

Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bell Ringers

Witney and Woodstock Branch AGM Saturday 17th February at St. Laurence, Combe Report - Hon. Secretary

Ducklington hosted the 2017 AGM in February where a well-attended open ringing session was followed by tea and cakes and the annual service. Robert Walton of North Leigh handed over his roles of Chair and Secretary to Hazel Howarth of Ducklington and Andrew Goldthorpe of Witney respectively. Anthony Williamson of Combe handed over the ringing Master position to Sue Rhodes of Freeland, with Michael Probert, also of Freeland replacing Richard White as Branch Representative. All departing committee members were thanked for their invaluable service. Membership only grew from 174 to 175 over the last year but we welcomed a new ringable tower at Black Bourton into the branch, along with welcome plans to make Broadwell ringable.

Unfortunately, two much loved and well-respected members passed away in 2017, Derek West of Witney and Mary Douglas of Bladon. Obituaries were published in Odd Bob and a number of quarter peals were rung in fond remembrance.

Our branch annual social was hosted by Freeland on 22nd July. After ringing at St Mary's church, we moved next door to the Oxfordshire Yeoman for food & drinks and a wet but competitive game of Aunt Sally to bring the evening to a close.

In September, a band of ringers from Witney and Woodstock joined Kevin Musty on an outing to South Wales. Organised by Kevin, originally from Swindon, who has recently moved to a small village in South Wales, it was our great fortune that he invited us to ring in his new territory. Set over a long weekend with two nights away we enjoyed many excellent towers and lots of good hospitality. Ringing at Dyffryn, Cadoxton, Neath, Llanelli, Sketty, Bridgeend, Gorsienon, Aberavon and Aberdare we attempted a QP at each and got most. At Gorsienon we had the honour of ringing for a wedding. It was an excellent trip and all the towers are well worth a visit.

This year's well-supported Branch outing took place in Warwickshire on a warm and sunny October day starting in Harbury, followed by Lighthorne, an excellent lunch at Bishops Tachbrook followed by afternoon ringing St Nicholas Warwick, Barford and lastly St Peter's Wellesbourne. Our thanks to Michael Probert for his excellent choice of church towers and bells and a fine pub in such a beautiful part of the Warwickshire countryside.

November saw the re-dedication service for the new ring of six at Black Bourton with the service taken by Area Bishop Colin Fletcher. David Harding, tower captain, and his new band of Black Bourton ringers rang the bells for the first time after they were blessed during the service followed by an open ringing session. The subsequent branch practice was the best attended of the year with 17 ringers keen to try out the new bells. The Black Bourton ringers, as well as the whole branch, are extremely grateful to the family of Jackie Wheeler who donated the funds to enable completion of the restoration and a new treble was cast in her honour. Thanks also go to the village for its dedication and support in fundraising over the last few years, Richard Betteridge for organising the whole project, David Nixon for his tireless hard work in the tower and all the other helpers who have completed a mammoth task in such a short time.

Branch practice attendances have been a bit hit and miss in 2017 but always provide an excellent opportunity to try out the 24 ringable towers we are fortunate enough to have in the district, as well as to socialise. Highlights of the year included Wootton's excellent pub and ringers' chips as well as our first ever branch practice at Langford. December saw a low turnout for the Yarnton practice but an enthusiastic if exhausting quarter peal of bob doubles was rung on the back five.

There were many 1st Quarter peal congratulations this year which is a tribute to the quality of teaching we are fortunate to benefit from in our branch towers as well as the strength of our support group of Association of Ringing Teacher qualified teachers. Sue Rhodes, our Ringing Master will elaborate on these achievements in her own report but, on the subject of ART, and its awards system for ringing achievements, Fiona Methley of North Leigh achieved Level 5 with the support of her ART tutor Alison Merryweather-Clarke and Hazel Howarth of Ducklington achieved levels 3 & 4 with the support of her ART tutor Roger Barnes as did I at Witney. If any other ringers achieved ART qualifications that I am not aware of, please let me know and I will be happy to add their achievement to the minutes. I will also be attending the ART Level 1 teacher training course in March to improve my bell handling teaching skills and I would encourage any members interested in improving their teaching or ringing skills to speak to one of our branch ART members.

Concerning recruitment, at Witney, we are currently training 10 sea cadets with a view to them ringing at the 2018 Remembrance Day national ringing event encouraged by the 1400 poster which you should all have seen circulated by your tower correspondents. It provides a helpful conversation starter if you are trying to recruit new ringers, as well as a target for new recruits to take pride in achieving.

As branch secretary, I have benefitted from extra ringing opportunities associated with my attendance of a number of ODG meetings and training events. My personal highlight was a recruitment and training course held in Amersham where I was able to ring at my old school church which I last attended at my leavers ceremony 38 years previously, having also discovered that my course tutor and the Guild PR officer was an old school friend. A topic of debate at this meeting was developing the concept of ringing hubs at strategic locations, not only in this branch but also our neighbouring branches of VOWH, Old North Berks and Bicester, with less regard being taken of historic branch boundaries and more attention paid to drawing on the wealth of resource and talent at our disposal. I look forward to exploring this further in the year ahead with the committee and other Guild members.

Finally, I am personally very grateful for the counsel of my current and previous committee members in my first year as branch secretary, as well as the invaluable support of ringers from other branches of the ODG in providing sound advice and extra ringing opportunities. My special thanks go to Hugh Deam from OCB and Tony Crabtree from VOWH, the latter in particular for running the tower maintenance and rope splicing course at Witney. I encourage all branch members who want more experience in steeple keeping or extra ringing opportunities to get in touch with these individuals, or me and my fellow committee members, as we have a wealth of ready and able support to draw on in this branch.

Happy ringing!

Andrew Goldthorpe
Hon. Secretary