

“A WILD SNAKE DANCE IN GREAT HORWOOD”

Back to the Past with Ed Grimdsdale

Here are extracts from a long piece that appeared in the Christmas number of the Detroit Free Press in 1881. The observant writer was clearly a bell-ringing virgin but his innocence displays great charm.

Great Horwood is a village set on a very mild hill. Everything about Great Horwood is exceedingly mild and gentle. Its slopes and valleys are gentle, and its people and its ale are mild. The environs of the village are quiet and rural and subdued. The only object of pride in Great Horwood is the church with church, with its square grey tower and handsome windows. The Church has recently been “restored” [by Gawcott’s Gilbert Scott] but the hand of its restorer has dealt kindly with it, and has enhanced the beauty of the ancient edifice.

As I stood by the door of the old inn, looking at the picturesque tower mellowed by the clear moonlight, the landlord said: “The chime ringers have gone over there.”

“Do they ring chimes every night?” I asked.

“Well, at this time of year they do; getting ready for Christmas, you see.” “Would they have any objection to a stranger going up to see how it is done?”

“Oh bless you, no. They wouldn’t mind. Go in by the south gate there, and you’ll find in big door in the tower open.”

The large oaken door was ajar, and pushing it open I entered the church, which looked vast in the gloom, its interior dimly lighted by the moon shining through coloured windows. One candle sputtered in an old candlestick, and did what it could to make the darkness more impressive. A narrow, arched door, which was open, showed stone steps leading upwards.

Round and round in complete darkness went the steps. The spiral stone staircase was just wide enough for one person, giving him every opportunity of rubbing the gloss from his coat on both sides.

After a panting climb I came to a little door. Instead of coming among the climbers, I stepped into the open air on the leaden roof of the tower. The night was chill and clear, not a cloud in the sky, and in the bright moonlight the lovely landscape appeared to better advantage than in the daytime. It was the gentlest sort of hill and dale scenery – the hills not very prominent, and the dales being far from glens. Away to the north could be seen Buckingham church spire glittering slenderly in the blue sky. Further to the right, six or seven miles away, hardly visible among the trees, was the venerable square tower of Maids’ Moreton Church on whose old doors tradition points out marks left by the sacrilegious pikes of Cromwell’s soldiers, and that legend tells how they chopped down the huge cross that stood there, and how the cross in falling killed the soldier who had proposed its destruction. Turning from north to south – from ancient to modern – away in the distance might be seen the white clouds of steam from a far-off train; a latterday invention that never comes near Great Horwood. Immediately beneath the red-tiled roofs of the peaceful village, and in the shadow of the tower stood the white stones that betoken the still more peaceful village of the dead.

Passing back through the low doorway I felt my way carefully down until another door was reached, and that showed a glint of light from within. Fumbling around for the handle I drew

it open and stood among the chime ringers, who were doffing their coats, getting ready for business. The square stone room was partially lighted by a number of candles stuck in niches around the walls. A square, wooden cupboard-like place to one side contained the clock, that for years had given the villagers the correct time, and its slowly measured tick-tock showed that if *tempus* did *fugit* it was in no hurry about it.

I sat down on a bench and watched the preparations for ringing. The ropes which had been looped up out of the way were now taken down. Six of them hung from holes in the ceiling and six stalwart Buckinghamshire men were spitting on their hands preparing to ring. [...] Watching the silent, coatless ringers, and listening to the clangour of the bells, the whole scene, in the dim insufficient light, became strange and unreal. On each of the ropes was a long arrangement of soft wool of different colours, intended, I suppose to make the handling of the ropes easier. [Bell-ringers call such woolly sections "sollies".] As the ringers bent their backs, the rope would lay in fantastic coils ast their feet. Then it would rapidly uncoil, and the coloured part would pop up suddenly out of sight through the hole in the ceiling, while yje ringer would stretch up on tiptoe so as not to lose the end of the rope. No two ropes would uncoil at the same time, and as one would pop up out of sight, and then another, and another, it seemed to me like a wild snake dance – the rainbow-coloured reptiles springing up to the music of the bells.

All at once the din ceased, and the men relinquished the ropes, and sat down wiping their heated brows, while the leader on his knees chalked a new set of figures on the floor.

"Shall we ring the bells down next time!" asked one.

"No," was the answer. "We'll ring twice more."

"What do you mean by ringing them down?" I asked.

"Why," said the leader, rising, the bells are all mouth upwards now, don't you know."

I expressed my surprise at that and two or three of the ringers kindly explained the matter together; yet I must confess I still did not understand why the bells are inverted, and have to be rung down.

"Would you like to go and see them?" said the oldest of the ringers – a fine-looking old man with sharp features and thin grey hair. He took a candle from its socket, and I followed him up a narrow stairway, whilst he shaded the flickering taper with his wrinkled hand.

Presently he opened a door like the one he had left and beckoned me to go in first. Stooping I entered the home of the bells. There they all were with their brazen throats upwards, and the air seemed still in a quiver from the recent ringing. The old man remained near the door, and I stood on a narrow plank further in.

"It wouldn't be very pleasant to stay here during the ringing," I remarked. "If a fellow made a miss-step and fell amongst the bells, he might break them, you know."

The old gentleman looked at me, and answered very seriously: "Might break *him*, more like." Just then the bells gave a shake, and the big one next to us made a sweep downwards that instantly put out the light, and left us in darkness. All the bells followed, and the tremendous din was something appalling. I could feel the solid stone wall of the tower tremble as I braced back against it. Now that the candle was out a thin sheet of moonlight made itself seen coming from a narrow slit window in the tower. I stood this pandemonium as long as I was able. I thought I could bear it while the old man could, but I was mistaken.

“See here,” I shouted. “I’ve had enough, haven’t you?” but I couldn’t make myself heard over the roar & clash. I bent over cautiously to touch the old ringer, but I couldn’t reach him. A person had to move with care. The whirling bells looked dangerous as they flashed through that thin sheet of moonlight, and disappeared into blankness at each side. I groped along the wall until I came to the closed door, and hurriedly opening it crept thankfully down the dark stairway.

On coming in among the industrious ringers again, I sat on the old oaken bench and when the ringing ended, I said “Ringing is rather dry work. Suppose we adjourn to the inn and have some ale, after you ring down the bells.”

One of the ringers who had said nothing all evening, suddenly looked up on hearing the word ‘ale’. Spitting on his gigantic hands he cried:

“Coom, coom ma lads, let’s get at aringin’ on ‘em down.”

There was a general smile at his sudden animation and one of his comrades whispered to me: “You can easily see what ales him.”