 1

Rung by a band of local students.

Sandridge,

Saturday, 26 August 2023 in 42m (6–0–18 in B_b)

1380 Mixed Doubles (2m)

Grandsire and Plain Bob

1. Ron E Titmus
2. Judith E Titmus
3. Ann Evans
4. Hana Booth (C)
5. Vivian Nutton
6. Richard Hayes

First quarter peal as conductor.

Editor Rob Goss