

“I’M A BELL RINGER! GET ME OUT OF HERE!”

Just before last Remembrance Day, we old geezers, tottering around on the top of our bell frame with muffles in hand, discussed what might happen if one of us should take an unplanned shortcut to the bell chamber floor!

If a serious injury or illness occurred anywhere in the tower, we reckoned it might not be particularly easy for the emergency services to extricate him or her. It was therefore suggested we should invite paramedics from the ambulance service to take a look at the ringing chamber and belfry, and offer advice as to what we should do in an emergency.

We made contact with South Central Ambulance Service (which covers Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Hampshire). They informed us that the teams responsible for carrying out rescues from difficult sites are the ambulance service Hazardous Area Response Team (HART) and the fire service Urban Search and Rescue team (USAR). The latter team has advanced rescue equipment. They were very keen to meet with us, survey the scene and carry out a simulated rescue. Both teams agreed a day when they could visit our tower together.

The appointed day arrived and we duly turned up to meet the representatives from the HART and USAR teams. Our jaws dropped, as one after another, a procession of fire appliances, and ambulance service vehicles arrived and gradually filled the car park.

It was obvious that the teams were fully committed to a full blown exercise. However, their initial plans were immediately thwarted by the fact that the perimeter hedges of the churchyard made access impossible for the heavy appliances normally used to lower a “casualty” down the outside of a building. And, anyway, it was doubtful as to whether the churchyard, with its many burial chambers, would be able to support the heavy vehicles.

We took the team leaders into the tower, pointing out the narrowness of the spiral staircase and also the availability of a removable iron grating in the centre of the ringing chamber floor. They seemed to be reasonably satisfied that, using various items of equipment, one or the other of these could be used to lower a casualty to the ground. Just one modification was recommended: a strip light in the vestry below the ringing chamber should be relocated, as it impeded access through the grating.

However, when we showed them the room above the ringing chamber and the bell chamber they were not so confident that removing a casualty would be so easy. On the positive side, they said it was not impossible and, in an emergency, they would do whatever was necessary to extricate the casualty. But they then began to discuss the use of power saws to open the floor or to remove the sound control shutters. They also talked about possibly having to remove stonework to widen the bell chamber windows.

They eventually concluded that conducting a trial to rescue a casualty from either of the upper rooms would cause unacceptable damage to the fabric of the building and decided to abandon the exercise. As for us, we decided that, on the whole, it was probably better not to have an accident in those areas of the tower!

So what did we learn from our morning with the teams? The first thing to note, was that familiarising any specific emergency service personnel with our exact circumstances had limited usefulness, since, in an emergency, it could be any of a number of teams that turn up on the day, depending on who was available and nearest at the time.

However, what we did discern from our meeting was the importance of conveying relevant information to the Control Room when the 999 call is initially made. They need to know the postcode of the tower, and, if the casualty is incapacitated, where he or she is, and whether the rescue is from a confined area, or from high up, or both, so that the appropriate teams are called out.

It is also important to make sure that a minimum of people remain in the tower with the casualty, as any unnecessary onlookers will only get in the way if and when a large number of emergency service personnel arrive. People are better employed to wait outside the tower ready to escort the ambulance and fire service staff to the scene of the accident. Several are needed to do this, as the vehicles which attend are unlikely to arrive all at the same time. Obviously, mobile phones are useful for contact between those inside and outside the tower.

On their part, the HART team leader said that an aide memoire would be provided to the Control Room to ensure that, if a call from a bell tower was received in which a difficult rescue was required, the appropriate teams would be called out.

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