

Muffled bells for a Queen, joyful bells for a King

By

Elizabeth Johnson

On Thursday, September 8th the news was looking serious for the Queen's health, prompting an immediate email to St John's ringers about the protocols for bells in the event of 'Operation London Bridge' being enacted. This document had been prepared some time ago by The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers in conjunction with The Church of England. As the sad news hit the world after 6 pm we knew we would need to be ringing muffled bells at midday the next day.



Flag Halfmast

Early Friday morning Rex Corfield raised the flag to half-mast. The muffles were fixed to the bell clappers by Ian Redway and Elizabeth Johnson. This entails crawling underneath the downward hanging, so safe, bells and buckling on the eight leather muffles. The bells were then raised to the mouth-up position ready to ring out at midday. Here the convenience and expertise in all things internet by Roger Booth came into its own as a sufficient number of ringers assembled in the tower to ring at exactly Noon. All our ringers contributed including Lynda Singleton, a new recruit, and a visitor, Peter Richardson. Simple rounds and call changes were rung for 30 minutes, the bells sounding loudly for 8 blows then a soft echo for the next 8 blows. The ringing ended with the lightest bell stopping followed by the others in turn until only the Tenor bell was sounding its sad toll one blow loud, one blow soft. Some of St John's went on to Cheriton to assist the band there to do their ringing for the Queen.

On Friday evening a normal practice was held with the bells half muffled. At 9 pm the bells were lowered to the safe mouth down position. Saturday 10th was a Day of Proclamation. Following protocol, the flag was raised to full height and the muffles were removed. This meant we could ring happily with the bells open for the wedding of Sarah Williams and Nicholas Jaques and for King Charles III of course. The bells were rung open for the Sunday morning service.



Clapper fully muffled

After 4 o'clock Rex lowered the flag to half-mast and the bells were fully muffled – muffles put on both sides of the clapper except for the Tenor which was only muffled on one side.

St John's bells rang for the service of Prayer and Reflection at 6 pm sounding softly 12345678 1234567 then a loud blow from the tenor, giving a solemn tolling effect. This was heard again on Friday 16th practice night and Sunday 18th morning service. This type of ringing, fully muffled with the Tenor open at back stroke, is only done at the death of a Monarch.

On Monday 19th St John's bells rang out solemnly for an hour prior to the funeral service in Westminster Abbey. When this service ended ringers rang at Old Alresford with the bells half muffled. St Mary's only has six muffles so were unable to ring fully muffled. St John's has two sets. Cheriton bells were rung before the Westminster service and Tichborne bells after the service. At St John's a quarter peal of 1288 changes, Grandsire Triples, was rung in 51 minutes prior to the committal service at St Georges chapel.



Quarter Peal Band

L to R: Tony Ayres, Sue Smith, Elizabeth Johnson, Frances Warwick, Ian Redway, Andrew Booth, Roger Booth, Rob Hatch

With the bells lowered all the ringers went home to quietly contemplate on a job well done.

It just needed Ian and Elizabeth to crawl under the bells again on Tuesday to remove all the muffles – 15 at St John's, 6 at St Mary's. In all we crawled under the bells 6 times putting on 29 muffles, taking off 29 muffles in all. No ringers or bells were harmed in this whole complicated operation but two of the muffles will need to be repaired as they were worn through.



Worn Muffle

Pictures by Elizabeth Johnson