

We learnt how to ring by standing on a box. Me, my three brothers, my sister, Dorothy, Ron Goodman, Tony Lane, Les Goodman, John Richards and a whole host of other village boys and girls who came under my father's thrall.

He would stand beside us, eights to 12 year olds, on Monday nights in the ringing chamber atop that suicidal ladder, to catch the sally and save us from some unimaginable misfortune, perhaps a cross between the garret or the gallows.

We all learned to ring like that, patiently, methodically. No one ever came to grief, save one: in my sister's case, the blood mingled with the tears. She scratched her nose so badly missing that errant rope she never ever rang bells again, those on front doors excepted.

We were a family team of ringers – not quite polished enough to call ourselves campanologists. Our most advanced method was a course of 120 changes of Grandsire Doubles. Afficionados of the art might have called it coarse bellringing, but Harry Meredith, my father, our ringing and choirmaster, was a stickler for discipline.

Whatever we rang, we struck immaculately. Sometimes we could strike with the precision of a Swiss watch, then he'd say, "Let's do that again".

On Christmas Day, when the BBC's old Home Service ran 10 minutes of recorded bells (never ours) from around our nations, my father would scoff, "We can strike better than that". On our better days, so we could. If the bells of Vatican City or Bethlehem were included in the programme, as they invariably were, those "foreigners" really were quite beyond the pale; (a) they were at the natural disadvantage of being foreign and (b) they merely "toll" but never properly rang their bells like us Clunbury professionals.

In those times, in Clunbury, campanological chauvinism was rife.

We were never far from the bells, from the Church, from the sacred and the secular. Our family bellringing team comprised my father, my brothers, Charlton, Ivor and Roger, my brother-in-law, Martin Phillips and his brother –in-law, Albert Lane, our next door neighbour at Dutch Cottage, once the village pub called the Pig & Whistle.

We rang for morning and evening services, we rang muffled peels when a royal or a prime minister died, we rang joyous peels for weddings, for VE and VJ day, for coronations – indeed for any excuse under the Clunbury Parish sun.

If Clunbury and Clunton, Clungunford and Clun were the quietest places under the sun by definition of A E Houseman's oft misquoted sonnet, we vigorously set about changing all that.

As the ringleader in the literal sense, my father was responsible for most of the clamour and the cacophony. When he wasn't ringing at Clunbury he was ringing at Clun or Clungunford, Hopesay or Wistanstow, Stokesay or Bishop's Castle, Lydbury North or Ludlow.

My mother claimed he loved his ringing more than he loved her. She was a perceptive woman who kept her feet firmly on the ground while my father's were often aloft in some distant spire.

There was no denying my father's devotion – one might even say obsession – with bells and belltowers in South Shropshire. He could reel off the number of steps you climbed into every ringing chamber within a radius of 20 echo-sounding miles; give you the sonic key in which the bells were registered and describe a short history on their development, down to the foundry in which they were cast or re-cast.

All the life of our village, seemingly, revolved round the church. You either rang the bells, sang in the choir, got wed at the altar or fertilised, ultimately, the flora in the churchyard.

We never really needed an excuse to start ringing. It was endemic – born and bred into each and every one of us.

At the Christmas season it became manic. We rang on the evening of Christmas Eve to announce the coming of the festival to our village kinfolk. We crawled out of bed at 6.30am on Christmas Day, summoned from our slumbers by my father rapping with the brass poker on the black oak beams of our living room, calling "Roger, Ivor, Michael", his words repeated by our African grey parrot, Joe, whose only mistake was to intone the name of brother Roger with a hard "g" sound, stupid bird!

Thus we'd awaken the village in case they'd missed our intentions the night before – so we rang at 7am and again for Christmas Matins.

But the occasion we enjoyed most of all in our campanological tour-de-force was our equivalent of Last Night at the Proms – New Year's Eve.

It was the vicar's solemn duty to invite the band of ringers to his lounge at 10pm for sherry, coffee, mince pies, left over Christmas cake and small talk.

At 11.30pm we'd climb that vertical ladder from the vestry to the ringing chamber and for half an hour announce to our world that the old year was on its last legs. It was a deliberate and practised ritual, the ringing slowing as midnight approached.

Some of us, who hadn't made it to the vicarage, but had been diverted by the liquid blandishments of the Kangaroo or the Hundred House, would make it with a minute or two to spare before the magic hour.

The vicar would intone a prayer, then a member of the team would ring the tenor bell for 12 measured strokes to herald the New Year; occasionally one of us would strike 13 o'clock – a stigma equivalent to clapping after the first movement of Beethoven's second symphony in the Albert Hall – though it was an event which usually went unnoticed by everyone else, especially in Bird's House, next door to the bell tower where my mother, her daughter, daughters-in-law, numerous friends and kinfolk were preparing the festivities.

We summoned the first half hour of the New Year with a furious and frenetic burst of ringing activity. Even at this time in deep mid-winter, we'd sweat a little from our exertions.

Others sweated more. The libations consumed in previous hours seeped through the pores – usually of those ephemeral once-a-year ringers who, as if on a pilgrimage to Mecca, always turned up for New Year's Eve at Clunbury Parish Church. They'd stagger and sway up our

vertical iron ladder, like old salts clinging to the rigging in a Force Niner. We never lost one, but there were a few apocryphal near misses.

At 12.30am the celebrations began. We'd all retire to Bird's House where mother and the girls, who'd been cooking, baking and basting all the long day to set out an enormous buffet – cold turkey, roast beef, chicken, ham, sausage rolls, salads, trifles, mince pies and the rest for our festivities, which went on until a grey dawn broke over Oaker Hill.

We'd sing and recite, tell jokes and tales we'd heard a legion times before, play the hand bells, first foot at neighbouring homes with a lump of coal and a glass of Scotch, certain in our hearts that the Scots themselves had no better time than us.

My father's cousin, Tom Davies from Clun – whose principle claim to fame was that he once drove a taxi in New York where he had Al Capone as a fare-paying passenger – would shake hands with everyone, practising his pincer-like grip which brought tears to the eyes. He tried it once too often when he offered his hand to my blacksmith brother, Ivor, and never tried it again!

Two hours sleep, then wearying and half inebriate still, we'd stagger out of bed to go to work, for those were the early post-war years of 1945/46/47 and after, when New Year's Day was a day for work. It took the edge off the night before, but never dimmed the memory.

Albert Lane, who to this day at the age of 80, still plays the organ at Clunbury, oiled the bells and wound the clock. They ran like a Rolls Royce, needing to be maintained with precision, for they were seldom silent.

Before Christmas we'd take the hand bells out of their box in the tower and tour the parish playing familiar favourites, The Bells of St Mary's, O Little Town of Bethlehem and others to raise funds for the parish church. In the clear night air of a frost-laden Shropshire, no sweeter sound ever broke our peaceful valley. We were, truly, Summoned by Bells.

13.9.87

We believe that this was written by Michael Meredith