

## Rayleigh has hundreds of clubs and societies. Each month we'll be taking a look at one of them. In this edition we head up the Belfry and meet the

### Rayleigh Company of Change Ringers

**Have you ever passed Holy Trinity Church on a Tuesday evening, or Sunday morning and wondered how the glorious sound of the ringing bells is created?**

Well the truth is, it takes a lot of dedication, heaps of concentration and something of a mathematical mind as I discovered when I joined the Rayleigh Company of Change Ringers for one of their practice sessions.

Before a single bell is rung the first task is to climb 44 steps up the tight confines of the 15th century tower to the ringing chamber, just below the clock. Above us are two more rooms – the clock chamber and the bell chamber, where the eight bells wait silently ready to be rung into life.

Seven of the bells date from 1925 when they were recast, but one, the No 5 Bell, was made in 1509, the year of Henry VIII's coronation and it's sound has been heard above the streets of Rayleigh for more than 500 years. At the bottom of the steps lays an even older bell, a rare pre-reformation example cast in 1415, the same year as the Battle of Agincourt. Now cracked, it is no longer rung, but an extraordinary reminder of how far the English tradition of bell ringing goes back.



**The oldest bell rung at Rayleigh dates from the time Henry VIII ascended to the throne in 1509**

As the ropes are unfurled (the colourful part which is held is called the sally, the end of the rope, the tail end) I'm told that the heaviest bell hanging above us weighs in at 16 hundred-weight, about the same as a small car.

It's no wonder

then that safety is paramount. As I sit watching I'm promptly told to uncross my legs. One stray loop of rope around my ankle and I could find myself dangling from the rafters.



“There is a fine control on the rope, you should be able to feel where the bell is,” Penny Drayson tells me as the bell-ringers form a circle and a marvellous sound erupts above our heads as clangers hit bronze. “It's a cross between playing a musical instrument and riding a bike.”

The Rayleigh Company of Change Ringers practice every Tuesday from 7.30pm to 9.00pm with new members taught earlier in the evening. Eighteen-year old David Buckley is one of those who has joined the hobby. After six months of training he's just started joining the circle for some of the easier compositions, or methods as they are



**Steeple keeper Tony Lowe who looks after the bells and the church clock**

called. The tunes have wonderfully English names, such as ‘Grandsire’ and ‘Westminster Surprise’ and as the bells are rung a whole new language emerges with shouts of ‘Bob’ and ‘Single’ flying across the room, referring to changes in the order in which the bells are rung.



#### **Ringing the bells at the right time and in the right order takes concentration**

Barbara Leigh, visiting from Wickford, tells me the beauty of bell-ringing is that it is a hobby you can take all over the world. She has rung bells in Washington DC, Hawaii and Boston, Massachusetts. Some people even take part in ‘tower-grabbing’ she tells me, ticking off towers they've rung, much as twitchers tick off birds they've spotted.

What's evidently clear is this is a skill that takes time and dedication to get right. Each different ‘method’ follows a distinct numerical pattern, that needs to be memorised. These are published in books and at first glance look more like some kind of secret code, than lists of numbers, which if followed correctly, will stop people in the street in sheer wonder.

“It's a very public performance,” says Sheena Booth. “People may not recognise what we are playing, but they know if it's good or bad. It's the kind of hobby where you never learn everything.”

There are currently four people learning to ring the bells, including a 12-year-old, but the Company are looking for new members. Once skilled, ringers also play at services on Sunday and occasions such as weddings.



**Eighteen year old David Buckley is shown the ropes**

**For more information on the Rayleigh Change Ringers check out their website [www.rayleighbells.co.uk](http://www.rayleighbells.co.uk)**