

Bells around the world will ring to mark Mandela's passing

Church bells speak to a community with a timeless voice that can often express things that words can't. This is especially so of the unique sound of English style bellringing, which evolved over 400 years ago and has spread not just across the country but around the world.

Bellringers everywhere will be responding to the news of Nelson Mandela's death by planning to ring something special in his memory. Some will ring peals (performances that take around three hours) and others will ring quarter peals, while many will ring shorter performances.

Ringling to mourn someone's death has traditionally used the sombre sound of half muffled ringing (alternate loud and soft strokes) but it has become more common to celebrate a life concluded with the brighter sound of normal unmuffled ringing.

Kate Flavell, President of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers said: 'Bellringers who climb the tower over the coming days to pay their respects to one of the greatest statesmen of our age, will be expressing the feelings of the communities who hear them ringing'.

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Background information

About English style ringing

The unique sound of English style ringing is made possible by the special way that the bells are hung. The bells swing through 360 degrees when rung – mouth up to mouth up – and they strike once on each swing. Typical bells weigh between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ ton, but some are lighter and many weigh well over a ton. Each bell is controlled by one person on the end of the bell rope some way below the bells.

The special way that the bells are hung means that only modest effort is needed to ring them in accurately timed sequences. In perfect ringing each blow is accurate to a few hundredths of a second. Ringing the bells sequentially in this way produces a more pleasing sound than the random clanging heard in many parts of the world.

Worldwide there now are over 40,000 active ringers and around 6,000 towers with bells hung in the English style. Many are in England, but there are several hundred towers with active bands of ringers across the rest of the British Isles, the Commonwealth and the USA.

'Half muffled' ringing is used for solemn occasions like Remembrance and funerals. A leather pad is fitted to one side of each bell's clapper, so that alternate strokes are loud and quiet. The alternation of bright and muted sequences produces a very dignified effect.

About change ringing

Change ringing is a unique form of performance art that requires a special blend of physical and mental skills. It provides intellectual stimulation, modest physical activity and social contact. Change ringing on tower bells hung in the English style (see above) developed in England around the end of the sixteenth century, and spread from initial centres like Cambridge, London and Norwich.

The essence of change ringing is that the order in which the bells strike continually changes, with one or more pairs of adjacent bells in the sequence swapping places at each change. Variations on this simple process enable the creation of enormous variety in performances. For example, there are 5040 different orders in which 7 bells can be struck, and even more on higher numbers.

In the late 17th century the key principles of change ringing were being developed, and ringers were making the transition from 'plain changes', where only one pair of bells swaps place at once, to what they called 'cross peals', where several pairs swap at the same time – the form of ringing that is normal today.

Change ringing is practiced on different numbers of bells from 4 to 16, with the most common being 6 and 8. The 'gold standard' performance is a peal, in which over 5000 different sequences are rung without any repetition. It takes around 3 hours, and is rung with no 'music' or other aids – everything is worked out from memory. Around

5000 peals are rung each year. Quarter peals, which take 40-50 minutes, are more popular, with around 13,000 rung each year. 'Date Touches' are also rung where the length of the performance matches the year of the event being commemorated. Date touches have to be specially composed for the event, whereas there are many standard compositions of peals and quarter peals.

About the ringing community

Bell ringers form a close-knit extended community that shares a common skill and heritage. This is reflected in the universal welcome and opportunity to ring with them that ringers around the world offer to any visiting ringer.

Most ringers belong to the band at the tower(s) where they regularly ring for church services. They also belong to the ringing society covering their area or country, each of which has from a few dozen to a couple of thousand members. The societies are affiliated to the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, which represents ringers worldwide, and provides many services to the ringing community.

Ringers commonly describe their community as 'The Exercise', a term coined in the 18th century when the young gentry took up ringing because of the physical effort required to perform with the bells installations of the day. That is no longer true, apart from very heavy bells, thanks to engineering advances in modern bell installations. The most strenuous physical exercise for most ringers is walking up the belfry stairs before they ring. Ringing itself is all about skill, poise and finesse, not about brute force.

Further information

Central Council of Church Bell Ringers: cccbr.org.uk

About change ringing: cccbr.org.uk/changeringing Discover Bellringing: bellringing.org

Ringling towers (all) dove.cccbr.org.uk Recent ringing performances: bb.ringingworld.co.uk