**Looking After the Bells**

1. **Introduction**

This note has been prepared to give people an overview of what needs to be looked after and the roles and organisations likely to be involved. (See appendix checklists)

Unfortunately, bells tend to be heard and not seen and those with legal responsibility for them may have little technical or ringing knowledge to apply to their care. They are also likely to have limited resources for bell inspection or repair. They may even be inclined towards that cessation is the easiest way to avoid risk. The note therefore indicates how to care for the bells, how risks may be effectively mitigated and the steps which those involved may take to show that they have acted responsibly.

This note does not deal with the actual ringing of the bells or teaching of ringing but stops at the point where the installation can be shown to be safe for ringing to take place and indicates the inspections and records required.

1. **Background**

Bells are expensive, valuable musical instruments, often with long histories and many stakeholders with an interest in their preservation. Primarily here we are considering bells in Churches hung for full circle ringing but many of the principles will apply to all bells as in all cases they will have an owner with various statutory responsibilities for their safe management.

In the case of Church bells, responsibility will normally be with the incumbent (if any), Churchwardens and Church Council. Increasingly, however, Churches are being closed, possibly passed into the care of bodies such as the Churches Conservation Trust or may always have been essentially private as part of estates such as those managed by the National Trust or independent Trustees.

Hopefully these owners will have put in place procedures for the safe management of their assets but anybody planning to ring at a tower without a regular band would be well advised to make appropriate checks before doing so.

1. **Insurance**

Normally a building owner will have insurance policies in place to cover their responsibility to persons using the building or employed to work in it. These policies, especially those issued by Ecclesiastical Insurance, may include particular stipulations about how bells are to be managed. It is for the owners and users to satisfy themselves that such requirements are fully complied with and considered as part of maintenance and inspection arrangements.

1. **Inspection Roles**

Open CofE Churches will normally be subject to Quinquennial (5 yearly) inspections by an approved architect or surveyor who may not be a skilled ringer. They will only rarely ensure that an inspection is conducted whilst the bells are actually being rung. It is therefore quite likely that potentially dangerous faults may be missed and in any case, much can happen in the 5 years between visits.

A prudent Church Council may also put in place some formal maintenance regime with a bell founder or hanger but it is likely this will focus primarily on frames, bells and fittings and will often not consider wider aspects of the bell tower which the bell hanger might reasonably expect the Quinquennial to cover. Depending on the individual conducting the review and their understanding of interfaces it is easy to see how things may be missed. Fortunately, many towers will also have access to a “bell advisor” possibly through a territorial or Diocesan ringers association but often with limitations to what the “advisor” can cover.

Many “advisors” are volunteers who whilst often better placed (relative to non-ringing Churchwardens and PCC members) to inspect towers and bells are often limited by personal experience. There is no formal professional organisation ensuring they work to consistent recognised standards. Many may be retired from previous professional Architectural or Technical roles but may not be fully up to date with the latest legislative changes.

These advisors take many forms:

1. A local or visiting ringer who notices a difference, strange noise etc.,
2. A local steeple keeper who regularly checks the bells,
3. Somebody who comes to help you work out what is causing an issue,
4. An inspecting member of the local Guild’s Towers & Belfries Committee or a Belfry Advisor (if no T&B committee) within the local Guild representing the Ringing Exercise.
5. An inspecting member of the CCCBR Stewardship and Management Working Group (SMWG) representing the Ringing Exercise.
6. A Bell Advisor to the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), Church Buildings Council (CBC) or Council for the Care of Churches (CCC) representing the local Diocese and the CofE
7. A Bell Advisor to Historic England
8. A professional (architect, structural engineer or bell-hanger) who is knowledgeable about bells, acting in a professional capacity. Answerable to the owner of the bells.

Identifying that work may be required is likely to come from a-e with f-g being relevant to how that work is then organised and delivered.

1. **What should be covered**

This document is not intended to give a full list of everything to cover during an inspection as much specific advice and many checklists are available and specific local circumstances will need to be considered. For example, a tower undertaking a lot of teaching may need to inspect stay and slider condition much more frequently than one with a small band of competent and experienced ringers. A well managed tower will also adjust inspection intervals to reflect the frequency and duration of ringing and known condition issues such as rope deterioration where age or climatic conditions may significantly impact remaining safe life.

Taking the advisor list above in turn:

1. For everybody’s safety it is wise for anyone with a concern to know how to tactfully raise it. Such concerns may not just be limited to the bells but might encompass issues such as failed lights, loose steps etc. If there is nobody amongst the ringers to whom a concern might be addressed (e.g. when visiting a tower during a ringing outing) it may be necessary to make an approach to whoever allowed the visit. Where towers have fallen silent, key holders granting access may have little ringing knowledge. In such cases it would be wise for outing organisers to allow time for a quick check of bells and ropes before ringing commences.
2. Many towers may have difficulty finding suitably skilled persons to undertake the full range of steeple keeping duties as listed in the attached tower checklist. Where this is the case, the PCC should be asked to either put in place a maintenance contract with an appropriate professional or arrangements should be made to involve a suitable person from a neighbouring tower. Where there is a local ringing Guild, they may be able to assist in identifying somebody to help. Even where a tower has a Steeple Keeper it may be prudent to invite the proverbial “second pair of eyes” to take an occasional look. Steeple Keepers should be encouraged to enhance their skills whenever possible. Many Guilds will offer maintenance courses.
3. Such individuals may be invaluable as a “second pair of eyes” rather than just asking for the narrowest possible help (e.g. problem with rope wear on the ..) try to encourage such helpers to have a good look around whilst you have the opportunity.
4. From this point onwards it is likely we’re dealing with a response to a problem identified by a, b or c above. Whilst many Guilds offer general inspections and maintenance award schemes these are likely to be managed via formal process and will be undertaken to a formal format commissioned between bell owners and the advisors. The outcome of such reports will then lead to the involvement of e to h if required.
5. **Conflicts of interest**

Inevitably the condition of ropes and fittings involves an element of subjective judgement which could present two opposite extremes:

* A paid inspector with an interest in undertaking repairs may take a more cautious view to reduce any risk to them of complaint if something fails and in the hope of being asked to correct issues identified for a fee,
* A volunteer, keen or local ringer aware of the owner’s precarious finances may wish to extract as much use as possible from the bells at minimal expense or perhaps worse, wish to score a peal or quarter before condition stops further ringing.

There is no easy solution to these issues, but it is suggested that if any doubts exist then a truly independent further report may be needed.

1. **Record Keeping**

Many steeple keepers may have been in post for a long time and volunteers may be hard to find, however, in the event of any incidents which may involve the Church Insurers having a record of the inspections undertaken showing what was covered and when may be very helpful. A logbook kept within a ringing room or otherwise accessible place may also be useful in allowing points raised by anybody under (a) above to be recorded and actions taken recorded. It can be very helpful to have actual records rather than hazy memories of who may have said what to whom at some random time in the past

1. **Permission to do work**

Bells have several different groups of people with an interest in them ranging from their owners to the local community who are the audience. In the case of Church bells there are formal processes known as Faculties which are used to control what work is done, when and how. These vary between the Churches of England, Wales and Scotland and are managed within the local Diocese. They are broadly the equivalent of the planning and listed building approvals administered by local authorities. Faculty rules can be found via the appropriate Church websites. The rules recognise that a number of maintenance and repair activities may be undertaken without a faculty as part of care and upkeep. Specific items likely to be of relevance to ringers include:

 List A1 pt. 18 the installation of bird netting to tower windows

List A3 Bells

(1) The inspection and routine maintenance of bells, bell fittings and bell frames.

(2) The repair and maintenance of clappers, crown staples (including rebushing) and bell wheels and works do not include the re-soling or rerimming of a bell wheel

(3) The repair or replacement of bell stays, pulleys, bell ropes (including in Ellacombe apparatus), rope bosses, sliders or slider gear

(4) The repainting of metal bell frames and metal bell fittings

Provided in all cases that no tonal alteration to a bell or lifting a bell from its bearings is involved.

The rules also cover permissions for many other aspects which may be relevant to ringers such as Tower Access, Flagpoles, Electrical installations and alterations or additions to fixtures (e.g. peal boards) and furnishings within ringing rooms. Anybody considering work within the Church, ringing room, bell chamber or tower should consult these rules.

Whilst ringers are likely to see works as necessary for the continuation of ringing it must be recognised that other interested parties may see preservation of historic details as more important. Early consultation with Diocesan Advisers is strongly recommended as this may avoid much wasted effort where proposed work is unlikely to gain approval but an alternative route to a desired outcome conserving historic material and details may gain approval.

1. **Conclusion**

The bells have an owner who will have statutory responsibilities for their safe management and use. This owner may, however, have limited specialist expertise and will be considerably aided if ringers can assist with delivering a local inspection and maintenance regime tailored to local circumstances. Logically the owner and maintenance providers will also seek to reach a clear understanding of their respective roles so if the owner assumes that the ringers will keep an eye on various things, then that is what they will actually do.

**Appendix**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Suggested Maintenance Schedule** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | Year: |   |  |  |
| **Weekly** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Lubricate plain bearings |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Check lighting throughout the tower |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Monthly** (+ weekly) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Oil plain bearing pulleys |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Check ropes |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Check stays for loosness and cracks |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Check for loose clappers/staples |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Test emergency lighting |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|  | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
| **Quarterly** |   |   |   |   |
| Grease ball bearing pulleys |   |   |   |   |
| Clean and check runner boards/sliders |   |   |   |   |
| Grease clappers (if applicable) |   |   |   |   |
| Check tower roof drainage |   |   |   |   |
| Check tower for water ingress |   |   |   |   |
| Check pulleys for wear and free rotation |   |   |   |   |
| Check “spider” cord |   |   |   |   |
| Clean ringing chamber |   |   |   |   |
| Check frame bolts |   |   |   |   |
| Check headstock bolts |   |   |   |   |
| Check bearing bolts |   |   |   |   |
| Check for work clapper bearings |   |   |   |   |
| Check for loose/missing wheel bolts |   |   |   |   |
| Check clock hammer(s) and spring(s) |   |   |   |   |
| Check chiming hammers |   |   |   |   |
| Check clock hammer barring apparatus |   |   |   |   |
| Check all chiming hammer ropes for fraying |   |   |   |   |
| Check for ingress of birds |   |   |   |   |
| Check stairs/ladders/traps |   |   |   |   |
| Check safety of sound control system |   |   |   |   |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Annually** |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Clean bell chamber |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Check rope chutes/bosses/guides |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| PAT test all portable appliances\* |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Check/service fire extinguishers\* |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Check clock hammer wires\* |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Check clock weights/wires/pulleys\* |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Check tower or spire structure |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Clean out dirt and rubbish |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Treat rust outbreaks |   |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Date completed  |   |  | Signed: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| \*PCC responsibility |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Every 4/5 years, plain bearings should be cleaned out if necessary and woodwork treated with preservative. |  |
| Every 10 years, metal frames should be repainted if necessary |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |