



Worcester Cathedral

Guild of Bellringers

Tower Safety and Safeguarding

Summary

This paper sets out for Chapter the challenges and risks of managing bellringing at the Cathedral by the Worcester Cathedral Guild of Bellringers (WCGoB). The Guild's current practices and policies are presented.

Bellringers are public performers operating the world's biggest and loudest musical instrument.

The WCGoB aims to provide a safe and welcoming environment to all. The Guild teaches and performs bellringing to the highest possible standards appropriate to the abilities of the ringers in the tower at any given time.

The WCGoB is one of the largest Cathedral ringing groups in the UK, comprising more than 40 full or associate members. Many other bellringers regularly visit on Sundays, practice nights, and assist with special ringing events from time to time.

Background

There are more than 5000 rings of bells in the Church of England (CofE). Only 140 (2.8%) towers have a ring of twelve or more bells. Only 20 (0.4%) of towers have bells weighing over two tons. The 16 ringing bells at Worcester Cathedral comprise the fifth heaviest ring of bells in the world. They are regarded as one of the best rings of bells in the world because of their outstanding tonal quality

Worcester Cathedral's bells, however, are also among the most difficult to ring or 'handle'. The stone-built tower is strong, but not stiff. The bells are hung in a Victorian designed, wooden structure (the bellframe and the wooden 'wigwam', a semi-independent tower), which moves independently of the stone tower, and is noticeably affected by the weather. The tower's lack of stiffness and the old-fashioned frame cause the tower to move independently of the bell-frame. Considerable ringing skill is required to compensate for this in order to control the bells properly. The large distance between the bells and the ringing room (rope length) increases the technical difficulty even further.

The challenges posed by the combination of the weight and number of the bells, the movement of frame and tower, and the length of the ropes makes ringing at Worcester Cathedral unique. What works in most towers may not work here. The Guild has developed rigorous, carefully considered processes for all bellringers, especially visiting ringers and non-ringing visitors.

New and inexperienced bellringers, unused to the bells, are at risk, unless supervised. Bellringing is a potentially dangerous activity if not managed properly. Controls are needed for the physical safety of all ringers and non-ringing visitors in the ringing room. These controls ensure a suitable standard of bellringing performance and a safe environment in the tower.

The Cathedral bells are not suitable for teaching the elementary stages of bell handling. This is one of the main reasons for building the Teaching Centre in 2008. Two types of teaching happen at the Cathedral. Bell handling is taught on the computer-assisted dumbbells in the Teaching Centre. All ringers, including new recruits, are then instructed how to perform on the real bells. Therefore, when running every Cathedral bellringing event, there is a constant need to be aware of the safety of all bellringers and other visitors to the tower in order to achieve both the best performance and safe operating conditions.

How bellringing works

Unlike choirs or church musicians, bellringers do not always travel or perform in organised groups. Bellringers have a custom of moving freely between practice nights and Sunday service ringing, joining local bands of ringers. This open and welcoming attitude promotes both friendship and sharing of skills. There also follows, however, two risks:

- 1) A potential threat to safeguarding, and
- 2) Clergy, Chapters and PCCs being unaware of who is in their tower.

Bellringers often go on tour, sometimes visiting 10 or more towers in a day. Others perform set pieces called quarter peals or peals lasting many hours. Others just ring on Sundays and practice nights. Most ringers are sympathetic to and support the CoFE whether they are practising Christians or not. Some, however, may ring to pursue a personal hobby and may not appreciate that bellringing is part of the Cathedral's wider Christian mission or that, for a variety of reasons, the cathedral has a right and duty to control or even deny access to the bells. Since the late Victorian period bellringing has been organised into local Diocesan or County groupings. These Guilds or Associations in the 21st century frequently bear little relevance to current functional groups of bellringers. The age profile of bellringing, especially within its "management" organisations is estimated to be 75% over 65 years of age. This contrasts with the WCGoB which is seen as an innovator in many developmental aspects of bellringing.

Associations and Guilds hold meetings at towers in their 'area'. These will be hosted by a local bellringer, normally the tower captain, who will be responsible to the PCC or Chapter. However, as many towers do not now have any regular ringers, the clergy, PCC or Chapter will not know who is responsible for such visitors, or how Safeguarding risks are managed. For example, what would happen if an under 18 or vulnerable adult went to an open bellringing session without a parent or guardian?

Bellringers' controls and processes are rarely documented. One must also recognize that not all bellringers will be alert to or give proper regard to the CoE's policies about Safeguarding.

What happens at Worcester Cathedral?

Rigorous policies have been developed from nationally agreed principles, discussion with the Cathedral authorities, personal experience, and case law.

Most new visitors (individuals or groups) contact the Guild via our website or email to ask if they can ring with the Guild. The small size of the bellringing community makes ascertainment of visitors' abilities, aspirations, and potential problems quite straightforward.

Visitors are met at the Friends' Door. No one is given the access codes to the building. They are met again in the ringing room and given encouraging advice and made aware of the Guild's safety procedures. No one is allowed to ring until invited by the ringer in charge: ringers are not allowed to just "grab a rope and ring".

Under 18-year-olds and vulnerable adults are not allowed to visit on their own. Written permission from a parent or guardian is obtained to allow regularly attending young ringers in the band to attend Cathedral bellringing on their own. Such young ringers are never on their own with less than two adults in the tower, and they are escorted out of the Cathedral to meet a parent or guardian at the end of every bellringing session.

All Cathedral ringers and known visitors are 'placed' on a bell for each ringing performance. This means the ringing master, or delegated leader, tells each bellringer which bell to ring. This reduces the risks of injury and poor performance. This practice may not be familiar and is sometimes not liked. It requires the ringing master to know the skills and abilities of each bellringer and to manage them fairly. What often happens elsewhere is a 'catch hold where you like' policy which results in bad ringing, selfish behaviours and apathy. This does not stimulate a learning environment or high standards.

If any ringer cannot handle the Cathedral bells safely or perform to an acceptable standard, they will not be asked to ring again. If they respond to coaching, then they receive the Guild's support. Even very experienced bellringers find the Cathedral bells a real challenge. Worcester Cathedral's bells' reputation helps to manage the dilemma of welcoming and including inexperienced, visiting bellringers.

When non-ringing visitors are in the ringing room (for example on New Year's Eve) they are given a Health and Safety-based (H&S) introduction and guidance on tower etiquette. For example, sitting with one's feet in the air (cross-legged) is dangerous. There is no talking during ringing and visitors are not allowed to walk around. Visitors are told never to touch any of the bell ropes.

Although the Guild wishes to welcome visiting bellringers, there will be occasions when the abilities of the individual or group fall below what is required. The accident in 2017 illustrates this. The visitors had given assurance they knew what they were doing. They clearly did not, and the accident occurred. The experienced WCGoB team took immediate action that prevented more serious injury. The Ecclesiastical Insurance Group use this as a case study promoting best practice.

This shows the need for having an experienced WCGoB person to deal with visitors in the ringing room. The Guild provides a standard H&S notice with information regarding fire escapes and means of exit to cover accidents. Access to the ringing room is restricted when the tower is open to the public to prevent a non-ringer entering the ringing room and pulling a bell rope. This has happened elsewhere.

There are First Aid kits in every room and at the top of the tower and some of the WCGoB membership have First Aid training.

Processes and Policies

The WCGoB operates within the policies and procedures of the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral. These policies are linked to the Diocese and wider Church of England approaches. This means the following:

- The WCGoB safeguarding officer is David Jenkins and he will report any issues or concerns to the Cathedral Safeguarding Lead. It is not the responsibility of the WCGoB to handle their own safeguarding issues, but to work within the Cathedral's safeguarding processes
- All regular bellringers will be recruited to meet safer recruitment processes, including references and, where appropriate, a DBS check. These will be operated by the WCGoB through the Chapter's systems
- Details of all registered bellringers will be held securely and shared with the Cathedral's HR/Safeguarding staff
- All regular bellringers will be required to do the C1 Safeguarding Training course and any refreshers when required
- Any immediate safeguarding concerns will be escalated quickly to the CSL or the DSA

Risks and issues

See <https://www.cofe-worcester.org.uk/safeguarding>

The Cathedral has an open, welcoming policy for all visitors. This works on the ground floor of a large, essentially public building, which is 'policed' by vergers, guides, other Cathedral people and members of the public. The WCGoB also has an open policy which works well as it is carefully managed. A major shift in policy that restricts visiting bellringers would be a bad thing, though it could help manage potential risks. Saying "no" does not send out a good message. However, if there are good reasons, this may be a necessary response.

A fully open welcoming policy for all does not work in a room 80 feet above ground which is only accessible by two doors and spiral staircases, often at times when there are no other users of the Cathedral present. People are there for a specific purpose and should respect the bells and the Cathedral, behave responsibly, behave decently, be honest about their bellringing ability and fit in with how the Guild manages the tower.

This comparison may help. If someone who plays the organ or piano enters the Cathedral, they will be made welcome, though it does not mean they can play the organ. If a singer enters the Cathedral, they will be made welcome, though it will not automatically mean they can sing with the Choir for a service. The same applies in the tower. There are added dangers concerning safety and safeguarding in this hidden space.

All the rooms in the tower are potentially dangerous, especially to non-bellringers. All the doors are double locked. The access codes are restricted to four bellringers and designated Cathedral people. Only three bellringers have the access codes for the belfry. The bell ropes are hoisted out of reach and access to lower them is via a coded lock. The ropes to the dumbbells are hoisted up for safety. Though the public have access to the Teaching Centre room, it is only when there is a steward present. The WCGoB members have the codes for the Friends' and north transept doors. These names are held by the vergers and COO. These codes are regularly changed to maintain a high level of security. Four WCGoB officers hold a fob to unset and set the tower security system by the Friends' Door.

Before each ringing session or on any occasion outside regular sessions, all bellringers and visitors sign the Fire Book at the bottom staircase in the north transept. They sign out when they leave. We keep a register of all ringers for every ringing event. We hold the names, addresses and relevant details of all our young ringers. We keep in close contact with their parents, some of whom are bellringers. Parents and family members are always welcome.

We do not tolerate any behaviours which comprise a safeguarding risk, or any behaviours which are bullying or inappropriate.

Specific Issues

The Cathedral has an open welcome policy. This is easy to manage on the shop floor.

In common with other activities across the Cathedral, Chapter may not be able to offer open access to all activities, where there are known safeguarding risks that are not possible to be managed safely. For ringers known to the WCGoB who present a risk, there will be an active dialogue between the Cathedral Safeguarding Lead and DSA about giving them permission to ring with the bellringers.

Chapter holds ultimate responsibility for safeguarding. For Chapter to actively manage safeguarding risks, it is important the CSL is aware of any bellringers for whom there is a safeguarding concern. Until this risk is safely managed or there is an agreement, bellringers who present a safeguarding risk and have not been given permission to attend will be asked to leave if they attempt to enter the tower. If they do not accede to this request, the police would be called. This process will involve a safeguarding agreement being put in place, where it is deemed necessary.

Appendices

1. Diocese of Worcester safeguarding: <https://www.cofe-worcester.org.uk/safeguarding>
2. The WCGoB's safeguarding policies, and health and safety information are publicly available at <http://worcesterbells.org.uk/health-and-safety/>
3. The Worcester Safeguarding case full judgement: <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2016/1117.html>
4. The Ringing Master, Secretary, WDCRA safeguarding contact and the Cathedral Chief Operating Officer hold a list and details of bellringers under 18 or vulnerable adults under our care.

Note: the officers of the WCGoB have shared and contributed to this document.

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