

Belfry Advisory Committee (BAC) Minutes from 22 Sep 2025 Meeting

The BAC held a meeting on 22 Sep 25 at the Cretingham Bell.

Six members attended and four apologies were accepted.

Present

C Davies(chair), C McArthur (Sec), A Moulton, Birkby, P Lock and J Flatters.

Apologies

N Whittle, T Hart, W Girling and M Steggles.

There was one new grant request to consider. In 1961, Aldeburgh's bells were rehung in a teak 8 bell frame, 5 bells recast, and two new trebles added to make the new octave. The bells are a good musical set but spoilt by the 1622 William and John II Brend fifth bell, which was retained by the parish at that time. The PCC, subject to a successful faculty application, plan to have their existing fifth bell replaced with a new bell and retain the old one as a clock bell. A recent inspection by our technical advisor revealed the rope pulleys are all heavily worn, affecting the going action of the bells, and he recommended that new pulleys need to be fitted into the existing boxes.

The parish have decided to refurbish all the pulley blocks, at a cost of £1693 plus vat. The replacement No5 bell with new headstock is estimated at £12,251 plus vat. All the work will be overseen by our technical advisor and carried out by local helpers and the BAC. The work totals £13,944 plus vat, and the BAC unanimously recommended a grant of £1,400. It is noted that the Listed Places of Worship Scheme is due to close on 31 Mar 26, which is currently the last date which they will accept invoices for VAT repayment. Because the pulley block will be completed well in time for vat recovery it is requested that the grants be given in two halves, £170 for the pulley's and £1230 for the bell.

Aldeburgh bells are rung weekly for services and support a regular band comprising 11 guild members and weekly practices. In the most recent Guild Report, they were the most pealed bells in Suffolk. Unusually, they have not obtained three estimates for the work. Taylor's completed all the previous work and are the preferred contractors for this refurbishment.

There is currently only one ongoing restoration project.

At Fornham St Martin, the bells have been installed and a service of dedication held. The BAC continues to work on a small number of items to complete the project. These include painting the upper surface of the frame with non-slip paint, fitting linear actuators to the sound control flaps in the louvres, so that they can be remotely controlled and the installation of a new floor in the ringing chamber. Additionally, there may be a requirement to raise the rope guide frame some 6inch, because of rope wear.

Projects gaining momentum and likely to come to fruition in the foreseeable future include Copdock, Haverhill and Wetherden. Longer term projects remain Hoxne and Thornham Magna.

Mention was made of the Adrian Knights bequest and progress of the working group. A letter has been sent to all Suffolk parishes, briefly explaining the aim of the bequest and inviting offers of interest. To date, eleven churches have expressed interest, but the calling notice remains open until the end of September.

The single issue that causes most controversy within the BAC is the grading of towers in the Ringers Handbook. Historically, technical advisors have rated the installations on technical merit, such as whether the bells had plain or roller bearings, or the type of construction and condition of the frame and fittings. It also considered the stability of the tower. However, most ringers are more concerned with the actual ringing experience. As a result, we have first class rings downgraded because they are in a wooden frame, whilst other rings with roller bearings and steel frames do not “go as well” as their numerical rating would suggest. The BAC felt that the ringer’s handbook should reflect the ringing experience, rather than a technical appreciation of the bells. However, to grade all Suffolk towers is a major undertaking, and is, by its very nature, a subjective judgement. Nonetheless, if enough ‘ringing reports’ were gathered, a fair average report would result. The committee felt that if it were technically possible, ideally as a form on the website, we would encourage ringers to rate their ringing experience on the website by a numerical score. If and when, sufficient reports – perhaps a minimum of 10 were received for an individual tower, the scores could be averaged and awarded a grade. The grades would lie from ‘not to be rung’ (rather than unringable), through “poor”, ‘fair’, ‘good’, ‘very good’, to ‘excellent’. We would only change the report format when sufficient data had been collected, which might take as much as two years to complete.

An online form has been produced, but further discussion is ongoing. The BAC will continue to fine tune this proposal.

During the last four months, the BAC’s work has continued helping and advising parishes throughout the county. These included:

Aldeburgh SS Peter and Paul: Refurbished pulley blocks will be replaced on 6 Oct. Faculty application for a new 5th bell ongoing.

Blythburgh Holy Trinity. Our diocesan advisor attended a site meeting with the architect to discuss the installation of a kitchen in the current, ground floor ringing chamber. The initial plans required substantial modification as they had not made adequate provision for the ringers on a new first floor, because of the location of stairwells and ladders impinging on the ringing circle. The bell restoration has been completed. The next stage will be the installation of a new toilet, with most of the groundworks already completed. The third and final stage will be the kitchen and new first floor ring, which will also require the present rope guides to be raised up the tower. The second and third stages are in progress but no date for completion.

Bures St Mary the Virgin: Ongoing problems with much repaired tenor clapper. The bells are still being rung but a new tenor clapper has been ordered.

Cavendish St Mary the Virgin: Ropes spliced.

Cavenham St Andrew: This 7.75cwt, 3 bell tower is currently under refurbishment, in a project led by our technical advisor.

Copdock St Peter: Advice provided with reference to rehanging the six bells in a new eight bell frame. There is little space in the bell chamber and the bells currently swing into the louvre window recesses. A new concrete ring beam will be necessary to stabilise the tower.

There are also some technical issues linking the frame to the ring beam. This project is gaining momentum and is increasingly more likely to happen.

Drinkstone All Saints: All outstanding tasks from the restoration now completed.

Easton All Saints: All pulley blocks removed and refurbished by BAC. Improved go and noise reduction is considerable now following ringing for a recent wedding. Ball races could not be fitted however due to design constraints.

Framsden St Mary: This 16cwt eight bell ring is only occasionally rung on the back 6 (the two tenors are recently reported as being hard work). The treble is not rung due to a lack of flooring under the bell. The BAC intend to replace the flooring under one bell to enable all eight bells to once again be rung after a full test ring.

Gipping St Nicholas: Work ongoing to refurbish their single bell for swing chiming.

Great Blakenham St Mary's: An inspection of the two, pre-reformation bells was carried out. The larger bell is badly cracked and has not been used for some years. Their Oct24 QI report requested that the bells be made safe until such time as they be fully refurbished. A suitable scheme was proposed and has been completed.

Haverhill St Mary the Virgin: Inspection undertaken, recommending a new frame. This project, although in the early stages, is gaining momentum.

Henley St Peter: Project underway to replace the seriously deteriorated intermediate floor. Also, a serious split in the west wall originating at the top of the west window arch has resulted in all ringing being suspended.

Hoxne St Peter and Paul. Eight Keltek bells have been allocated to the church, currently in storage with Blyth and Co (Bellhangers). Village strongly behind the project and actively fundraising.

Ipswich St Clements: Considering installation of sound control due to noise complaints/concerns from nearby flats and the future implications of additional planned building nearby.

Ipswich St Lawrence: Tower unringable due to disintegrating flint/stonework on the tower. Hearsay suggests that this is a major financial challenge with a 6-figure restoration cost. The repair work is expected to be completed in 2025.

Ipswich St Nicholas: Tower scaffolded, bells unringable due to loose pinnacles and other structural issues. The church falls outside the faculty system and so the work is likely to require listed building consent. This is unlikely to be a quick fix.

Ipswich Minster: Bellhangers are currently being engaged for some remedial works to the fittings .

Kelsale St Mary and Peter: Wooden frame, fittings very tired. New toilets proposed for current ringing room which may prohibit future ground floor ringing. Hearsay suggests that the Parish is attempting to use a bequest to their bell fund to fund the loo's.

Lavenham SS peter and Paul: Problems with odd struckness, thought to be mainly because of clappers. Problems sorted by the Technical Advisor.

Little Glenham St Andrew: An inspection revealed considerable frame movement whilst ringing. Fittings very tired, particularly wheels which were disintegrating and have been repaired. The Parish has been advised to only undertake short periods of ringing, typically 10 minutes, for major events such as weddings.

Long Melford Holy Trinity: During a ringing incident, a bell rope, had wrapped itself around the guide frame and partially torn it from the wall. Our Technical Advisor recommended its removal, which was carried out. It turns out that the guide frame had been unsatisfactory for many years and had never had a faculty for its initial installation. Without the guide frame, tenors go well but the trebles are flighty.

Mildenhall Blessed Virgin Mary: Technical Advisor inspection completed. The advice given suggested that the two memorial bells be retained, whilst the remaining 8 would be scrapped to make way for 10 new bells. A structural engineering report by Stuart Armitage (Morton Partnership) is underway.

Orford St Bartholomew: Tower very dirty. Industrial cleaner coming into clean, with will then enable stay repairs to be undertaken.

Polstead St Mary: Bells in a 1953 Taylor's steel frame. Steelwork generally in need of scraping and painting, but bearings in good order. Helped parish do routine maintenance.

Rougham St Mary: Inspection – 6 bells in a 1905 Day's frame. Frame getting very tired. A new steel frame would allow 8 bells, but the ringing circle would be very tight (if not impossible).

Thornham Magna St Mary Magdalene: The back bells have reportedly been increasingly difficult to ring. Nicholson's, Taylor's and White's have all carried out full inspections with an eventual target of refurbishment/restoration. Current plan is a new steel frame for the existing six bells in the silence chamber, with the existing wooden frame remaining in situ, and the current floor opened up for sound projection.

Ufford: Maintenance and stay replacement required but that is not possible until industrial cleaning of bell chamber is undertaken, due to considerable bird habitation over many years.

Wrentham St Nicholas: The bells have been inspected and a project to allow some ringing later this year is ongoing. Ropes have now been fitted. It was noted that the tenor wheel is very fragile, a mixture of woodworm and nail corrosion, and will need to be removed for repair. We now await a tower and frame movement inspection, with all six bells in motion, before a decision can be made as to future ringing. Technical Adviser leading on this project.

Wetherden St Mary the Virgin: Have requested a BAC inspection. Rumour suggests that bellhangers have been carrying out inspections suggesting a re-hanging project is very likely.

Worlingworth St Mary: Technical Advisor inspection completed. 8 bells in a Day frame with 1913 Day fittings and plain bearings. The bells are not rung regularly and there is no room for more bells in one level.

BAC meets again on 6th February 2026 at 19.00 hrs

Venue – The Crown PH , Church Road , Stowupland , IP14 4BQ (01449 490490)