

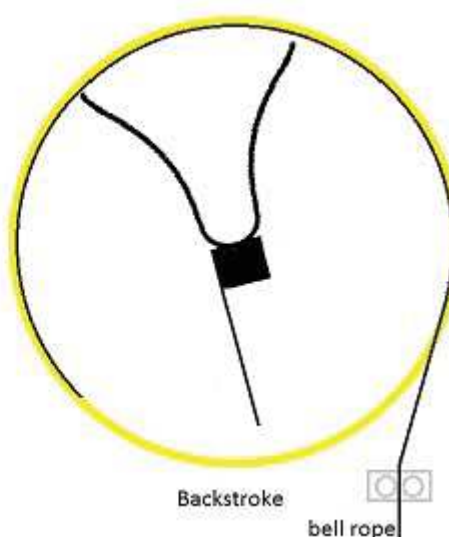
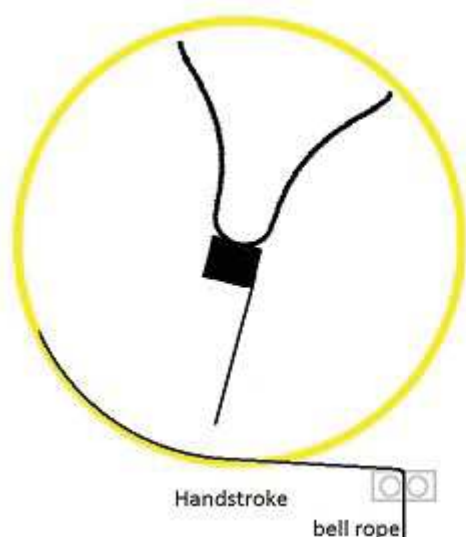
# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - November 2017

## Living Heritage - A Social History of Bellringing

The Wargrave Local History Society's November meeting was a look at the Living Heritage that is the social history of bell ringing, from the 18th century to the modern era, by John Harrison, who leads the team of bell ringers at All Saints, Wokingham.

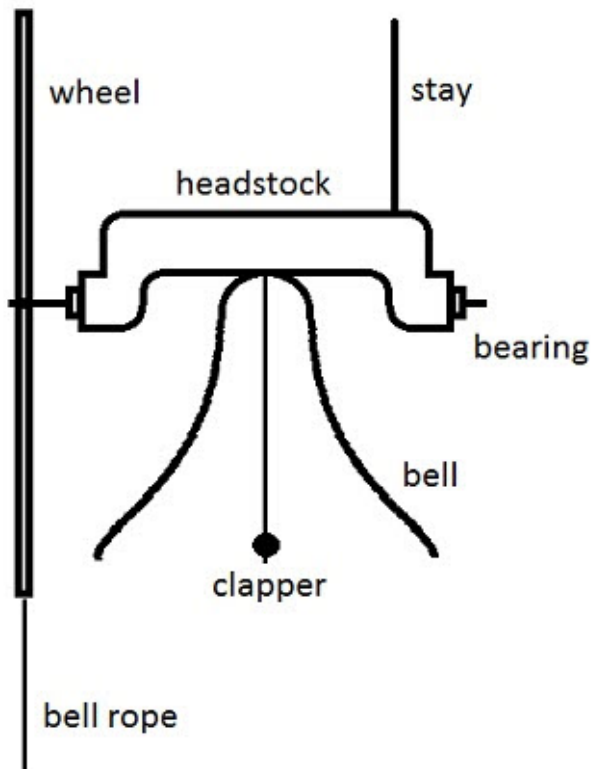
John began by explaining that there are about 6,000 places - mostly in England, that practice the English style of bell ringing, and that in this country there are about 40,000 active ringers (and even more 'ex-ringers'). It was so much associated with England that Handel described the country as "the ringing isle".



The English style of ringing depends on a particular way in which the bells are hung. Before its introduction, bells would be hung from a simple lever. This would have a very limited amount of swing, but can be rung by those

unskilled in the art of bell ringing. If the bell could be made to swing further, it could make more sound, and so a quadrant was added to the lever, so that the bell rope could raise the bell higher, before it swung back. Subsequently, this was enlarged to a  $\frac{1}{2}$  wheel, and later a  $\frac{3}{4}$  wheel. Although the bell could now be raised even further, there was only one stroke on which it could be controlled - the rope having to be in tension to have any effect. The next stage in the development was to tie the bell rope onto the wheel part way round, so that the rope could pull the bell for both the handstroke and the backstroke. Finally, the wheel was made to be a full circle. If the swing of the bell was small, it tended to act as a pendulum, which by its nature swings at a constant timing. By allowing the bell to rise more, or less, however, the time when the bell sounded could be controlled to within a few hundredths of a second.

These developments lead to the way in which English bells are hung, with the bell itself suspended from a large headstock – originally a large piece of elm, although now more often of metal - supported on bearings at either end, with a large wheel on one side, to which the bell rope is fixed, and a wooden stay on the other, to limit the movement so the bell can be “parked” in the upside-down position. If the bells are left with the mouth of the bell down, then it is perfectly safe to move round the bells in the ringing chamber, but if the bell is balanced with the mouth uppermost it would take little to set it swinging downwards. Despite the weight involved – the bells at Wokingham range from 4 cwt to  $14\frac{1}{2}$  cwt, whilst those at Wargrave are somewhat heavier, ranging from  $5\frac{1}{2}$  to  $17\frac{1}{2}$  cwt), the action of controlling them requires relatively little force from the ringers. In part, this is because of the size of the wheel – the largest at Wokingham is well over 6ft in diameter – giving added leverage. (The largest bell in this country is the tenor bell at Liverpool Cathedral, weighing  $4\frac{1}{4}$  ton, but still readily controlled by one ringer).



Originally, these sets of bells would be rung ‘in order’, but by about 1600, change ringing came in (‘ringing the changes’ being a phrase heard in a sermon of 1614). In change ringing, the bells swap order according to a definite sequence – eg in order, then 1 and 2; 3 and 4; 5 and 6; 7 and 8 swap places – and so on

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
X		X		X		X	
2	1	4	3	6	5	8	7
1	X		X		X		1
2	4	1	6	3	8	5	7
X		X		X		X	
4	2	6	1	8	3	7	5

The entire pattern is rung from memory – maybe for several hours of changes.

In the middle ages, bell ringing was not only used for church needs, but had a secular purpose as well, being rung to mark the market day, or start of the assizes, or a victory at sea, or even the return of the local squire. They therefore came under the control of the vestry – the local government of the time. It is probably this secular use of bell ringing that enabled it to survive the changes in religious practice in the 16th & 17th centuries the ringers becoming independent of the Church. It was so much enjoyed that efforts were made to ban it – such as in an Act of Parliament in 1643 which prohibited forbade sport on the Lord's Day, including the “ringing of bells for pleasure”. By the time of the industrial revolution, the ringers had acquired a reputation for being unruly and often drunk! (they were often paid to mark ‘public rejoicing’ by the vestry for ‘in beer’).

However, the early 19th century, saw a time of “Belfry Reform”, initiated by some of the clergy, bringing the ringers more in touch with the Church, and reviving interest in change ringing – in part as to ring changes was seen as not only needing ‘craft skills’, but an ‘intellectual input’ as well.

Until improved transport meant that the work of bell founding could be concentrated in a few places, it was carried out by small firms across the country – about 60 of them in 1700. There was a foundry in Wokingham – people assume in Bell Foundry Lane, but in fact it was in the town centre. The road was originally called Bell Foundry Farm Lane – the need for bells to be cast was spasmodic, and could be fitted in with seasonal farming. Each bell maker had his own symbols cast into the bell, which at that time were made by the ‘lost wax’ process.

The oldest bell now in Wokingham church was installed in 1704 – some 50 years after the local foundry closed, and was made by Samuel Knight’s Reading foundry. The ring of six bells was refurbished and replaced, with two additional bells, in 1903. In 1880, the Sonning Deanery Ringing Society was begun (Wargrave also joining then), and its successor is the longest established change ringing society anywhere. Its first master was Rev F E Robinson, from Wokingham, who was the first person to ring 1,000 peals, and also had a record breaking performance of over 9 hours. – and at his funeral in 1910 a peal of 5040 changes was rung. The first lady ringers started in 1914 (including Revd Robinson’s daughter, Vera, but it remained a predominantly male activity). Bell ringing was banned for a period during both world wars, but a resurgence in the 1970s has resulted in a lot more activity (and in some cases, complaints about the noise – so ringers at All Saints have fitted sound control shutters to the tower), a special peal being rung in 1990 to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the church. The bells were retuned and rehung with modern fittings in 2004.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, December 12th, when the Society will hold its *Christmas Party*, then on Tuesday, January 9th, when Mick Pope, who will tell us about *Activities around the Recreation Ground*, whilst on Tuesday, February 13th Catherine Sampson will give us a glimpse of some of the many historical, unusual and sometimes hidden *Berkshire Churches* and churchyards, and the people associated with them. The meetings take place at the Old Pavilion on the Recreation Ground, Wargrave, starting at 8pm. For more information about the Society visit our website [www.wargravehistory.org.uk/](http://www.wargravehistory.org.uk/)