

English Heritage and bells – responses to Alan Hughes

Martin D. Fellows of Stourbridge:

I share Alan Hughes' concern about the involvement of English Heritage in bell work (p.128). With the passing of each week one hears of, or indeed experiences, further examples of the 'different agenda' approach which this unelected state-funded body exerts in the bell restoration field. Perhaps ringers should be asking their local Members of Parliament to raise with Government Ministers the problems they experience at the hands of E.H.? After all, money raised from us, the tax payers, funds its activities.

Of equal concern is the tendency of some Diocesan Advisory Committees to do nothing about advising in faculty matters until they know the views of English Heritage. On the basis of this approach they might as well abrogate their advisory functions in favour of English Heritage at the very outset.

As for 'Diocesan Bell Advisors', the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991 does not even contemplate the appointment or the existence of such a person, still less define their function. It would be interesting to know the legal authority for their appointment and the terms of same. And are ringing organisations and bellfounders and bellhangers always consulted about the appointment of such persons? I think not. The DAC is certainly empowered in law to appoint 'consultants' (for what particular purpose is not defined in the Measure), but the now frequently-used term 'Diocesan Bell Advisor' is tending to bring with it an air of independent authority in bell matters, which is misleading, factually incorrect, and dangerous. Correction and clarification is urgently needed here.

What is also a matter of deep concern is that it is sometimes the case that either the members of the DAC, or the 'Diocesan Bell Advisor', do not carry indemnity insurance cover in respect of the services they provide to those who seek faculties. There is no statutory protection for members or consultants of DAC's, and the absence of insurance cover for them arises despite the recommendation made in the Code of Practice issued by the General Synod as a result of the passing of the 1991 Measure.

It is also important to remember that E.H., the DAC, or the 'Diocesan Bell Advisor' do not grant faculties for bell work. That function is the sole prerogative of the consistory court – see the case of *Re St Andrew, Cheadle Hulme [1944] 1 WLR 880 (Chester Consistory Court: Lomas Ch)* where the DAC got it very wrong. It should also be borne in mind that no one has an absolute right to the grant of a faculty – that is a matter for the discretion of the consistory court. Further, petitioners for a faculty are not obliged to ask the DAC for any advice on their proposals if they do not wish to. The point is specifically reserved in rule 3 of the Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 1992, and it means that petitioners can seek advice from whomsoever or wheresoever they wish. This provision is however often conveniently overlooked. I wonder why?

Has the time not arrived that the Central Council should focus on these important questions and assert the voices of ringing in the debate? The desire of ringers, bellfounders, and bellhangers is surely only to see that bell restoration work is carried out in a sensible and cost-effective manner and as speedily as possible. After all, ringers are frequently the major funding providers for the work.

Can we have an early statement from the Central Council, please, which addresses the current issues in this field?

Robert B. Smith of Eayre & Smith Ltd.:

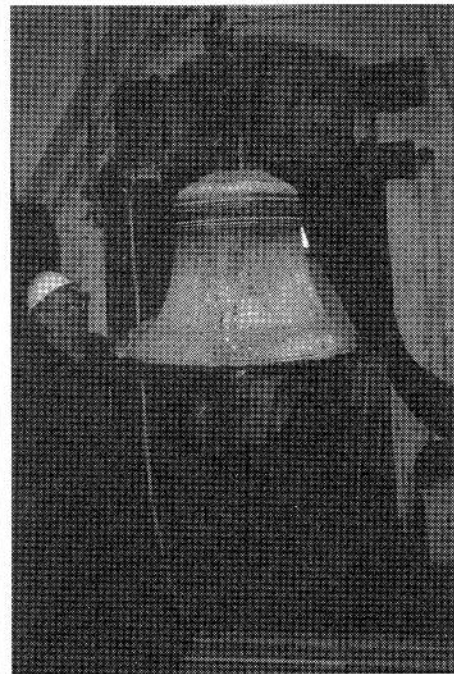
There is no doubt in my mind that the factual contents of Alan Hughes' letter are correct, but it would be easy to misinterpret some of them. My understanding is that churches decide who their contractor will be and this may not have been decided at the time of an offer of funding from the Millennium Commission. At least one project which we understood was to have been done by us is now being done by another company. It could be implied that Eayre & Smith have been favoured in the awarding of Millennium Commission funded projects, and that projects in the south of England have been neglected. We do not believe either to have been the case; our projects are widely spread in England, Scotland and Wales.

Whitechapel's recent experience in being short of work is the same as ours was in 1996-97 when projects we had expected to start were delayed as churches waited to see if they would get funding from the Commission. But for the fact that we had a considerable amount of export work to Australia and the U.S.A., we would not now be in business. I am in no doubt that in my particular case, the onset of angina is directly attributable to the stress and tiredness to which Alan Hughes refers at the end of paragraph 4 of his letter. Our lack of work in 1996-97, despite doing over 200 inspections/reports/quotations resulted in a substantial financial loss which wiped out the profits we had made in the previous three years.

The looming problem of a 'hidden agenda' by English Heritage is one which should concern us all, and Alan Hughes is very courageous to address it, as it could alienate those who will in future hold the purse strings. In 1993 the Central Council for Church Bellringers, English Heritage and we 'in the trade' (with Alan Hughes as our negotiator) were jointly responsible with the Council for the Care of Churches in producing the new Code of Practice for the Conservation of Bells and Bellframes. At that time we believed that we had the best compromise between conservation and the practical requirements of churches and those who are required to ring the bells week-by-week. Since then English Heritage, who administer lottery funded projects, have imposed additional constraints so that none of us now know where we stand. Bellfounders and bellhangers can no longer base their report and recommendations on what the Code of Practice says; we have to guess at the possible reaction of English Heritage which is completely unpredictable.

Most readers will not be aware that English Heritage have appointed their own group of bell advisers, some of whom also act in that capacity for their DAC. They, we are told, have been briefed to be looking for preservation and conservation, with a presumption against retuning bells, irrespective of the wishes of local people who have to listen to them. I could expand on this but here is not the place or time to do so. I do wish to endorse what Alan Hughes has said in the final three paragraphs of his letter. This is a subject which needs to be discussed as a matter of urgency at the Central Council Meeting in Dublin in May.

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This quarter peal at West Malling was the last on the bells just before they were dismantled on 31 January and taken to Whitechapel for retuning, new fittings and rehanging. The near local band included three 16 year olds, as well as Peter Carter who has served this tower for 40 years as tower captain. In addition, one person rang their first quarter.

We were very fortunate in being successful in our bid to the Millennium Commission's "Ringing in the Millennium" project. The last significant work on the bells was undertaken more than 10 years ago and they were becoming increasingly difficult to ring. Therefore, being able to rehang them will ensure that the bells will remain in a ringable state for at least another century, continuing to provide a service for the local community. KATHY HOWARD

West Malling, Kent. 23 Jan, 1260 PB Doubles: Paul Williams 1, Peter Carter 2, Kathy Howard 3, Jo Sutch 4, David Kirkcaldy (C) 5, James King (1st Q) 6, Nick Crutchfield 7, Pat King 8. With 7-6-8 cover Last quarter on the bells before removal for rehanging.

Towcester branch outing

Thirty members of the branch set off by coach driven by the Ringing Master in the direction of Oxford on 22nd November 1997. The morning started at Islip with good Stedman Triples and Bristol Surprise, before moving on to Appleton where we visited Whites of Appleton. We are grateful to Brian White and Graham Clifton who showed us around their bell works and then let us ring on the Balscote ring! This proved quite a culture shock for most of us, and I have to say the youngsters put us older ones to shame; however we did manage some surprise major. Lunch was taken in the 'Plough' at Appleton. During the afternoon we enjoyed good ringing at Farringdon, Buckland and Cumnor before retiring to the 'Shelswell Inn' where we ate well, and the younger members were able to enjoy games of pool and darts before returning home.

A good day out, made more pleasing by the number of younger ringers who came and obviously had a good time, and are so full of enthusiasm. We are all grateful to the towers who entertained us and especially to Brian and Graham at 'Whites'. R.Y.