

A visit to the Devon Six Bell Final

By Simon Linford

On Saturday 11th June, Combeinteignhead were victorious in the Devon Association's 6 Bell Major Final, the signature event in the call change ringing calendar. They did the best job of mastering a tricky ring of bells to carry away the coveted Ross Shield, which they also won the last time this contest was held in 2019. The team from Shaugh Prior, whilst placed third in the overall standings, collected the cup for the 'Top Ringing' of the day.

This was my first experience of a Devon call change competition and a Devon Association Festival. I have become more and more interested in this style of ringing and the singular focus on striking that it generates. My local band in Moseley is humouring me in this pursuit, and we are planning an open competition of our own in June next year.



My day started quite early given it was an afternoon event, with a 5.45 alarm and 6.40 departure, but I was to drop Eleanor at the station for her day trip to Bolton, and I had targeted Severn Bridge parkrun to break my journey. Charlie was going to have a day shopping in Birmingham with a friend, and after explaining that "after lunch we are going to hit Primark", a five hour trip to Devon or even a day in Bolton suddenly looked like particularly good options.

The tower selected for this contest was Molland – quite a small village on the edge of Exmoor that is home to more cows than people. This was a village with few facilities and even less mobile reception. The landlady of the pub wouldn't give up the Wi-Fi password in case it slowed down her card machine. However, in terms of a venue for a six bell striking contest it had the necessary ingredients, namely a church with a ring of six, a pub next door with Exmoor Ale, a wonderful view, and sunshine.

Before the competition got underway, another important part of the Festival awaited – the church service. The small and beautiful church, whose interior has escaped any Victorian or later re-ordering, packed in a large number of ringers, their heads just visible over the tops of the high box pews. The particularly rousing rendition of the hymns was noted by the Reverend Penny Lawson, who said "the church has not heard such singing in years". We had two solid Victorian classics, and a fine ringers' hymn composed specially for the Association in 1949. The service finished



with both the politically acceptable verses of the National Anthem - there was not to be any 'frustration of knavish tricks' today despite the great rivalries present.

I am quite used to not being able to write legible notes by the time it comes to the results of major striking competitions, but it is new to be in such a position at the draw. However a combination of strong Devon accents, team names I didn't recognise anyway, and the general hubbub of excitement, left my scribbled attempt at noting the running order looking like a delinquent four year old's spelling test.



Eleven teams were contesting the Major Final after one late drop-out, with seven teams having competed in each of the North and South Devon Qualifiers a month earlier. The Devon call change community has been particularly badly hit by the pandemic and is only slowly recovering. Pre pandemic the qualifiers would have attracted 12-14 teams each. This year only seven teams entered each of those competitions, so with five teams going through to the Major Final the qualifiers were just a warm up, especially as the two winners of the ensuing Minor Final (held between losing teams in the qualifiers) would go through as well!

Apparently in days of yore there would have been up to 40 teams in the qualifiers, but such a change in participation is not unique to Devon - more an indication of how strong a culture there has been of competition ringing.

For those not familiar with Devon's call change competitions, there are a few differences to what you might expect from competitions in the method world. There is no practising on the bells, either during the 12 months before the contest or on the day itself. Each team rings their peal straight off – you get used to your bell while raising it up, and maybe curse it on the way down. The piece of ringing, which comprises a raise, the fixed set of changes called 60 on 3rds, and the lower at the end is called a 'peal'. The peals are timed because you have to ring for a minimum of 15 minutes irrespective of how many rows you end up ringing, and are disqualified for not doing so. Four judges mark faults which are then simply added together and divided by four, with a 'Scrutineer' responsible for the adding and production of results. All teams get a very fine certificate, which you see adorning the walls of many a Devon tower.

Immediately before the service I got the opportunity to experience the bells myself by being invited into the Judges Peal. This was only my second exposure to proper Devon call change ringing after joining the Kingsteignton outing last year. I acquitted myself pretty well, and got first-hand experience of the third bell which was to become such a factor in the competition proper.

You may remember the German pentathlete at the Tokyo Olympics who was reduced to tears when the horse assigned to her by the event organisers refused to jump, sending her from potential gold medal position to 31st. The same was felt by most ringers of the third, which resolutely refused to strike or 'speak' at the start of the raise and end of the lower, perhaps giving the judges something of a dilemma of how to mark a missing bell, and its consequential effect on the others.

Ringing later in striking competitions is generally acknowledged to be favourable for those teams with high performance aspirations. It is a combination of the accepted phenomenon of 'serial order effect' which conspires to make judges more lenient as competitions wear on, and the removal of nerves from teams who have been able to enjoy a little light lubrication. Serial order effect is not about judges getting tired though, they do that as well – it is caused by how our minds remember

and compare similar things heard in sequence. This was analysed in the context of the 12 bell contest by a series of articles in *The Ringing World* by Liz Orme.

It became clear quite early at Molland that this contest was going to be won and lost in the raise and lower. Thirteen or fourteen minutes of the finest call change ringing could be blown into insignificance by the minute or so of getting the bells up and down, but such is the nature of this form of competition. Bells are raised quickly, and you can see why. The later teams were listening intently to the early peals, noting the issues being faced by three and five in particular – possibly referring to their previous notes on the bells’ idiosyncrasies. Ringing later was definitely going to be an advantage.

Another factor that could affect the judges’ appreciation of the later teams was the quality and scale of the tea. Ringers’ teas can of course be a thing of legend but they are elevated to another level in North Devon. For less than the cost of a gallon of petrol, the locals of Molland, including the vicar, served up a veritable feast including (Cornish?) pasties to die for and a dazzling array of cream-based-puddings. I noted that the scones had the cream hidden under the jam, but then the layer of jam was also hidden underneath a plump strawberry. The vicar kindly wrapped up an extra large pasty in a napkin for my long journey home.

I didn’t spend all day listening intently. I spent an enjoyable hour in the London Arms drinking some excellent Exmoor Ale and discussing and comparing the approaches of the best call change teams with my experiences of ringing in the Birmingham 12 bell band. I had only met Scott Adams and Ryan Trout online during lockdown, but have come to know them through my efforts to promote this style of ringing more widely, firstly through the YouTube competition the Central Council organised early in lockdown, and now through the publication of my eBook on call change ringing (callchanges.cccbr.org.uk).



In the middle of the afternoon I did an hour’s circular walk around Molland, without meeting another human being, and I listened to what would turn out to be the winning peal while trying to find my way out of a cow field which was not on the route plan that I had designed while I still had mobile reception, and which my decidedly urban footwear was not designed for.

It was not until gone 7.30 before the ringing was over and everyone assembled in church for the results. There is no long analysis of teams’ ringing here – the scores speak for themselves. Three teams stood out – the three that I had noted on my initial draw list as the ones to watch. Combeinteignhead’s victory was put down not least to David Burgoyne’s quick mastery of the third.

1 st	28 ¼	Peal 8	Combeinteignhead A
2 nd	30	Peal 5	Down St Mary
3 rd	30 ¼	Peal 11	Shaugh Prior
4 th	46	Peal 6	Bow
5 th	51 ¾	Peal 2	Sampford Courtney A
6 th	57	Peal 7	South Brent
7 th	67	Peal 1	Stoke Gabriel
Jt 8 th	77 ½	Peals 3 & 4	Tiverton St Paul and Sampford Courtney B
10 th	81 ¾	Peal 9	East Anstey
11 th	94 ¼	Peal 10	Combeinteignhead B

It was a shame that the difficulty of the bells meant that this was not the showcase of striking that it usually is and promised to be, with only the top three teams really producing the sort of striking I was expecting to hear. For me it was too much about the raise and the fall, both of which were dominated by the bells' difficulty. This pinnacle of the Devon call change calendar is often won by teams with fault counts in the single figures, which given how many six bell rows you can ring in 15 minutes, is remarkable accuracy.

As the day drew to a close, I was sitting on a grass verge, discussing call change ringing with old and new friends, and I noticed my foot was tapping to the metronomic and measured beat of Shaugh Prior's peal. I never tap my feet to ringing! This style of ringing is growing on me.

Simon Linford



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