

Litten's challenge is timely, as there are – and always have been – problems with this approach. It is certainly not the ideal compromise that some believe it to be.

In one case I know, an old frame has been suspended from the tower roof on hawsers. Inaccessible for study – it wobbles horribly – and it is unlikely to remain safe and secure for long. When will parts of it crash down and cause damage to the new installation below?

More seriously, I know of several cases – two come readily to mind – where keeping an old frame has turned a big job (i.e. bell restoration) into a monster project (i.e. involving full-scale reorganisation of everything contained in the tower).

At one, just to keep the old frame they had to relocate the organ and the clock as well, and install two new floors in the tower – major work at all levels in the tower envelope. The results are far from satisfactory for the ringers because the ringing room ceiling is much too low.

Why preservation? Who is interested? And – perhaps the most important question yet one that is seldom asked – precisely what are they interested in?

It is probably true – an assumption that needs to be tested, I accept – that the public value the sound of bells more than the sight of them – the essence of Julian Litten's comments. Even if the sight is important, those esoteric aspects that fascinate specialist historians are unlikely to capture the public imagination!

With current political focus and pressure from funding agencies to improve public access to the heritage, there is potential to make bells more accessible for people to see as well as hear. But there is a problem over access to belfries, with practical and regulatory considerations imposing limits on the extent to which our treasures can be shared with and enjoyed by a wider public.

It is getting harder to obtain access to bells for genuine historical study – and if those of us who are passionately interested and determined can't get to see them, most others will simply give up.

We can perhaps measure serious interest in belfries by looking at book sales. It is hard for anyone publishing a book on bells to sell more than 250 copies – including sales to libraries, local purchasers and those with a broad interest in the heritage who support such publications. It is a very narrow and limited interest – albeit a strong one among a small band of enthusiasts.

So, if we're not preserving for a specific and identifiable audience, for whom, and why are we doing it? Is it good enough to be doing so chiefly to assuage those who have a philosophical belief that old things should be preserved? When is the case for preserving evidence strong enough to stand in the way of progress?

We have listing, of course – as David Knight has explained. The aim is to identify bells that are worthy of preservation, and the criteria have recently been revised.

Whatever quibbles one may have with the CCC lists, at least people who know about bells have compiled them, and the lists themselves are only "advisory". The same cannot be said with regard to statements of significance which vary greatly in quality and scope.

In theory, the introduction of Statements of Significance provides an answer to this question of what must we keep – and I certainly welcomed the concept when it first appeared as it offered hope that they might lead to a consensus regarding what is really significant about a historic building and its contents. The hope was that by doing this, controls could be relaxed for aspects of lesser importance.

Yet, unfortunately, the system is already being misused by the heritage world and I have seen examples of these potentially valuable documents being used to record anything that anyone might

possibly argue could be thought of as significant.

Instead of getting a clear focus on priorities – on the things that "most people would agree are significant and important" – we are seeing evidence of a scatter-gun approach that targets almost anything that anyone might want to replace or alter.

I'll know that the cause is lost when I read of a bell cast in 1844 by Charles & George Mears being significant because it is a product of the famous Whitechapel Bell Foundry – no offence intended, Alan, but I use the example to show a lack of contextual understanding. To say this in a statement of significance would not be untrue – but it ignores the fact that at that time Whitechapel held a near monopoly of production and cast well over 230 bells in that one year alone.

Enough on this, but my central point here is that I do think that all involved need to be very much clearer on the justification for preservation (if it isn't about quality and contemporary value) and on the real scope and potential for future study and enjoyment of those things that are preserved.

#### **DIALOGUE: Improving communications**

In recent years, communications between the different interest groups have improved immeasurably. But there is still scope for more meaningful engagement, especially when it comes to looking at cases on the ground.

I should like to end by attempting to offer some pointers to the separate groups of stakeholders.

So, to the **conservationists** I would say

1. There has to be a balance – the erosion of the past by renewal and replacement is to some extent inevitable;
2. It is perfectly reasonable for local people directly involved with buildings to question "so what is so special about this?" – and for you to come up with winning answers that make a robust case if other people are going to have to preserve and live with things that fall short of modern standards. Arguments in favour of preservation need to be reasoned, considered, informed and clear (and statements of significance need a much sharper focus);
3. Perceptions are important, and "the authorities" are often seen by parishes as obstructive and unhelpful. The answer's "no" – what's the question? Schemes arise through identified need or from a wish to make significant improvements – not heritage vandalism;
4. Power is largely on your side – but that doesn't give you a monopoly on wisdom. It doesn't mean that yours is the only valid course of action, and it certainly doesn't give you the right to talk down to everyone else;
5. It's too easy for the executive to hide behind their paymasters, wave the relevant piece of paper and say "we're only following approved policy";
6. There is a need for organisational consistency – it is hard to understate the problems caused for parishes by staff changes, edict changes and delays caused by reviews and reorganisation;
7. Have regard for the costs to others of your requirements. The accusation that official bodies are careless with other peoples money is often not without justification;
8. What about your own costs too? Allowing for staff time, travel and indirect-costs, the cost of heritage administration and casework is significant. Moreover, it sometimes seems disproportionate to the heritage worth of the things on which time and money are spent.

And to the **ringers**, I would say:

1. We must start by appreciating what we have – making a reasoned case for change, not just an "all must be new" dogma. Old isn't always bad;
2. Maybe ringers need to be more appreciative of difference and variety – different tonal qualities, variety in types of hanging etc. The process of

homogenisation is leading to a loss of the unusual and reducing the variety between rings;

3. Once it's been removed, or once it's been radically altered – then for the archaeologist and conservationist it's gone. Loss of fabric will mean loss of evidence;
4. Ringers need to listen to the conservation viewpoint – and work with it as best they can;
5. People representing official organisations or the amenity societies are often enthusiasts – like us, but with different views and objectives. All of us, to some extent, are regarded by others as "single interest" pressure groups – "Bellringers are to be taken no more seriously than train-spotters" (conservation architect / nephew of well-known ringer);
6. Where conservation measures are appropriate, project budgets must accommodate extra costs (e.g. recording, preservation of key items as extras or out of use) – an additional fund-raising burden, of course;
7. Remember the possibilities of modern and future technology – look at "Time Team" and think about how scientific research techniques could be employed in a well-preserved belfry. We close the door to those possibilities if we don't preserve things of potential interest.

To **everyone**, I would say:

- Why is all this so polarised? Why is there so little room for those who seek the middle ground – practical preservation, realism about durability, willingness to experiment;
- There are always at least two sides to an argument – usually a great many more, and never just one. All reasonable viewpoints deserve consideration. Solutions require acceptance of elements that involve compromise;
- We need to maintain integrity and balance in our arguments, whichever side of this fence we are on. Too often statements are heard from the restorers like – "the bellfounder would have wanted to make the bell sound better" or from the conservationists – "the local people like the sound of the bells as they are". Yes, we have to find catchy ways of making the point sometimes – but let's recognise that these are false justifications, using the supposed views of those who do not have their own voice to project our own particular standpoints;
- Remember that controls exist to stop churches doing things that are downright stupid – not to circumscribe the taking of difficult but well-informed decisions;
- The survival of our church buildings depends on use. The heritage is more at risk from church closures and dispersal of contents than from adaptation for modern use;
- Always have regard to why bells were installed in the first place, what they are for, and the range of people – within and beyond the church – who appreciate their sound

## **Session 2 - Communication**

### **Paper 6 – Perspectives - The View from Worcester Cathedral**

**Mark Regan – Ringing Master, Worcester Cathedral Company of Ringers**

My story tells a different perspective of bells and our heritage.

A few months' ago Radio Four's Today programme ran a feature on the popular sounds in our landscape that define Englishness. The most popular sound was church bells. Significantly this feature said nothing about ringing, the archaeology of bells, the history of bellringing and everything that brings us together today. Bells were just a sound, a feature of the landscape that 'just happens'. We know this isn't true – why doesn't

everyone else? The sound of church bells (and I apologise to the Welsh, Scots, Irish and especially the Australians) is something that defines Englishness in the same way our magnificent Cathedral tower does.

A few months' later – the Independent runs a story. The future of ringing is under threat: "...there's a shortage of bellringers with no kids being trained". The BBC website carries a story about the threat to ringing in Devon: "...if we don't recruit and train 1000 new ringers there will be no ringing in 10 years' time". What's this got to do with us? Well lots. Without ringers, bells aren't rung. The heritage activity that makes the noise that defines Englishness dies. No more bell foundries, no more bell hangers, and little point in DAC advisors. What would John Betjeman have thought?

As practitioners we bellringers like to lock ourselves away; unaware of the thousands of people who hear us. And there are worse things like 'public accountability'. We like sound control – it saves us talking to the community. Yet how many people really complain about bells? Very very few. By all means adjustable sound control – yet there are churches in London with super bells which cannot be heard outside – what is the point?

At times we are ashamed of our relationships with the community and the Church. And we've got ourselves in bit of pickle over conservation and the future. Without a future there is little point in conservation.

This is not a conservation bashing perspective. I believe in sensible balanced and relevant conservation. I believe even more in an accessible and relevant heritage.

It's a delightful irony that we are all so nostalgic about steam railways and moan about Dr Beeching. And what a sad loss steam trains are to the nation. Hang on. Steam trains only appeared in the 1840s. They were hated as nasty modern uncivilised things (especially by investors in the canals and the Church of England). Many cities and towns wouldn't have stations in their centres. A contemporary word for us, which is the Victorian equivalent of "Railway", is "Internet". How quickly opinion changes; in a real historic context our romantic sentiment about steam trains is nonsense. Everything we take for granted has to have been new once.

I'm an optimist and I like change: so here's my perspective. I'll describe it using three stories and this theme runs through all of them:

1. Ringers are stewards and practitioners;
2. The Church owns the bells;
3. The community own what we do.

### 1. Bredon

A gorgeous church in a lovely village just off the M5 and A E Housman wrote that Bredon bells "were a happy noise to hear".

Well that's the point - they weren't heard. Not for over 90 years. Rumour and myth said the bells were unringable, the tower was unsafe, and so that was it. A few attempts to get the bells ringing failed for a variety of reasons. They were occasionally chimed. However, they were installed as ringing bells and what is the point of them remaining silent?

A visit and climb up the scary ladder revealed a big ring of five hung in an enormous Warner cantilever bellframe. A try out with the architect and engineer present - and the myths were instantly dispelled.

So how did this happen – first I struck lucky – the Rector Matthew Baynes was a lapsed ringer. Those in authority who believe in rumour are dangerous. Matthew had been told by such a person that the bells and tower were unsafe. No-one had checked. The church community picked up on the idea and grew excited about it. It was something new. PCC meetings would be a bit more interesting. The

village had grown interested too. It became a community project.

After the first time we rang the bells the kids in the village primary school next door were so enthralled by the noise they lined up by the fence in the churchyard, "a happy noise to hear". They were all a bit too young for the Today programme - though you could witness the proof of their feature on church bells.

The project was not managed or implemented by ringers – it was a church and village enterprise. The link with A E Housman created coverage in the national papers and BBC Radio Four.

Within a few months the bells were augmented to six, the ringing room brought downstairs to the tower floor, a local band are being trained and now thrive, the bells are now part of church and village life, and they've had concerts and parties to celebrate. And it's created new ringers and community ownership. Simple isn't it?

2. Now let's look at **Worcester Cathedral** - home of one of the best peals of bells in the world. Well you only know that if you're a bellringer. The Church and City community used to have no idea how special its Cathedral bells are. What's the point of keeping this a secret?

In a short time the Cathedral's ringers have embarked on a big and necessary programme of change. There is a lot to do. The first task was to establish a closer engagement and working relationship with Chapter and the Cathedral community. This is not rocket science. Education about the bells, opening the doors in the tower - and someone had said to me "I thought we weren't allowed in the ringing room" - helps. For years extremely limited peal ringing had taken place here – and for any good reason?

There are lots of peals here now – just about all of them are for specific church or City occasions. Apart from welcoming Deans and Bishops, we ring to open the City's Arts' Festival – after all ringing is a performing art. And when the City celebrated the 150th anniversary of Elgar's birth, Julian Lloyd Webber was heard on Radio Four with our bells in the background. Our bells are often rung as part of concerts in the Cathedral.

We mark events – so the community expects its Cathedral bells to be rung – they are part of the City's aural landscape. And we have no complaints.

As ringing master I'm responsible to my fellow ringers and accountable to Chapter. Bells are part of the Cathedral's musical output.

And Chapter have sponsored our scheme to set up a Teaching Centre in the Cathedral. We're working with local schools; teaching ringing on dumbbells and computer teaching aids. What's this got to do with heritage and conservation? Well just about everything – it's all about creating a sustainable future.

And there's Jim Wheeler's wooden clappers. Combining old and modern technology – and what a success!

The next thing to look at was our relationship with the local community. The group who own what we do. Next year the cricket club, after their appalling summer, have asked us to ring for the first home game of the season. The bells have always been part of the magic of cricket at New Road. Many at the Club once thought that bellringing was automatic. Not now.

We've also looked at funding from external arts' charities and trusts. And have been quite successful. We're also talking to teachers, education funders, the HLF and the media. Ringing is a performing art – sell it a different way and re-brand it so it has better relevance to the community and make it accessible. The community own what we do. And we need their support.

3. Next we have a scheme which is just starting

– new bells for **Old St Martin's Worcester** – the City's parish church.

The existing bells have been unringable for over 100 years. The City has lost four rings of bells in the past 140 years. Let's look at putting some of them back.

This is an unusual scheme. The current guidelines indicate that retuning and taking off canons would not be possible. Ringing the bells in the existing frame would be structurally dangerous. Taking the bells out of the frame would destroy the eighteenth century installation. It's contemporary with the tower and of heritage interest. Any scheme to get the bells ringing in the existing frame and fittings without retuning and better hanging would create an expensive ringing white elephant. So what else can be done?

I suggested to the Rector and PCC that the original bells could be preserved and made good as clock bells. They haven't been heard for 100 years. What is the point of them remaining silent?

In the space available under the old bells we hope to put in a new ring of eight or possibly ten new bells. The new bells become part of the church's mission and links will be made with local schools. This scheme preserves our heritage and generates new bells and ringers for tomorrow. One of the new bells has been given by the City of Worcester.

New bells in Worcester. Exciting and positive.

Working within the CCC guidelines this unusual scheme came to mind. I showed it to Paul Cattermole, who knew the bells and he gave it his full support.

It keeps all stakeholders happy. Who could disagree with it?

There are far too many unringable and unringed bells. Look at all the new bells in York England and Perth WA - evidence that new bells create new ringers and engagement with the community. Trinity Wall Street New York, St Magnus the Martyr London, Perth WA and the little village of Campton Bedfordshire having something in common – new bells and new ringers – creating a living heritage.

A status quo which encourages silent and unringable bells is irresponsible. What is the point of unringable and silent bells hanging in church towers for the community? In the Diocese of Derby and Guildford there are no unringable bells. Brilliant! The work to achieve this was done by a positive 'can do' attitude by DAC advisors and ringers. We all know that the standard of DAC advice in the UK is inconsistent and confused. And occasionally DAC advisors confuse advice with opinion.

Of the 63 towers with four or more bells in my local WDCRA area 22% are unringable and two are seriously under threat. The number of bells cast is interesting too. Between 1700 and 1799, 492 bells were cast for Worcestershire (and how many medieval bells were lost?).

- 1800 and 1899 548 bells were cast;
- 1900 and 1925 131 bells were cast (despite WW1);
- 1926 and 1950 140 bells were cast (despite recession and WW2);
- 1951 to 1975 64 bells were cast;
- 1976 to 2000 46 bells were cast.

So what's gone wrong? If I were in the trade I'd be worried. I wonder if the decline in the casting of new bells is linked with the decline in the number of ringers. Or is it the other way round? By all means keep what is worth keeping. However, bells need to be recycled, new rings of bells need to cast. Regeneration is important: and new works get people interested. It's how communities work.

So please let's work together so that in 50 years' time, the Today programme reports that the sound of bells is still the most popular sound in England. And, of course, reports that Worcester has established itself as a City of Bells.