

Belfry Advisory Committee (BAC) – Suffolk Guild of Ringers

Minutes of meeting at Stowmarket Church – 30 January 2024

Present – C Davies (Chair), C McArthur (Sec), C Birkby, J Flatters, M Steggles, P Lock, Neville Whittle, W Girling, C Girling, J Taylor.

Apologies - A Moulton and K Mossop who wished to retire from BAC with immediate effect, but still a NE district helper.

Declarations of interest - C Birkby regarding Saint Mary Le Tower Ipswich training bells grant proposal.

The opportunity was taken for BAC members unfamiliar with the tower to ring the splendid new bells. Many thanks to W Girling for hosting the meeting and his hospitality.

Winston wanted to put on record that Stowmarket ringers thanked BAC greatly for much assistance with the recent ten bell rehang project. Bishops' dedication service for the new ten is on 25th February 2024.

1.

Previous meeting minutes agreed and signed as correct. Hintlesham 6/10/23.

2.

Management feedback – Maximum grant for bell restoration has now been restored to 10% for future projects from the 5% previously.

3.

A grant application has been received from St Mary le Tower (St M le T), Ipswich. It requested support for a new installation of 6 dumb bells, for use with an Abel simulator and six laptops in a manner similar to the St Peter Mancroft Ringing Centre installation. Total project estimates were not provided, but a contract has been let with Matthew Higby for £26,657 for the supply of the dumb bells. After considerable discussion, the meeting concluded that in the past we have been more successful in repairing and rebuilding our bell stock than recruiting new ringers, and particularly youngsters to our towers. Thus, any provision to encourage training of new recruits must be encouraged. However, the committee were unanimous in the belief that the rules and previous precedent governing the Bell Restoration Fund (BRF) would not allow a BRF grant. In particular, the rules preclude grant support for new additional bells and simulators. In fact, ST M le T did not ask for funding support for the Abel soft and hardware, nor the required computers, but only the dumb bells. Nonetheless, the committee unanimously believe that this project falls outside the current BRF guidelines.

Similar dilemmas have been successfully resolved in the past. Grants for simulators, ineligible for BRF funding, were financed from the Golden Bottle Fund. The BAC believed the rules governing the application of the BRF had evolved over the last 50 years into a robust framework, guiding the grant process. It is possible to re-write the rules to accommodate both simulators and dumb bells as specific allowable exceptions to the existing rules. However, if the rules are thus amended, virtually every tower in the county would be eligible to apply for a simulator. Having said yes to St M le T, how could we refuse others?

Therefore, the BAC unanimously felt it would be better to look for money elsewhere to fund the project. If money could not be found, it might be more prudent to ask the AGM to pass a 'one-off' grant for the project, given its importance to the future of the Guild.

4.

An application for grant aid has been received from Drinkstone, who have a faculty to replace the existing frame, fittings, and ring of 6 bells (which were declared unsafe in 2020) with an 8-cwt peal of 6 new bells in a new, eight pit, steel frame. The difference in cost between the 6 and 8 bell frames was negligible, and the spare pits allow the easy addition of two new trebles in the future, should they be required. In 2021, estimates were obtained from Taylor's, Nicholson's, and Matthew Higby and Taylor's were selected as their bellhanger of choice. They have promises for approximately £50K of the £128,931 (Jan24 estimate after allowances for self-help assistance) project. Of that £129K estimate, £110,562 would be eligible for our grant assistance. They hope to raise the remainder of the funds, including a lottery grant application in 2024, so that work can be carried out in the 2025.

A training plan has been submitted to R&T, but is yet to be approved, and the parish has yet to sign our Guild T&C's. The BAC recognise that the GMC may not be able to deal with this application at the February meeting, but nonetheless dealt with their part of the application. This well thought out plan has been guided by Alan Moulton throughout and the BAC were unanimous in suggesting an £11K grant toward the project (9.95% of the allowable cost).

5.

There are currently two ongoing restoration projects. At Fornham St Martin, the original six bells have been removed to Nicholson's. However, a Keltic supplied bell and the old No.6 were found to be cracked. The old No.6 has been welded at Soundweld and returned to Bridport whilst Keltic have supplied a replacement for their cracked bell. Tuning will recommence on 12 Feb. A 6-8 week project delay occurred due to the lack of a faculty for a new bell chamber floor and sound control, which had not been included in the original application. The bells should return in late Spring/Summer 24.

The Westhorpe project is continuing smoothly. The re-casting of three bells has been completed. The future band are being trained at Gislingham and Redgrave and are making steady progress. The bells are due to return in the late Spring/Summer 24. Assistance from BAC is unknown at this stage in the installation.

6.

The BAC spent some time discussing the GMC request for the BAC to run a bell maintenance course in 2024. Some unease was expressed amongst members about trainees whose enthusiasm outweighed their practical ability. Given that the BAC are prepared to travel throughout the county to assist with maintenance, it was felt that it would be much safer to offer a Bell Maintenance Awareness Course. In this way, trainees could be guided through the problems that might be found in a ringing chamber/belfry but encouraged to call for BAC assistance rather than undertake repairs for themselves. The BAC will offer such a course on the website in February, and undertake the course based upon the response. C McArthur to ask C Garner to include a note in the latest what's on asking for expressions of interest.

7.

The BAC are very aware that there were a lot of members in the committee. Although it is very useful to have members throughout the county who can quickly respond to local maintenance issues, we also expect them to attend BAC meetings at least once a year. All our members have been asked if they wished to remain, and all said yes. However, members who are reluctant to help with repairs, and who will not attend meetings are of little use to the committee, irrespective of often a long history of valuable contributions to the Guild. To that end, we have reduced the BAC membership to those members who actively support the work of the committee, and we thank you for all the past contributions made by members no longer part of the committee.

8.

During the last four months, the BAC's work has continued helping and advising parishes throughout the county. These included:

Blytheburgh project is continuing, with grant raising ongoing.

Bramfield old frame was mentioned as being problematic, but C Davies and J Flatters have inspected recently and not found any particular problems, bearing in mind the installation age.

Bures St Mary the Virgin: Clapper welded on tenor.

Copdock St Peter: Advice provided with reference to rehanging the bells in a new frame. There is little space in the bell chamber and the bells currently swing into the louvre window recesses. This project is gaining momentum and is increasingly more likely to happen.

Falkenham St Ethelbert King of East Anglia: Inspection. Locals have made a fine job repainting the frame. Contractor used was good and a competitive price that might be viable to consider at other East Suffolk towers.

Framlingham St Michael and All Angels: Serious water ingress problems in the tower roof means that the bells, fittings, frame and ringing chamber carpet are all soaking wet sometimes. Reportedly there is no money for immediate repairs. The consequences of the soaking wet frame may be very serious since it is these very conditions that encourage death watch beetle.

Framsden St Mary. This 16cwt eight bell ring is only occasionally rung on the back 6 (the two tenors are recently reported as being hard work), The trebles are not rung due to a lack of flooring under the bells. The BAC intend to replace the flooring to enable all eight bells to once again be rung after a full test ring. Action will be spring / summer 2024 for BAC.

Ipswich St Lawrence: Tower unringable due to disintegrating flintwork on the tower. Also, St Clements have had sound control complaints that are being investigated.

Lakenheath St Mary the Virgin: Technical advice given reference the poor going of the bells, especially the tenor. Recommended new bearings and gudgeon pins be fitted to the back five bells. The refurbishment of the tenor has been completed, but there are no immediate plans for the other bells.

Laxfield project complete, although quarter peals on them have not yet been initiated. This is mentioned in the guild grant conditions stipulations for such projects.

Metfield St John the Baptist: Inspection, general maintenance, and advice to the band.

Stanton All Saints: Clapper tightening on the four, hung dead, chiming bells.

Sudbury St Peter: Inspection. Building now called “The Art Centre”. Bells rung from downstairs, where the bells can’t be heard, or upstairs where they are very noisy. Assistance by BAC given recently in moving the two sets of ropes, from the downstairs six bell position to the upper chamber ten bell set up.

Wrentham St Nicholas: Inspection of these 6 bells required. Potential unstable tower means the bells remain classed as not fit to be rung. In the spring work to be initiated by locals and BAC assistance on defective fittings.

Whepstead St Petronilla: Replacement Stay

9.

Health and safety – The meeting noted that a bellhangers incident had resulted in an injury during a recent rehangng project, and such incidents should be noted with BAC in future, to initiate lessons learnt. This topic will form part of our training for towers mentioned in item 6 above.

Next meeting Wednesday 22 May at Troston 19.00 hrs ringing and 19.30 hrs meeting to follow.