

Mobile Belfries – History, Present and Future

In October 2018, Greg Chu discovered bellringing. Intrigued by his first experience, he was taught to handle following ART's Learning the Ropes scheme, and in four years had passed Level 5. He went on the ART Masterclass in Birmingham in October 2023 where he rang Bristol Maximus, Stedman 15, and called a touch of Stedman Cinques.

You would be forgiven for assuming that Greg comes from a ringing family and so was one of the ringing 'nepo babies' referred to in one of my President's Blogs. But no, he is not. He does not have ringing parents, had never seen bellringing before (he didn't actually realise bells were rung by humans!), and did not have bellringing friends. He was not a choirboy, didn't come from a church family, and was not religious in any way.

In fact, Greg saw the Charmborough Ring at Cambridge University Freshers Fair. He was handed a flyer, quickly attended an introductory lesson, was taught well, and was hooked. In terms of success stories for the impact of a mobile belfry as a recruitment tool, Greg is a shining example.

Introduction

The Cambridge University Guild has got the use of the Charmborough Ring down to a fine art – a well-oiled machine for hooking in impressionable freshers and then providing a structure that not only gets them taught to handle quickly and well, but feeds them into a support structure that helps them to progress. This is a utopia which should be the envy of all.



The Charmborough Ring being dismantled following an event for the Platinum Jubilee (photo Roger Booth)



The Charmborough Ring in use at Apple Day 2019, in New Alresford, Hampshire (photo Roger Booth)

There are many other examples though of mobile belfries and mini-rings (I'll differentiate them in a moment) being successful in recruiting. A quick question in the Bellringers Facebook group found plenty of ringers who were attracted to ringing through seeing a mobile belfry or mini-ring. Stuart Box saw the Charmborough Ring at Billingshurst and was intrigued by it, five ringers at Warden Hill started after seeing the Bicycle Ring on Tour at a church event, and the first young ringers at Seal Chart school were recruited by a visit of the Maypole Bells to the school playground. In fact they have said it was definitely having a go on the Maypole Bells that made them want to start ringing!

It is because of success stories such as these that in 2021 the Central Council commissioned a new mobile belfry with a particular focus on getting bellringing in front of new audiences, and particularly into schools. The purpose of this article is to give a progress report on that project, introduce

the new Mobile Belfries Trust, and to appeal for help from the ringing community to maximise the potential of mobile belfries.

Spoiler alert! If you have got a vehicle capable of towing, have got a bit of spare time which you wouldn't mind devoting to promoting ringing, or have access to free storage space in the south Midlands, we'd love to talk to you!

Mini-rings and mobile belfries

There is no set definition of 'mobile belfry' that distinguishes it from a portable 'mini-ring'. The Mini-Ring directory website <http://www.campaniles.co.uk/MiniRingsPortable.html> lists about 30 such rings, with tenors ranging from a few ounces through to around ¾cwt. The three heavier ones listed are the Charmborough Ring, the Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry and Mobile Belfry 2.0 (new name to be revealed below!), all of which are considered by their owners to be 'proper bells', and much closer to the real bell experience than the small rings.

The smaller mini-rings are often rung with just one hand on the sally and one hand on the tail end doing the backstroke. A lack of stays (which might need replacing about every five minutes) enables the bells to swing through as much as 540 degrees, i.e. way over the balance both strokes. Indeed, it is difficult to ring very small bells like this two handed.

One of the features of the larger rings, the so-called mobile belfries, is that they encourage and enable the ringer to use both hands, with the same style as traditional tower bell ringing. There still aren't any stays, and setting the bell does consist of just letting it go right up and over at handstroke, but they can give a relatively realistic ringing experience. The new mobile belfry is realistic enough that you could comfortably teach someone to handle on the bells. The tenor feels as though it is about 3cwt.

It would only be right to note at this point that there are critics of both mini-rings and mobile belfries. Just as there are shining examples of recruitment, there are associations who have taken mobile belfries to events such as county shows with no recruitment success whatsoever, and even some who think that mini-rings give a negative impression of what ringing is really all about. There is definitely a difference between the presence of belfries at large, untargeted events where it is difficult to follow up enquiries or really give the impression of the richness of our



The Charmborough Ring on its trailer (photo Roger Booth)

art, and the use of rings in schools, universities, or for specific tower recruitment events.

However, generally the view of those involved with these portable rings is that if used correctly and with good, quick, follow-up, they can recruit ringers, and the presence of rings at any event is good for ringing public relations and awareness which might spark interest at some point in the future.

The Italian Experience

Mobile belfries are a big feature of ringing in Italy. In the early days of considering the new Mobile Belfry project, we had discussions with the Veronese Association and ringers with contacts in Italy to understand how they are used.

Unlike mini-rings used by our ringing community, Italian mobile belfries are full sized rings of bells delivered on lorries and positioned to form the centrepiece of village and town events, carnivals and celebrations. They are often funded by the bellfounders themselves.

While the new Mobile Belfry is not quite on this scale, it was one of the design considerations that the bells should sound good in the open air, with the overall installation being a positive representation of what ringing is all about. Those who saw it first demonstrated at the Nottingham Roadshow in 2023 agreed it met the brief in this regard, in shiny aluminium with red-painted frame parts and shiny bells. It is a good-looking piece of engineering.

The Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry (LDMB)

The LDMB is one of the forerunners of mobile belfry design. It originally came about in 1989 as a result of the Central Council inviting proposals for projects to celebrate its centenary in 1991. Phil Gay suggested a mobile exhibition centre but his proposal was narrowly defeated.

Phil remained convinced about the merits of a mobile belfry with ‘ringable’ bells, installing a ring in his own house and continuing to pursue mobility. In 1997 a joint project was set up by the three associations in the Lichfield Diocese (Lichfield & Walsall, North Staffs, Shropshire) and in 1999 the LDMB trust was born.

The bells in the LDMB were cast by Whitechapel, and became owned by the LDMB trust when Whitechapel closed in 2017.

Bell	Diameter (inches)	Weight (cwt-qtr-lb)	Note
1	10.9	0-1-15	B
2	11.4	0-1-15	A
3	11.7	0-1-17	G
4	12.3	0-1-23	F#
5	13.3	0-2-05	E
6	14.4	0-2-21	D

The Charmborough Ring

The Charmborough Ring is similar to the LDMB in many ways. The six bell ring was designed and built by Matthew Higby using bells cast by the late Richard Bowditch, and made its first public appearance at the Ringing Roadshow at Newbury Racecourse in 2005.

In 2007 a group of private individuals financed the purchase of the ring, with the intention that it be used primarily in London and the Southeast to publicise ringing at the many community events in the build up to the 2012 Olympics. They established the Charmborough Trust to operate the ring, with all income going to the Trust and the Trust insuring and maintaining the ring. The intention was that the individuals would eventually be repaid, although this has not happened yet!

Coming in pieces, the Charmborough Ring can be erected indoors and has been used at Rugby school and various other schools in Kent, Surrey and Greater London, something the Trustees are keen to continue and build on. Some time in 2024 the Ring is likely to fulfil its 200th engagement.

Bell	Diameter (inches)	Weight (cwt-qtr-lb)	Note
1	10 ¾	0-1-11	B
2	11 ¾	0-1-18	A
3	11 ¾	0-1-18	G
4	12 ¾	0-2-01	F#
5	14 ¼	0-2-26	E
6	15 ½	0-3-10	D+48

Mobile Belfry 2.0 (still not its real name!)

Although the two current mobile belfries are still doing a good job in actively promoting ringing and recruiting new ringers, they have their limitations particularly in terms of portability, and the time needed to set them up. The LDMB comes on a trailer which when complete weighs in at just under 2,000kg, while the Charmborough Ring needs a vehicle capable of towing 2,100kg. This is not your everyday family saloon, and it limits the number of people who can tow them, putting additional pressure on the few who can.

On arriving at the proposed demonstration site, the LDMB takes six people three hours to erect (although it can be quicker in fine weather and omitting the canopy), while the Charmborough takes five people and

one-and-a quarter hours. This has not been a barrier particularly, but it does limit the available demonstration time and requires more volunteers to be coordinated.

Principal design considerations of the new ring were therefore to reduce the overall weight of the ring, and to enable it to be erected within half an hour of arriving on site, without a team of helpers. Indications are that the combined weight of belfry and trailer will be just over 1,600kg, which brings lots of different vehicles into play. This will enable far more people to be able to hire it, tow it, and erect it without specialist knowledge.

The lower weight has been principally achieved by building the frame out of aluminium, while the portability has been achieved by adopting an idea originally proposed by Phil Gay to have the belfry lying on its side on a trailer and then pushed vertical using a hydraulic ram. This element of the design has been entrusted to a company that specialises in bespoke trailers. That company (BSP TEX) has completed its design work and is waiting for delivery of the belfry early in the New Year.

So, the Touring Tower (yes at last, it’s got a name!) is just waiting for the bells to be engraved with names of donors and major contributors before it moves to its final phase of development with the trailer manufacturer.

Coordination of Mobile Belfry Booking - the “Mobile Belfries Trust”

As the project to develop the new belfry progressed, the partners saw the benefit of bringing the three mobile belfries under one ‘banner’ – one single port of call to which a tower or organisation wanting to book a mobile belfry could come. In the peak summer period there can sometimes be conflicting events, and with three mobile belfries positioned around the country there are efficiencies to be gained from being able to send the nearest belfry to an event.

There didn’t seem to be any point creating a new trust for this and the Trustees of the Charmborough Trust agreed to change its name to the more generic ‘Mobile Belfries Trust’. The new ring will be owned by the Mobile Belfries Trust, and the others will fall under a unified management regime.

I became a Trustee of the MBT because I want to see this project through and help the new Touring Tower fulfil its potential. Alison Everett also left the Council Executive last November and became a Trustee of the MBT, as she was looking for a fresh way to contribute to ringing development.

The MBT is now collecting bookings for mobile belfries for 2024. See the calendar chart overleaf.

So can you help?

1. Towers! As in people who can tow!

What we could do with more than anything is more people who have got vehicles capable of towing a caravan or similar who could pick up and tow a mobile belfry to an event. The two existing mobile belfries are on trailers rated at 2,000 and 2,100 kgs. The new Touring Tower is going to be the easiest and lightest,

2024 Dates	Event	Place	Mobile Belfry
13 or 20 April	Recruitment event	Andover, Hants	Charmborough
23-24 May	Ding Dong Schools Project	St Edwards School, Romford, Essex	The Touring Tower
6-9 June	Flamstead Arts Festival	Flamstead, Herts	TBA
18-19 June †	Royal Cheshire County Show	Cheshire	Lichfield DMB
19-21 July	Somerset Steam & Country Show	Low Ham, Nr Langport, Somerset	Charmborough
24-29 July	Cambridge Folk Festival	Cambridge	TBA
4 August	Trout 'n About	Stockbridge, Hants	Charmborough
1-4 August †	North West Ringing Course	Lancashire	Lichfield DMB
27 July – 2 August †	Scout Jamboree	Chelmsford, Essex	TBA
w/c 16 September †	B'ham City Uni Freshers Fair	Birmingham City University	TBA
w/c 23 September †	Birmingham Uni Freshers Fair	Birmingham University	TBA
3-4 October †	Cambridge Uni Freshers Fair	Parkers Piece, Cambridge	TBA

† denotes a provisional booking

and the towing weight of the trailer rated at 1,620 kg brings it within the reach of many more cars. I am already looking at changing my vehicle so that I can join the towing team!

One of the existing Trustees, Ian Kerwin, says he thinks that taking the Charmborough Ring to events is one of his favourite aspects of being a Trustee. An outing to somewhere new, meeting new ringers, seeing the joy of people experiencing ringing for the first time – it's a rewarding experience. The MBT pays the tower's mileage expenses, so this is really an investment of time rather than anything else. If you are also able to teach bell handling that would be an amazing bonus!

2. Bookings

The MBT's objects are to promote the history and art of change ringing, and that can either be the promotion of ringing as a general PR and awareness activity or as part of a recruitment campaign.

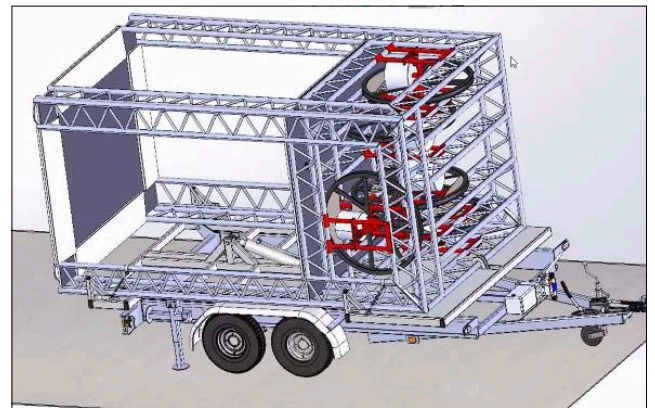
The cost of hiring a mobile belfry is around £250 a day plus transport costs from wherever the most suitable or nearest belfry is located. More details are on our website www.mobilebelfries.org

We are particularly interested in opportunities to take the mobile belfries into schools, especially if / provided that such a visit is linked to a tower or young ringers group that can pick up those who are interested, teach them in a young ringers environment, and nurture their progress.

This article started with references to the Cambridge University Guild's use of a mobile belfry at their Freshers Fair. We are very interested in finding other universities that would like to have a mobile belfry at a freshers fair or welcome week, and ART currently offers sponsorship for any university that does, which also includes training Modules for students who would like to learn how to teach others to ring.

3. Working trustees or just volunteer helpers

There are currently seven trustees, four of whom have been associated with the Charmborough Ring for many years, plus Alison and me who have joined more recently. Phil Gay has been a Trustee of the LDMB since its formation 24 years ago. So we're keen to find ringers who would like to become a working Trustee, or just a volunteer that we can call on, and this could



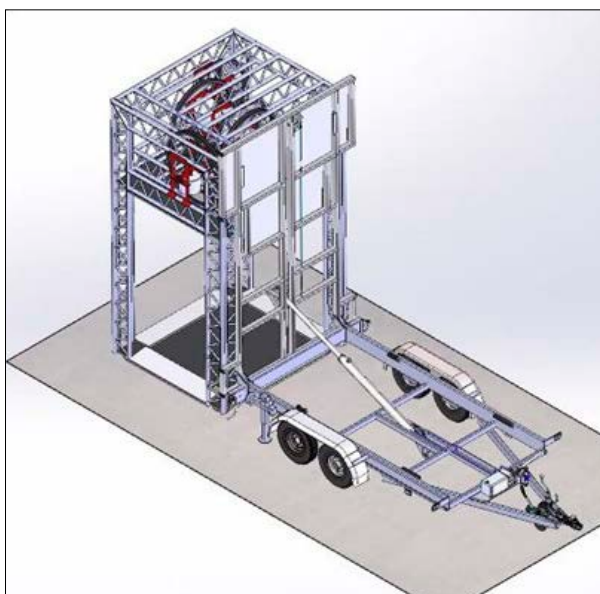
either be a general member of the team or specifically someone to do one of the 'jobs' like be Secretary or Treasurer, taking some of the load off Roger Booth. These are not huge jobs by any means – this is not a big Trust like a ringing association – although we are of course hoping to grow it.

Conclusion

2024 is going to be an exciting year for the Mobile Belfries Trust. The Touring Tower will join the fleet, we're hoping to do a really large Scout Jamboree in Essex, take belfries into a school as part of trialling ringing lesson plans, and fulfil lots of other bookings with all three belfries. With the Central Council also working on the ringing branding and marketing project as part of the Ringing 2030 plans, we are hoping that mobile belfries and mini-rings can leverage that, and all make a valuable contribution to the publicity of ringing and recruitment of ringers.

If you feel you have something to contribute, especially if you can tow over 1,600kg, we will be very pleased to hear from you. You can contact us at trustees@mobilebelfries.org

SIMON LINFORD
Trustee, Mobile Belfries Trust



The Touring Tower having been pushed off the trailer to its upright position for use. Above, it is transported lying down.

The Prehistory of Mobile Mark 2



In the late 1970s I acquired a 76lb bell which had previously been hung in the demolished church at Fenwick, Yorkshire. I had for some time been interested in hanging small bells, and I hung it with scale half-size fittings on the landing at Woodlands. Once I had moved the garter hole downwards by several inches it handled very well. This bell was the prototype for the ring of six hung in the Woodlands garage in 1992.

In 1990, the Central Council invited suggestions for projects to mark the Council's centenary the following year. I suggested a mobile exhibition centre containing a small (6, tenor 1½ cwt) ring of bells. My proposal was supported by a quarter-scale model and a 56lb bell hung for ringing in a portable frame, which was erected in St Cuthbert's Church in Wells. The following year, when the Council meeting was held in London, it was set up in the ground floor of the tower of St Mary-le-Bow. The Council decided by a narrow majority not to proceed with the idea, but I continued to think about the feasibility of such a scheme. My conviction that it could work was reinforced by the Woodlands experience, and evidence that it was a good idea was provided by a Lichfield Diocesan event at which the three ringing societies in the diocese mounted an exhibition which included a mini-ring loaned by Matthew Higby.

In 1998 I took a proposal, supported by outline sketches, to the North Staffs Association Committee for a mobile belfry mounted on a trailer with a ring of six bells with a tenor of about 65lb. The bells I had in mind at this time were fire-engine bells from Taylors, which I thought was all we would be able to afford. It was agreed to put forward the idea as a joint project for the three societies in the diocese, and I made a model to demonstrate the lifting gear and one bell hung for ringing. Marian Owen made the canvas cover, and the model was taken to meetings around the diocese to show people what the mobile belfry would be like. It was agreed to proceed, and a project team was set up. As well as two representatives appointed by each committee, Ray Daw produced detailed

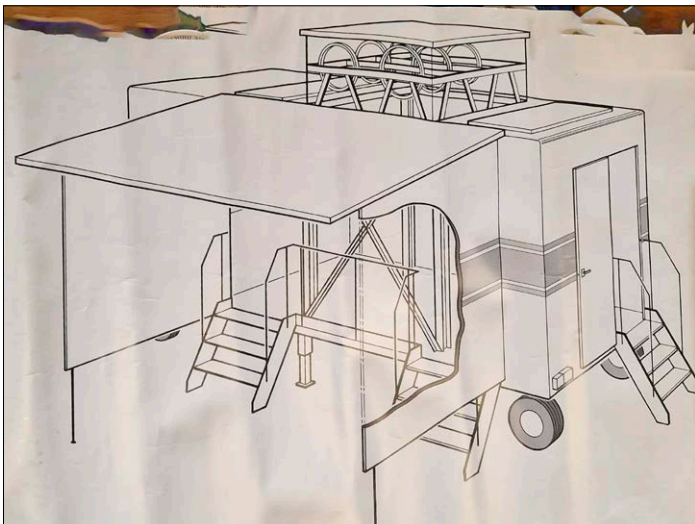
working drawings and Richard Offen acted as fundraiser. In addition to approaching charities, Richard approached Alan Hughes of Whitechapel Bell Foundry, who offered to cast a custom-designed ring of six, with a tenor of 75lb. I made the wheels and headstocks in the second half of 1998, having got my hand in by making the fittings for the two new bells at Woodlands. The Whitechapel bells were offered to us on long term loan, the first example of Alan Hughes's generosity to the belfry.

The Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry (LDMB) was dedicated on Easter Sunday 1999, the Bishop of Lichfield thereby becoming the first bishop to have a mobile belfry. It had its first public outing to the Tewkesbury roadshow soon after. The belfry has been well used ever since, easily justifying the decision to build it. When it was first being discussed, some association members had reservations about getting enough people to tow it, and with hindsight they were right, although to their great credit they never said 'I told you so'. This problem was eased in 2003 when John Daubner made a towing vehicle available for



Above: The Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry frame on a trailer, showing that the bells resemble tower bells – Heave Ho!

Right: The original prototype for the Woodlands ring (photos Phil Gay)



Phil's early mobile belfry design, rejected by the Central Council

dedicated use by the belfry. This was a fairly ancient Mercedes minibus, old enough to be without features such as turbocharger and power steering which are now taken for granted. In spite of this, it performed remarkably well including a trip to Cornwall, but by the summer of 2007 people (including myself) were increasingly unhappy driving it. I was a volunteer driver for a community minibus for six parishes and I proposed to its management committee that we pay for a towbar to be fitted so that it could be used to tow the mobile belfry. This arrangement came into use for the summer of 2008, towing the belfry away from the Staffordshire County Show, and it worked well. When the minibus was replaced, the management committee decided not to renew our arrangement, and I arranged to hire a minibus belonging to Keele University Students' Union. This also worked well for several years until replacement of the fleet by leasehold vehicles with a condition that they be used exclusively for transporting students. Since then we have been dependent on the goodwill of local ringers with suitable towing vehicles.

I've always thought that there should be several mobile belfries strategically located, and I hoped to build another one which would be easier to tow and quicker to put up. The two main drawbacks of the LMDMB were that, weighing almost two tonnes, it needed a specialised towing vehicle, and that it took almost three hours to erect on arrival on site. A significant feature is that the bells all swing the same way to exploit the greater stability of the trailer in the fore-and-aft direction. It occurred to me that this would enable a fabricated metal tower to be kept assembled rather than needing to be dismantled for transport, as long as it was laid on its side during transit. One mechanism capable of achieving this would be a small skip lorry, but this would again involve running a vehicle which would have a shorter life than the belfry. Another possibility was to use the mechanism of a tipper trailer to elevate the tower from travel mode, when it would form the body of the trailer, to active mode for which it would be rotated through ninety degrees by a hydraulic ram. I thought that the light six of the Taylor fire-engine bells, with a 40lb tenor, would be suitable for a prototype, but then, out of the blue, came another development.

Arthur Jopp was famous for his pioneering work hanging small bells. We met in the early 1980s when I began work on the Woodlands bells. Twenty years later, his widow Doreen had to consider the future of the two rings of bells he had installed in their house at Stoulton. Their son Paul was happy to hang the twelve in his garage in Derbyshire, but there was also the ring of six which Arthur himself had cast. Early in 2008 these were sold to Matthew Higby, who asked my advice about a possible future for the bells. We agreed that an Arthur Jopp Memorial Mobile Belfry would be a good way of keeping them in use and accessible to a wide range of ringers. In May of that year Matthew carried out some tuning on them. Exactly how the project would be funded was not yet clear, but the cost would be lower than some alternative schemes because the fittings were all in working order. What was needed was the structure, and I was fairly confident that this could be built at a weight which was within the towing capacity of a medium sized car.

This project was not seen as competitive with the LDMB, but rather as complementary; the management of the two could be co-ordinated in a way which enabled potential users to be pointed to the belfry which was most suitable for their particular event. For shows lasting two or three days, the erecting and dismantling time of the LDMB is an acceptable overhead, but for half-day events the smaller belfry would be more attractive.

In November 2008 I visited Matthew in Somerset, and brought home the bells and fittings. As with all of Arthur's projects, the workmanship is immaculate – all the clapper pins have grease nipples! In the end the bells were sold on and installed in a house at Huntspill in Somerset, although more recently Paul Jopp has acquired them and is planning to make good use of them.

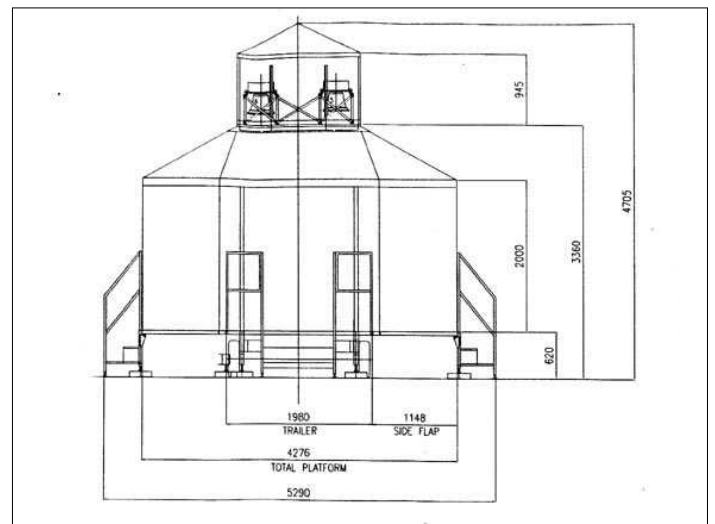
I continued to fancy building a quick erection model, and by the late noughties I had put together a 62lb ring of six Warner bells which I thought could be suitable. The tenor of this ring was not entirely satisfactory, so the front five are currently being remodelled into a 52lb six. I thought that a potential way of getting the belfry built would be to offer it to an engineering company as an apprentice project. A good way of achieving this would be to make yet another quarter-scale demonstration model, a project which is still on my to-do list.

University freshers' fairs are particularly good events for mobile belfries, and the LDMB has been to several. Leeds was the first, followed by several visits to Birmingham. On one occasion at Birmingham an amusing incident occurred. One always has to be on the watch for non-ringers coming onto the belfry and taking hold of a rope, and so anyone doing that has to be asked if they can ring. One person whose competence was questioned turned out to be Jack Page, newly arrived at the university.

Two significant negative features of the Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry have been mentioned above. But what are its positive features? Firstly, it was a path-breaking prototype, and it works pretty well. Only a few modifications have been made to improve it. Secondly, it is not just a belfry, but a mobile exhibition centre with a lot of display space. Thirdly, its canopy makes it fully weather-protected, and on more than one occasion its capacity has been tested to the limit during heavy rain. In spite of what many people believe, the bells are perfectly handleable, even by inexperienced ringers once they realise that they are not a mini-ring and if you handle them like full-size bells they will behave like full-size bells. Anyone who ventures up the ladder to look at the bells will see a perfect half-size replica of what you would see anywhere else, the only difference being the absence of stays. Several of the quarter peals rung on the bells have included fairly inexperienced ringers, and the four peals have included one of 41 Spliced Surprise Minor.

In 2021 these ideas were overtaken by a suggestion from Simon Linford that the Central Council should build a Mark 2 mobile belfry, and I was very pleased to be invited to be a member of the project team.

PHIL GAY



One of Ray Daw's detailed working drawings for the LDMB