

Ring Out comes full circle

by Mary Hooper

In early July I wrote a report about the Frome Festival Ring Out project for *The Ringing World* (p.694). After many months of preparation, Frome Festival came alive with over two hundred concerts and activities from 7th to 16th July, at the centre of which was a bell-themed project, produced by local organisations Rook Lane Arts Trust and Artmusic. The “Ring Out” project celebrated all things bell-related including the Cockey family of bell-founders who were based in Frome around 300 years ago.



The Ring Out team with the Mayor; L-R: Julian Back, Roger Booth (Charmborough Ring), Martin Bax, Helen Ottaway, Mayor Philip Campagna, Mary Hooper, Alastair Goolden

Bells from the Villages encouraged people to listen out for practice and service ringing in various towers and perhaps pay them a visit to find out more. Wanstraw ringers had the honour of being the first tower to ring on Friday 7th July, and they were recorded by Alastair Goolden from Artmusic. The recording was to be used as part of a newly commissioned piece for church bells and ensemble that would bring the Ring Out project to a close ten days later.

On Saturday afternoon, the Charmborough Ring paid a visit to Victoria Park, and over 250 visitors dodged the July showers, with a 5pm downpour signalling a timely end to a successful afternoon. The weather fared better on the Sunday, a day full of workshops. There was tune writing for the Frome Festival carillon, run by composer Helen Ottaway; a Listening and Rhythm workshop run by ‘yours truly’ and, outside in the sun, a chance to try out the dumb-bell run by Jenny Cornwell and Derek and Rob Livsey. It was lovely to see so many enthusiastic smiles amongst the participants and emails/ringing details for several new people were exchanged.



Luna and Max try out the handbells at Frome Victoria Park (photo Tori Allison)



Bell tuner Ben Kipling shows visitors around Matthew Higby’s workshop (photo Martin Bax)



Helen Ottaway leading a Carillon Composition workshop at The Silk Mill, Frome (photo Martin Bax)

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Composer Helen Ottaway, co-curator of the Ring Out project (photo Tori Allison)

Above the market square, the virtual carillon chimed the hours and played tunes composed by Helen and members of her composition workshop. The carillon was made up of samples of individual bells recorded in churches in the area. One unexpected boost was its use as a sound-bite for BBC Radio 4's "World At One" coverage of a certain local by-election. Apparently, it was also to be heard on Breakfast TV!

Each day of the festival, *Bells from the Villages* continued. Other offerings included *An Industrial Frome Walk* featuring the Cockey family history with bell-themed readings; talks from Chris Gilbert on his work in London repairing and maintaining clocks, carillons and chiming mechanisms, and historian David Lassman on bells and bell-founding in Frome. Several tours of Matthew Higby's bell engineering works could have sold out many times over.

The second weekend started with the ringing of Frome Festival Treble Place Major at Marston Bigot, and featured a tour of towers in the Frome branch of the Bath & Wells Association (BWDACR), with a few towers from neighbouring Salisbury Guild included. Attendance at these was mainly successful with ringers coming from as far afield as Cardiff, Sussex and Birmingham. Beckington tower aced it by providing cream teas – always a ringers' favourite – and an architectural talk about the church. Well over 50 people attended that one tower.

The Ring Out project culminated with a concert and talk on Sunday evening. Handbells started the evening, *A Miscellany of Bells*, ringing rounds, Queens, and the Frome carillon tune. This was followed by a highly informative and entertaining talk by BWDACR Secretary David Parfrey. Four volunteers were invited on stage to step out a plain course of Bob Minimus, to great hilarity. This was followed by the world premier of Helen Ottaway's new work for church bells and ensemble entitled *Full Circle*. Indeed it was full circle as the recording of Wanstrow bells that started the Ring Out project ten days earlier began the

piece, with the ensemble taking over the rounds and call changes before morphing into their own improvisations of the bells. It was beautifully hypnotic and meditative and in places sounded almost Balkan in style. Finally, the instrumentalists, clarinet, violin, flugelhorn, marimba and bells came back to rounds to bring the music and the festival "Full Circle".

After a brief break "Ring Out" work continues in a quieter way with new ringers; a new handbell team; raised awareness of ringing in the Frome area and beyond; Ring Out videos are being compiled; a studio recording of *Full Circle* is being made, and a free-to-download ringtone of the Ring Out carillon will be available through the Rook Lane Arts Trust website www.rooklanearts.org.uk/ringout/. Discussions are happening to make the carillon a more regular feature of the Frome calendar and it is hoped that other highlights of the project will make a welcome return next year, too.



Alastair Goolden of Artmusic (left), recording Mike Attenborough for the virtual carillon (photo Martin Bax)

Thanks go to the following organisations and people for their support for bell-ringing in Frome and beyond: National Lottery Heritage Fund and Lottery players; Frome Society for Local Study; Frome Town Council; Frome Festival; Rook Lane Arts Trust, in particular director, Martin Bax; Artmusic (Alastair Goolden and Helen Ottaway), the Bath & Wells Diocesan Association of Change Ringers, Frome Branch, the Salisbury Diocesan Guild of Ringers, Matthew Higby & Company Ltd, St John's Church, Frome, Poetry in Motion (guided poetry walks) Frome Heritage Museum, The Silk Mill, Frome; and Frome FM.

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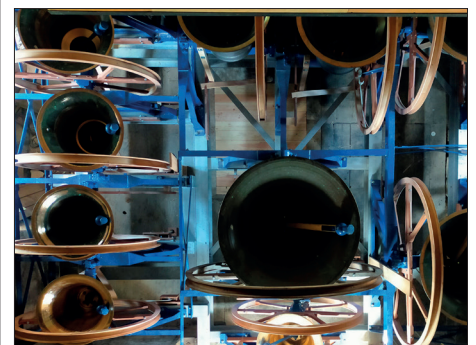
l-r: Volunteers John, Ray, David & Oliver; Whites Graham & James

created a professional looking fundraising poster; Rob Willis who took drone videos of the clock dial being removed and reinstated, interested people who commented about how much the bells were missed and last – but not least – the congregation and clergy of St Mary's who were very tolerant of the disruption to the life of the church. Special thanks are due to the team of volunteers who helped with the removal and installation of the bells – undoing nuts, heaving and pushing bells and generally helping out.

The winter of 2022/23 saw a long season of practice nights at local village churches (mostly very cold) and excitement at each new development. On 21st April 2023 there was a test ring on the new bells in their new frame and with their excellent new fittings. In the course of the process we met skilled craftsmen from Ellis Builders, knowledgeable engineers from Whites Bellhangers, clock experts from Cumbria Clock Company, a battalion of soldiers from REME based at nearby Lyneham and many interested observers. We were able to ring for the Coronation of King Charles III and we are now back to ringing on practice nights and for Sunday services. The restored bells are a joy and it is impossible to overstate the difference in the way the bells sound and handle. We have every hope that these bells will ring out over our town for many years to come and we are already training some new recruits.

The only sadness in this whole story is that Mike Rawle, one of our most reliable and stalwart supporters, died suddenly in October 2022. We often remember him and know that he would have loved ringing our restored bells.

For more information, photos and videos of the project go to <https://www.facebook.com/CalneStMaryBellProject>



The bells in their new frame, seen from above