

The Tour de France takes to the “Big Country”

On Saturday 6th March an intrepid band, more the Magnificent 12 than the Magnificent 7, of Sonning Deanery ringers, assisted by a couple of very able helpers, travelled west to the Big Country near where, in years gone by, the phrase “here be dragons” was inscribed at the very west most boundary of the ODG. Yes, the Branch outing was to the Vale of the White Horse, with St George (aka Deputy Branch Ringing Master John Manley) taking the lead in case we did come across any of the old dragons.

Having successfully negotiated the Rio Grande, also known as the M4 these days, we arrived at the first tower - Ashbury, just a short distance from the Ridgeway Path. Ashbury are a 13½ cwt 6, and they certainly go their weight, with some bells being rather tricky to strike in the right place (well, that is my excuse anyway). As an added feature they are an anti-clockwise ring, which did catch a few people out looking the wrong way for the treble! It was quite hard work for the first tower of the day but we came away with a feeling of achievement at having produced some reasonable ringing for the delectation of the locals, many of whom lived in very close proximity to the Church!



Next, our happy band made their way to Shrivvenham, a light 13 cwt 10 and here St George, admitted that this tower was the main reason for us visiting the Vale, as he hadn't rung here since they were augmented to 10! They are an excellent ring of 10, and go very easily, and managed some quite creditable ringing, given that most of us very rarely ring on 10 and some not very often on 8!

To help us with the transition back to a clockwise circle each bell had its number on the floor with, the exception of, for some inexplicable reason, the 4th. Here we managed a range of ringing, including some Little Bob Royal, as well as Plain Hunt on the 10 and some well struck call changes.

The most difficult aspect of these bells was the spiral staircase - very narrow and with very small steps - which

emerged immediately behind the lectern making a discrete exit during a service a complete impossibility!

The next tower on the agenda for the day was Longcot, a very well ventilated (you may read that as draughty and cold) ground floor ringing chamber. Longcot are a 8½ cwt 6, where we tried to keep ourselves warm with a range of ringing, including Plain Bob and Grandsire Doubles (not spliced!), Stedman and some very impressive four-spliced Surprise. We also rang spliced Plain and Little Bob where your Chairman distinguished himself by forgetting which method he was in on more than one occasion!



The last moments at Longcot were spent on the vitally important issue of where we should have lunch and, eventually, The Fox and Hounds at Uffington won our custom.

The observant amongst you will have noticed the reference in the title to the Tour de France. Andrew Moss, as part of his training for his charity cycle ride between London and Paris, had brought his cycle with him and was cycling between each tower. In general, and quite understandably, Andrew arrived at each tower some minutes after ringing had commenced. It is worthy of note, however, that the one appointment at which Andrew was the first to arrive was the pub and lunch! Obviously the motivation of food and beer lent him some speed.

It was an excellent choice of lunch stop - beer and food both of high quality. Discussions ranged far and wide over lunch, including two of the senior members of the party having a spitting contest (and I've cleaned that up for this publication ...) over who was the elder and who had started to learn to ring at a younger age!

After lunch we were off to Shellingford, with Andrew in the yellow jersey in hot pursuit - perhaps the chocolate brownies and cream had achieved the objective of replenishing the energy expended in the morning's exertions. Sadly the Magnificent 12 was now a Magnificent 10 as 2 of our number had had to return back to civilisation. Shellingford were a very pleasant 6, once it had taken 3 of us to work out how to remove a weight which seemed to be stretching the rope of the third - bit it certainly wasn't a new rope! Again we rang a range of method - including Grandsire, Plain Bob and Stedman. Although the sun had made an appearance outside it was still bone chillingly cold inside and we soon moved on to the next tower.





This was Stanford in the Vale, a very handsome church with a light 8. The steep access ladder was quite interesting challenge and the rather Tardis like structure covering the ladder encroached sufficiently far into the ringing chamber that the ringer of the 5 was forced to stand with one foot either side of the corner.

These perhaps weren't the nicest sounding set of bells that we rang on, but we did ring a range of methods including another go at spliced Plain and Little Bob, some Single Oxford as well as some Grandsire.

The unusual feature here was finding the bells all set at back stroke and then having to set at back stroke after the final

ring. I think we scored 5 out of 8!

The last tower wasn't! This was West Hanney, a quite heavy six, which had once had a proper tower but it fell down some time ago, so now the "tower" was no higher than the roof of the Church. It was a very large ringing room, though, with some very special features - namely a heater, a kettle and a bottle of champagne! As this was the end of the day this was quite hard work but they sounded very good, although they could quite easily have been made into an eight! Again a range of ringing - including Single Oxford, Stedman and Grandsire. We also rang Cambridge despite John Harrison's attempt to distract us all by ringing on his knees! We were offered the chance to ring for longer but, tired as we were, we declined and called it quits.



Outside, in the sunshine, we stayed for a team photo (below) before we went our separate ways to return to the land of Sonning Deanery, while the sun set in the West, in true cowboy style. So, we had seen no dragons and John Manley's planning had been faultless. Thanks to John for choosing the towers and the pub and thanks to all who came and rang. We could have done with a few extra ringers to spread the load a little so please look out for the next Branch outing and be ready to come and help us.



The Branch outing team, outside West Hanney at the end of a successful day of ringing, less Simon and Rachel from Twyford who had had to return early, and including Andrew's trusty (I said trusty, not rusty ...) cycle - and even the shadow of the kind lady from West Hanney who took the picture!

If anyone wishes to sponsor Andrew on his ride to Paris then please visit www.justgiving.com/AMoss-Bike-2010. Andrew is raising money for Thames Hospicecare and his legs, and saddle soreness, will feel much better knowing that he has raised a goodly amount for them.