

St Lawrence Handbell Ringers visit the St Lawrence River

Our long awaited trip to Canada finally came to fruition as we packed up the handbells from the church store, early on 30th August before most of Chobham was awake. It was to prove a long and arduous journey, with a frustratingly slow check-in at Gatwick, even longer delays due to a strike on arrival at Toronto, and then an interminable bus ride, a slow queue for the border crossing to USA, followed by dramatic storms along the way to our first night destination in Lakewood, near Cleveland, Ohio. Our hosts were Lakewood Presbyterian Church, linked through team member Lorraine, whose husband was pastor there before coming to Woking URC. The kindness and hospitality of the Lakewood folk was beyond all expectations. They befriended us, took us in as house guests, fed and entertained us. That weekend some of us went on tour to the Ohio Amish country while others took in the sights of Cleveland. Sunday morning we joined in their communion service. After a picnic lunch on the shore of Lake Erie, we performed a joint afternoon concert with Lakewood's own handbell choir.

Monday's bus ride took us back to Canada, with stop over at Niagara Falls, then on to Toronto - our base for the next week as we participated in the 11th International Handbell Symposium. It is difficult to describe, for those who have not experienced it, what an international symposium is like. There were around 600 ringers, from Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan, Korea, and USA. Each team had the chance to perform their own party piece for all the others during the rally rings (Chobham played our own special composition "Ring Out" by Sandra Winter). These were interspersed with massed ringing - all teams playing (almost) as one under the direction of experienced conductors - and workshops on particular aspects of ringing or other artistic activities. There were evening entertainments, and lots of chance to socialise with friends old and new from around the world. Then on the last day, a grand public concert in the magnificent "Air Canada Centre" followed by the symposium banquet.

Our second Sunday in the new world saw us on the bus again, this time headed for Gananoque for a cruise on the St Lawrence River (well we had to, didn't we?) followed by Kingston, Ontario where we visited Fort Henry, built by the British to defend Canada against attack from the USA. As well as partaking of a traditional lunch served in the officers' mess, we saw demonstrations of 19th century military drills, and we performed our own repertoire on the battlements. Spotting a piper lurking in the ramparts, we asked if he would play "Amazing Grace" with us (one of the pieces we had done in the Symposium massed ringing), which he gladly did - a most memorable event.

Next day on into the province of Quebec, and the city of Montreal. We quickly realised that Canada truly is a multicultural society, not only with the dominant English and French speaking populations, but many other ethnic groups too. Another five hour drive on Tuesday brought us to Quebec city where we unloaded the bells into Holy Trinity anglican cathedral, who were celebrating their 200th anniversary this year. An informal lunchtime handbell performance stimulated quite a lot of interest, and by the evening we had an enthusiastic audience for our formal concert at Holy Trinity. Wednesday was a day off to enjoy the sights and ambience of Quebec city and surrounding areas, then Thursday it was back on the bus for another long trip to Ottawa - Canada's capital. A guided tour of the Parliament buildings showed us just how much the British system has influenced other parts of the Commonwealth. Our final concert of the tour was at a Presbyterian church in the suburbs of Ottawa, where we were, as ever, treated to excellent hospitality and a warm reception for our playing. A dawn departure on Friday brought us back to Toronto for the flight home, finally reaching Chobham in the small hours of Saturday morning.

You can see some pictures of the trip on our website <http://handbells.chobham.org/> and hear more about it by talking to members of the team. We are very grateful to Tim, our musical director, for making many of the arrangements, and to Adrienne for planning and guiding us on the post-symposium tour. We were also delighted to welcome back old friends for the tour (Alan and Mary Collings, Maurice and Sheila Davies, Madge and Brian Martin) as well as a number of guest ringers (Jenny, Mary, Adrienne, Linda, Daniel) who helped keep the team musically intact.