

Two Suffolk towers and their very different journeys to the National 12 bell (2022)

The National 12 bell eliminator held in Bury St Edmunds on Saturday 26th March was a milestone for the Suffolk Guild with two Suffolk 12 bell towers, St Mary le Tower, Ipswich and the Norman Tower, Bury St Edmunds, entering and competing at the same eliminator tower.

Ipswich have previous experience when it comes to the National 12 bell, entering for the first time in 1988. They hosted an eliminator in 1989 and last entered a band in 1991 where they came a very creditable 4th whilst hosting the final. Their journey to the 2022 eliminator started in 2019 when they entered for the 2020 competition. A successful journey to Walsall, the host tower for the eliminator, sadly came to nothing when the competition was cancelled due to the pandemic.

Preparations for the postponed competition began for them in November 2021 when they held their first National 12 bell focused Sunday practice. Using both Monday practice nights and the Sunday afternoon practices they regained familiarity with the principle initially (after the enforced layoff of lockdown) and then focused on the test piece when it was issued in early December. Hawkear was used on a regular basis and enabled the band to see where improvements could be made specifically but also gave encouraging feedback on progress as the test piece became more familiar and the band gained confidence. This confidence was apparent when they won the George W Pipe trophy for the second time at Waltham Abbey in February 2022 giving them the belief they needed that a high placing in the eliminator was possible a month later. The journey was not however a simple one having lost one band member with a broken leg in January and various band members (or their families) succumbing to Covid-19 and needing to isolate in the days leading up to the competition.

The Norman Tower's journey started a little later when they were chosen to host the 2021 eliminator (which became the 2022 eliminator) becoming possibly the 'youngest' 12 bell tower to enter a band in the National 12 bell less than 10 years after the bells were augmented in April 2012. This was to be a huge milestone in the history of the Norman Tower and was an exciting prospect as the local band could use the opportunity to build on their success in the local GWP 12 bell striking competition. All was going according to plan when they regained the GWP in February 2020 but then the pandemic struck.

Tower bell ringing was off the agenda but thankfully handbell ringing came to the rescue and team building started in July 2020 with twice monthly Sunday handbell sessions on the Garth, a handy outside space near the Pilgrims Kitchen at St Edmundsbury Cathedral. This obviously wasn't an opportunity to work on striking or 12 bell ringing but the regular meetings started to establish a group of people who were prepared to work together, through thick and thin, towards a common goal. Ringing Room was a god send when the lockdown restrictions tightened but the band emerged again in April 2021 and all of the practice paid off with a successful QP of Plain Bob Major in hand on Sunday 9th May <https://bb.ringingworld.co.uk/view.php?id=1443394>.

When restrictions on tower bell ringing were lifted, the band were raring to go and scored simultaneous QPs on handbells and tower bells on Sunday 23rd May <https://bb.ringingworld.co.uk/view.php?id=1446038> & <https://bb.ringingworld.co.uk/view.php?id=1446013>. The first QP on 12, containing 10 members of the National 12 bell squad, was going to take a while longer (Sunday 12th Sept) but was well worth the wait! <https://bb.ringingworld.co.uk/view.php?id=1459825>

Despite regular practices and the home advantage, things didn't quite go according to plan on the big day as nerves seemed to play a part for the Norman Tower team. Thankfully all was not lost however with the Ipswich SMLT team making up for the disappointment with a magnificent performance earning them a place in the final at Guildford.

The people (and the beer).

None of this could have happened without the extensive planning and preparation before the event and the support of a team of stewards on the day. The Cathedral staff and volunteers were also hugely supportive of the whole event providing extra tours of the Cathedral and Tower and taking part in the proceedings with Philip Banks (Canon Precentor) providing a warm welcome and helping with the draw and Joe Hawes (Dean) reiterating how important bells and bellringers are to the life of the Church.

Joan Garrett was the crucial link between the National 12 bell organisers and the Norman Tower committee of herself, Tim Hart and Julian Colman. She responded to emails, answered/asked questions, wrote up the action

points and notes from the numerous planning meetings held, was the 'face' of the host tower on the day AND rang in the competition! Tim provided the technical support liaising with the competition team to set up the Hawkear digital sound recording for the practice sessions and the sound feed for the judges on the day. This involved using a tennis ball to get a cable from the top of the Norman Tower across the ancient rooftops of Bury St Edmunds to where the judges were based! Julian, as Tower Captain, set the ball rolling with his initial suggestion that the Norman Tower should apply to be a host tower but also had the enviable task of liaising with the local CAMRA members as they worked out the logistics of providing the all-important supplies of beer!

Seventeen event stewards, clad in vivid orange and mainly from the North West District of the Suffolk Guild, were on hand throughout the day and without them this event would not have been possible. Aply led by Pat Lees, the volunteers kept the judges fed and watered, provided information to team members and their supporters, sold the essential beer tokens and escorted the teams into and out of the tower. The beer was supplied by the Norman Tower ringer's local pub (The Dove); 400 pints (beer mainly but some cider) were served in the Cathedral by the CAMRA volunteers and, most importantly, it didn't run out and made a profit (which went to charity)!

Norman Tower band



Photo: Ben Keating

(Band order, clockwise from bottom right)

Treble	Cath Colman
2	Joan Garrett
3	Clare Veal
4	Chris Munnings
5	Ian Holland
6	Mike Cowling
7	David Stanford
8	Julian Colman
9	Tim Hart (C)
10	Andrew Stone
11	Rowan Wilson
Tenor	Craig Gradidge

St Mary le Tower, Ipswich band



Photo: Amanda Richmond/David Potts

(Band order, clockwise from bottom right)

Treble	David Sparling
2	Laura Davies
3	Lucy Williamson
4	Nigel Gale
5	Ruth Munnings
6	Katharine Salter
7	Colin Salter (C)
8	Richard Munnings
9	David Potts
10	Jonathan Williamson
11	Nigel Newton
Tenor	Ian Culham

Moving forward, this event has no doubt put 12 bell ringing back on the map in Suffolk and, as Ipswich start to prepare for the final in June, members of the Norman Tower team have already assisted them with their first practice as some band members were unavailable. Fielding two Suffolk teams was a big challenge and required a lot of new connections to be established and maintained in order to hold the regular independent practices. The fact that four Suffolk ringing families were involved in the eliminator (mother & son, father and daughter (both Ipswich), husbands & wives (both teams) and brothers (one in each team)) obviously helped but hopefully this experience will provide a robust base from which to build a stronger alliance between the two towers who proudly represented Suffolk!