

## **A Review of the HRGB National Rally from a “First-Timer”**

I have recently returned from attending the National rally in the Hayes Conference Centre in Swanwick, Derbyshire organised and run magnificently by the North West Regional team. I thought it might be useful to offer a review of the rally from the perspective of someone who, while having a fair bit of experience of music from my distant youth, is comparatively new to the world of Handbell ringing and was therefore rather dubious about how I would find the experience of attending a rally with another 180+ vastly more experienced handbell ringers, many who are the best in the UK. I felt a little nervous and intimidated about the prospect.

How wrong I was!!!

The organisational team were super impressive. From the minute I arrived at the venue everything was considered from lanyards with names on, a welcome pack with the directions around the whole site, times and locations of events, notepads, pencils and much more. As we all were in the same boat, trying to find our bearings it became obvious that the atmosphere was going to be one where everybody wanted to help each other have a good time. While a few of my own team were there it was just so easy to chat with anyone. Everybody seemed interested in finding out about where people were from and about their different experiences of bell ringing. I began to relax very quickly.

The atmosphere of the event having been set I would simply say that I heard and played a lot of wonderful music. The organisation of the whole weekend was utterly amazing for an event on this scale.

The accommodation was clean and had absolutely everything I needed. Double bed, a shower which worked and tea and coffee making facilities. In fairness I hardly spent any time in my room as this proved to be a very sociable event.

The catering was excellent with a choice of about 3 main courses as well as vegan/vegetarian options. I was even able to eat healthily due to there being a salad bar. There were lounges and a lovely bar so everybody could mingle after evening musical entertainment. There were a number of people there either by themselves or in small teams of 2 or 3. It really didn't appear that that anyone was being left out or alone.

The format of the Saturday Workshops also helped people meet and play alongside members from other regions. We were all asked, prior to attending, what we felt our playing ability level was. This enabled pieces of music to be rehearsed at workshops with people of a similar ability which helped with friendship building and removed the fear of feeling out of my depth.

A couple of workshops were different. One workshop was introducing the new improved HRGB website and then to seek feedback from HRGB members on how to encourage more people into the Handbell world and also increase the desire to attend rallies. I found it very refreshing that an organisation like HRGB was actively seeking constructive criticism on how to improve its offering. Feedback forms were handed out with the instruction to be as “brutal” as you like. Another general workshop I found totally fascinating was the workshop where all members of all abilities had the chance to discover that there

are different formats from which individuals or teams read their music. Apparently some teams use a number for each bell system, others a colour highlighting system, and others use a simple number 1, 2 and occasional 3 system. In short, the music which we were presented looked initially, to many of us, to be completely confusing and unintelligible. After a couple of minutes of explanation by the workshop leader and a few whispered words of encouragement from fellow workshop colleagues who use alternative methods of reading music in their groups astonishingly we found our whole workshop group playing well known tunes with little trouble and great pleasure and surprise. What an eye opener!

All workshop leaders and guest conductors were amazingly jovial and I loved their encouragement and humour when things didn't always go exactly as planned. The music was varied in type but all very enjoyable. Our workshop group had to learn to play "Prayer for the Innocents" by Michael Helman was just so beautiful it honestly brought tears to my eyes.

The Massed Ringing event on the Sunday morning was a joy with all 180+ in the same Main Hall learning to play 3 different pieces of music. A unique challenge and Wow!- what a sound. Malcolm Wilson conducting us in his own piece "Finlandia" was truly awesome.

Teams had been invited to entertain in a "Teams in the Spotlight" session on the Friday evening. Our Regional Team performed Nocturne in C minor. This was my first ever performance and initially I was terrified but all went reasonably well and we were all buzzing with adrenalin afterwards. Grab the opportunity if it is offered. I am glad I did it (did I have a choice?).

On the Saturday evening there was the official concert where the more experienced performers and teams showed us their amazing talents and musicality. This was honestly one of the best and most interesting concerts I have ever witnessed. I learnt so much about how I could improve my technique, given time, by witnessing how it should be done. It raised my own expectations of myself. Thanks to all those who performed.

Finally I would say that I am in awe of the organisational skills of the NW team. I offer a huge thank you to all of them and other teams for transporting bells, chimes and foams from all parts of the country. To be able to pull off an event on this scale and look after so many people, many of whom have mobility issues and differing dietary requirements. All of you should be very proud of what you have achieved and the joy you have brought to so many.

Many thanks. I am now converted to Handbell Rallies. I would certainly recommend that anybody, like me, who have fears that they may not fit in or be good enough, grasp the nettle, give it a go and attend next year's event in Milton Keynes. I'm sure you won't regret it. I'll certainly be there.

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