

2017: Suffolk

An Itchy Unicorn and a Bread Sandwich

Half a mile down the road: "Have you brought the itinerary?". "Oops! I left it on my desk.". "I've saved it to the Cloud. Should be able to pick it up on my phone." After a brief discussion a U-turn was performed. So much for reliance on modern technology.

The annual gathering of Barnes Ringers and Friends assembled at the Greyhound, Ixworth, where Giles appeared to be constructing a bread sandwich and the menu caused confusion until we realised that some dishes are elevated to "special" status on certain days but still available at other times. Suitably fortified, we made our way via several towers to Thornham Magna. Accommodation consisted of two pubs which, although in different villages, were separated by an easily-walkable stretch of lane. Both fortunately had a selection of well-kept ales and good food as there was little else in the vicinity.

As usual the organisation was impeccable. This year there were fewer quarter peal attempts and more general ringing, although whether that makes for a more relaxing day is debatable. Bells ranged from "interesting" to glorious. Methods varied from 8-spliced to Suffolk Place and Reverse Canterbury, which we noticed one local band had imaginatively renamed "Sandcastle Doubles" complete with little flags on the blue line.

Suffolk has more than its fair share of magnificent churches and we were given "artistic notes" on features to look out for. One could become blasé about this ("Oh look, another double hammer beam roof") but we particularly admired the carved pew ends at Stowlangtoft, including the "pensive" unicorn scratching its backside with its horn.

Mike Wigney's fame goes before him. The recent Daily Telegraph article now adorns many a tower notice board. At Eye, several of the local band turned out to meet the celebrity, gave us a most welcome cup of tea and sat respectfully through a quarter of Stedman Triples.

Saturday's dinner (I hesitate to call it formal as standards of dress have fallen lamentably since the early days - although on second thoughts I should perhaps exempt the ladies from this observation) took place in the White Horse, Stoke Ash. Peter, our budding barrister, having received good news about his exam results, demonstrated his powers of oratory by relating the saga of our attempts to speed up the service of breakfast at the Four Horseshoes. To be fair, the "full English" could not be faulted on quality (good meaty sausages) or quantity (two of everything) - it was more than enough to set one up for a day's ringing and would be well worth the wait if only one didn't have to be at a tower several miles away by 9 o'clock.

The normally impromptu rendering of Flanders and Swann songs after dinner was placed on a more formal footing this year when it became known that the writer had recently given a recital of the same, but the performance was much enhanced by spirited contributions by Mike and Peter and backing sound effects by Malcolm. The sundry diners at the other end of the room had already left by this stage, otherwise their departure might have been hastened.

If there's one thing worse than an unringable tower it's a pub with no beer. Such was the sorry situation that confronted us at Sunday lunchtime. However, we ascertained that there were extenuating circumstances - a staff walkout the night before - so I won't name and shame, and the relief crew coped admirably with feeding the vicar's party of 40 plus a dozen ringers. Another bread sandwich appeared - perhaps inordinately thick slices are a local peculiarity?

The tour closed with some excellent bells - the brand new eight at Horringer - and some equally fine beer in the Dove at Bury St Edmunds (it had been recommended to us earlier in the week but unfortunately doesn't open weekday lunchtimes).