

New Start with New Bells

Margaret Winfield, Slapton, Buckinghamshire

Written by Margaret Winfield, with thanks to churchwarden Dave Mann.

At present the only way the five bells in Slapton church, Buckinghamshire, can be heard is as Ellacombe chimes. They have not been rung full circle for many years owing to safety and stability issues, and together with the frame are in need of extensive restoration.

Now at last with various donations, grants, fundraising and the sale of a small plot of land belonging to the church (completion very shortly) comes the exciting news that this is about to become reality! It is expected that work will start in October and be completed by June next year. It is not just restoration that we can celebrate but also the addition of a sixth bell: the Keltek Trust have been very generous and given us two bells in addition to some financial help, and so we are replacing one of the existing bells which is in a poor condition with one of the new bells and adding the sixth.

I started learning to ring three years ago at nearby Marsworth, with several others, in order to take part in the celebration of the centenary of the 1918 Armistice.

Marsworth is a teaching tower with a simulator and there were six of us who started to learn, and all continued for more than a year and completed Level 1 of Learning the Ropes. During 2019, however, people began to drop out, mainly for family or work reasons, though the fact that there was no prospect of imminent bell restoration may have played a part. A lot of work had been done behind the scenes and some funding secured from various sources, but an application for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund was turned down.



One of the old bells at Slapton



Slapton Church

The church eventually took over the project and the sale of a piece of land has made up the shortfall. Currently there are only two of us left who are really interested, myself and a friend and colleague who unfortunately is often working on Marsworth practice evenings! I completed Level 2 before everything came to a halt last year, and having returned to practices, am learning Plain Hunt.

We clearly need to drum up some more enthusiasm – hopefully the news that work on the bells will start in October will help, and we have a lot of support from Philip Dobson, the Chair of the Chiltern Branch of the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers.

The redundant bell will be housed in the church with a plaque of some sort so that congregation and visitors can see what a church bell looks like – many will not have seen one close up! We are going to film the entire process from removal of bells to refitting so that future generations will have a permanent record of the works carried out.

I am really enjoying returning to ringing after the prolonged break. Now, the prospect of a newly restored peal of six bells to ring will certainly provide an impetus to my practice in future!