



# Worcester Cathedral

## Guild of Bellringers

### Report on a tower incident.

On Saturday 11 February 2017 a group of experienced ringers from Devon were due to finish a two day ringing tour at Worcester Cathedral.

After a tour of the cathedral and tower the group were due to ring for Choral Evensong. The group assembled in the ringing room at approximately 16:35. The four clock bells had to be rung up. Two men were ringing up the tenor, one on the box, one on the floor. There is no strap rope. A strap rope is an additional rope tied to the main rope. These are rarely used in bellringing. Ian Bowman, was one of the duo ringing up the bell. He was standing on the floor.

The ringing up of the four clock bells started at c16:40. When the tenor bell was half way up, the tail end got caught under Ian Bowman's foot. He had probably gone up on his toes to get more traction on the rope. He was pulled up about five to six feet and flipped upside down. On the way down his head caught the corner of the tenor box causing a nasty cut. His back was also caught on the box and he landed awkwardly. The accident happened in a couple of seconds.

We have three first aid kits in the ringing room; several trained first aiders were present and they were able to swiftly deal with his head wound. Cotton wool and bandages were carefully wrapped around his head wound. The initial flow of blood quickly stopped. At no point did he lose consciousness. At the same time the emergency services were contacted. Ian attempted to convince us he was fit enough to get up, but due to his potential back injury we insisted he lie still, and made him comfortable until the paramedics arrived 12 minutes later. He was comprehensively assessed and, with concerns for concussion and his back, the paramedics decided it would be a risk for him to walk down the 100 steps to the Cathedral floor. He also told us that he had a previous back injury that might have been aggravated by the fall.

The fire brigade and a special rescue unit equipped with climbing rescue gear were soon in the tower. The emergency services have practised at Worcester Cathedral and they knew exactly what to do with a tower incident and calmly took control. The Precentor, Canon Michael Brierley; the duty vergers, Robert Beattie; were informed. Coincidentally the Steward, Les West was attending Evensong and was informed. The central tower crossing area was secured as the trapdoors were to be opened. Choral Evensong was soon to start in the Quire. The Precentor, who was in residence as the Dean was ill, spoke to the emergency services it was decided that Evensong would continue in the Quire.

I called Steve Smith, the Service Manager at 17:19 (not knowing he was ill). Steve came to the tower to assist the emergency services with the tower trapdoors and offer help and advice when needed.

The majority of the ringing group descended back down to the cathedral floor, and those who decided to wait were given the privacy of a side chapel by vergers and fire brigade officers whilst the tower rescue was underway. They were kept informed of progress at all times.

The specialist rescue unit rigged ropes and climbing tackle across the heavy timber wigwam bellframe support in the room above the ringing room. Ian Bowman was secured in a tight fitting stretcher and was lowered 100 feet from the ringing room to the cathedral floor at approximately 18:15. He was accompanied by one of the rescue team who was attached to the rope by the stretcher. It was a seamless operation by a highly skilled and practised team. It was fascinating and reassuring to watch this high performing team in action. Ian Bowman was lowered to the cathedral floor during the anthem in Evensong. He was taken to the Worcester Royal Hospital, discharged that night and went home to Widecombe by car.

Fortunately, we were prepared for a tower rescue and my cathedral colleagues and I work closely together. The emergency rescue services spoke to Les West after the incident.

The social media and news reaction were understandable considering the dramatic images of the rescue. Being lowered 100 feet through trapdoors is newsworthy, walking down 100 steps whilst injured is not. The spin on the story was sensationalist. The Daily Mail: "Bell ringer is rescued from the top of a cathedral after getting his foot caught in a rope which WHIPPED him 100ft into the air in 'a freak accident'". The Sun: "I CAME CRASHING DOWN WITH A BIG BANG". Bellringer recalls terrifying moment he was left dangling 100ft in mid-air from Worcester Cathedral tower after getting caught in rope".

Reporting by the broadsheets was measured, though they too published photos of the rescue. The Guardian: "Bell-ringer survives freak accident at Worcester Cathedral. Ian Bowman who was ringing in cathedral tower was flipped upside down and trapped 80ft up after catching his foot in a rope." The Telegraph: "Bell ringer rescued from Worcester Cathedral tower after he got trapped in the ropes and hoisted into the air." Classic fM: "A man whose foot was caught in a rope in a cathedral's bell tower and pulled into the air has been winched to safety."

Some of this "spin" could have done the Cathedral and bellringing a lot of damage, especially after recent poor publicity (York Minster) in the national and social media. I was approached by the Worcester News on Sunday morning (12 February 2017). The national press later picked up the story from the Worcester News, as did BBC radio and television. The Worcester News was measured in its reporting. I told them the facts following a phone call with Hannah Worrall on the morning of Sunday 12 February 2017. These facts were released on network news feeds by the Worcester News and then changed by others.

The Dean and Steward asked me to talk to the media. I was repeatedly asked for Ian Bowman's contact details. I politely refused to do this respecting his privacy. The cathedral's best wishes were sent to Ian Bowman on Saturday evening by Canon Alvyn Pettersen via a phone call with the Reverend Geoffrey Fenton, vicar of St Pancras, Widcombe. Subsequent support was given by the Dean.

On Monday 13 February I was busy doing eight national or local radio interviews and three national television interviews.

Ian Bowman is at home recovering. We were both interviewed on BBC Radio 2's Jeremy Vine's Show hosted by Vanessa Feltz. He said that it was a freak accident, he thanked the rescue services and said he was looking forward to ringing again. Similar comments were reported in the press.

Thank you to all my Cathedral colleagues who dealt with the incident in a calm, competent and professional manner.

I have attached emails from Robert Beattie who was on duty and Clare Griffiths who organised the tour. Clare is also secretary of the Exeter Cathedral Guild of Bellringers. I assume the vergers keep an incident log.

Please can we have an incident review meeting.

Mark Regan  
Ringing Master, Worcester Cathedral.  
14 February 2017

Emails:

"Robert Beattie

Feb 11 (4 days ago)

to Michael, Peter, Duty, James, me, Les, Alvyn

Shortly after 5pm I was notified that there had been an accident in the Ringing Room involving a visiting bell-ringer from the group of ringers from Devon scheduled to ring before Evensong. I was told that first aid had already been applied and an ambulance was on the way.

So far as I understand it the gentleman in question had caught his leg in a bell-rope, been lifted up and dropped on the floor. Although he remained conscious throughout, he had sustained a head injury, and there was concern about his spine. A line team had been summoned from the Fire and Rescue Service to evacuate him from the tower via the trapdoors.

Canon Brierley agreed to proceed with Evensong in the Quire while this evacuation potentially took place over the crossing. In the event, it took until 6.15pm for the casualty to be prepared for the descent, at which point the service was curtailed with only a brief bidding and the grace after the anthem, and the congregation asked to depart to grant this evacuation more privacy.

Also in attendance from about 5.30pm onwards were Les West, who had arrived to attend Evensong, but stayed in the nave to liaise with the fire brigade, and Steve Smith who was phoned by Mark Regan to assist with the trapdoors.

The only information I was given about the casualty is his first name 'Ian'; his wife was present with the visiting group (or perhaps arrived shortly afterwards). Mark Regan has undertaken to supply us fuller information; and Canon Pettersen intends to make contact with the visiting ringers' incumbent.

Fortunately such an evacuation from our tower had been practised by the fire brigade in the not too distant past. So far as I witnessed it the response to the accident by both emergency services and cathedral personnel was competent throughout."

From Clare Griffiths:

"Clare Griffiths

Feb 12 (3 days ago)

to AlvynPettersen, me

Dear Mark,

I am so glad that I was able to give you the good news this morning that Ian Bowman suffered no major injuries, and is now safely home again and no doubt recuperating with the care of this family and friends. The Widecombe ringers are a close knit group, and I know they will all be there to help and support both Ian, and Jane, whilst he recovers. Such a relief to us all.

On behalf of Ian, Jane, and all of us, please can I ask you to pass on our profound and sincere thanks for all your care last night. From the instant the accident took place, everything was handled with care and compassion, as well as smooth and authoritative efficiency. At no point was there panic or distress – everything was dealt with so calmly, and Ian's treatment and recovery could not have been handled better. Thank you so much.

Please could you thank everyone in the Cathedral who supported us all through a traumatic evening, and also extend our thanks to the paramedics and fire rescue service who undertook their roles with superb efficiency and calmness throughout. We were all looked after, kept informed at all times, and we felt in very safe hands. I'm sure that Ian and Jane will always remain grateful for the care they received.

And finally, thank you personally to you for taking charge, and for your responsibility and care throughout. Sorry for creating such an incident to disturb the evening for everyone! But, as a Cathedral secretary myself, it was thought provoking to see your team set into place so smoothly – your duty of care to us all is something we should all aspire to.

Thank you for making us so welcome, we had very much enjoyed our visit to Worcester Cathedral, and appreciated all the time and trouble you had taken,

Very best wishes,"