

## *A day with...*

# COLIN SPENCER

### Ringling Master at Chichester Cathedral

As Chichester Cathedral marks its 950th anniversary, we find out about the centuries-old tradition of bell ringing in this magnificent setting

#### How long have you been ringing at Chichester Cathedral?

I've had the pleasure and privilege of being Ringling Master for 46 years. I began to ring at the Cathedral in 1971 and was first elected Ringling Master in 1978. Apart from a brief hiatus from 1991 to 1993, I have held the post ever since!

#### What does your role as Ringling Master entail?

I oversee our team of bell ringers, who are all members of a volunteer group called The Chichester Cathedral Guild of Bell Ringers. We currently have 18 people as members of the Guild, making us one of the best attended and advanced practices in the area.

#### What does a typical ringing practice involve?

A session starts with gaining access to our bell tower, and then climbing up a spiral staircase. There are 82 steps up to the ringing room, so we try to minimise walking up and down the steps to admit subsequent arrivals!

Our practice sessions are one and a half hours long, and our Services require three quarters of an hour of ringing. Each piece of ringing (known as a 'touch') takes between five and ten minutes before we then have a changeover of people for the next touch. On special occasions, and on the first Saturday of the month, we undertake longer continuous sessions of roughly fifty minutes (a quarter peal), or complete peals of three hours or so.

#### What's it like to ring in this historic place?

One of the things that makes ringing here so special is the bell tower itself – being the only medieval detached bell tower of any cathedral in England, it really is unique. It's an experience to stand in such a historic space, knowing the bells I'm ringing have been heard across Chichester for centuries.

The oldest of our bells date back to 1587 and they have a distinct character that's as much a part of the Cathedral as the stone walls and stained glass. The sound we create doesn't just fill the tower but resonates through the whole city – it reminds people of the presence of the Cathedral and its history, bringing a sense of continuity and connection.

#### What's the most rewarding part?

Over my 50 years as a bell ringer, I have rung 165 quarter peals and 28 peals on

these bells! I feel very honoured and privileged to be a senior member of the Guild and to be of service to the Cathedral and a part of its traditions. One of the most rewarding parts of this role is to be part of a 'touch' that sounds so smooth, with regular notes and no mistakes! We also hold teaching and progressing sessions on the bells for new and developing ringers; these are externally silenced but electronically audible in the tower. It's very satisfying for me to see people progressing and becoming hooked on our art.

One of the many great joys of ringing is the camaraderie of the band and long-term friendships I have developed with other ringers. Our Sunday morning sessions always conclude with a coffee and after our practices we always go to a local pub.

#### Do you have a favourite memory of ringing at Chichester?

There have been so many memorable ringing occasions at Chichester Cathedral, but one that sticks in my mind is the occasion we rang for the late Queen Elizabeth II on her visit to distribute the Maundy Money at Easter 1986. We were even given some Maundy money as a token for our effort!

#### Do you ring anywhere else?

Ringling at the Cathedral is only part of my weekly rounds. My wife and I are both bell ringers at St Mary's Church, Walberton, which is where my passion for bell ringing was first ignited after a friend urged me to come along. We also help at Arundel Cathedral as well as St Giles Church, Graftonham. It is a busy routine but one that is such a big and enjoyable part of our life.

I believe that bell ringing is an art which should not be lost. There is a scheme by the national council of ringers (The Central Council) called 'Ring in 2030' to recruit as many bell ringers, particularly young ones, as possible. Perhaps readers of *BRITAIN* magazine may be inspired to join their local band...?

#### How do you like to end your day?

At the end of each day of ringing, my wife and I tend to relax at home with a well-deserved drink. ■

*Chichester Cathedral will host a year-long programme of events to celebrate its 950th anniversary in 2025. For more information, see [chichester950.org.uk](http://chichester950.org.uk)*



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