

A word with ... Rowan Wilson

David Stanford interviews Rowan Wilson, Chairman of the Suffolk Diocesan Guild of Ringers, about her ringing experiences, other interests, recruitment and retainment, her own ringing achievements during the pandemic, and her aspirations for the future.

Where were you brought up?

I was born in Sidcup in Kent. We moved to Ladbroke, a village in Warwickshire, when I was four years old and I attended the primary school, joined the church choir and was keen on sport. My parents were non-ringers but as is often the case, I made the transition from the choir stalls to the tower.



Rowan Wilson in Lowestoft

What memories do you have about your early ringing experiences?

I learnt to ring aged eleven with three other girls of a similar age from the choir so it was very much a learner's band at Ladbroke. Harry Reeves, the tower captain who taught me to ring, was also a ringer at Southam and regularly attended local practice nights at Harbury so he soon encouraged me to join these towers as well as he could see that I was keen to progress. I rang my first quarter peal, Bob Minor, in 1977 two years after I started ringing and my first peal, also Bob Minor, later that year.

What do you think is needed to ensure new ringers continue?

New ringers need support. Most importantly they need encouragement and help to visit other towers and to become involved in the wider ringing family. When I was learning, Julian Edgson and John 'Spike' Thorne from Southam were particularly supportive and they provided links with other towers including Newbold-on-Avon and Warwick. In retrospect I can see that these were important links to ensure that I was welcomed as a young learner at many different towers, CDG meetings and events. Although I learnt to ring with others of a similar age they weren't as keen as me and only lasted about a year but this didn't prevent me from making progress as I relished the opportunity to mix with adults on an equal standing!

What do you do outside of ringing?

My main passion is cycling and has been so all my life, my parents even met through a

cycling club. I also like drinking real ale and I'm a member of CAMRA.

Tell me about your experience as Suffolk Guild Chairman and what you wish for the future of the Guild?

When I became Chairman in 2018, I wanted to ensure the best for the members we already have and trust that will encourage more, including young ringers, to participate. I also wanted to encourage members to make full use of the training opportunities available both within and outside Suffolk. The Mancroft Ringing Discovery Centre is right on our doorstep and we were starting to make progress with increasing visits from our members pre-Covid. My current hope is that bands will remain viable ready to ring post-Covid. In trying to maintain involvement and interest for Guild members, I revised the St Edmunds Clapper fundraising challenge and I am hopeful that members will take part in the virtual events we have planned whilst waiting patiently to ring on tower bells again!

Do you have any goals or ambitions?

Definitely! Although my ambitions have obviously changed quite a bit since the pandemic! When St Mary le Tower Ipswich entered the National Twelve-Bell Striking Contest, I was delighted to be included in the band. I was not expecting to be selected to ring on the day but was keen to support the practices. I'm certainly keen to improve my own twelve-bell ringing but I would also like to improve ringing on higher numbers generally across Suffolk; Bury St Edmunds were scheduled to host a National Twelve-Bell heat in 2021 so I felt this would be an ideal opportunity to encourage budding or lapsed twelve-bell ringers within Suffolk. My aim was to get more people ringing on higher numbers, with the support of those who already do but this is obviously now on the backburner!

Another personal ambition was to continue efforts to work toward ringing 23-Spliced Surprise Major but the lockdown put a block on that. Right now, I think I might struggle to ring eight-spliced! I am not expecting things to be the same after lockdown but I feel there is an opportunity to review and reset ringing goals. Eight months ago I didn't think I would ever ring handbells proficiently but I have now rung quarter peals of Bob Minor and Major.

Where once I thought I might just manage a plain course of minor as Chairman for the Guild Centenary dinner in 2023, something more should now be possible and I do intend to continue with handbells even when we are able to return to ringing tower bells.

Tell me something about your career and how it progressed?

I studied PE at Birmingham and completed a PCGE at Exeter. I taught PE and Outdoor Education in various locations finishing in Loughborough. Over the years PE became less practical and more classroom based and so I left teaching. I had a spate doing NVQ training and then joined Sustrans, the Charity who aim to make it easier for people to cycle or walk. Increasing travel demands caused me to decide to look for a job locally and, being unable to find a cycling related job, I decided to apply to Waitrose. I work in the store and as a delivery driver which doesn't really align with my wish for sustainable transport so I might try to persuade Waitrose to start using e-cargo bikes for local deliveries.



Receiving GWP 12 bell trophy for The Norman Tower from Alban Forster and Paul Mounsey (right) in February 2020

What about yourself might surprise your friends and acquaintances?

I strapped the tenor at Exeter Cathedral to a quarter peal attempt when studying for my PGCE. It's the heaviest bell I've ever rung but it was strange facing out of the circle.

What recommendations would you give to encourage good band cohesion?

The recent restrictions have brought into sharp focus the importance of the social side of ringing but I think there's even more to be gained from socialising after ringing. People can be very different when they have leadership responsibility in the tower compared with when they are socialising. The pub or coffee shop provides the opportunity to get to know each other better which leads to greater cohesion of the band and usually better and more enjoyable ringing.

'A word with ...' – short interviews

Why not try your hand at an interview? You might want to help readers get to know the ringer behind the printed name, or it might be someone who you don't think gets recognised enough, or who doesn't ring much but you know has an interesting story.

We've written some advice: rwrld.uk/aghs or go to www.ringingworld.co.uk and look for 'Submit'.

You might aim for 800–1000 words, but don't worry if it's longer or shorter. You can send it in any standard format. Don't worry about things like spelling – that's the Editor's job. Try to include a picture if the subject will agree.

Email to the Editor (editor@ringingworld.co.uk).