



## Older learners

One of the unexpected outcomes of the Millennium project was the number of older people coming forward to learn to ring. Frank Lewis has been talking to some mature learners.

### The best age to learn?

For years we accepted that the "best" age for recruits was around 12-17. Seasoned male ringers tell stories of leaving the choir when their voices broke and learning to ring. The inflow of youngsters seems to be slowing down these days. There are probably many reasons for this – too much homework, many other attractions, mobility and, in many cases, the lack of street cred associated with an activity like ringing. By the time they reach 45 or so most folk with ringing aspirations have already worn out several anoraks, so not being seen as "cool" by their peers is less important. Sadly, some of the still younger generation believe that it is foolish to do anything on a voluntary basis.

The thoughts in this article are based on two brand new bands needed for two brand new rings during 1999 and 2000. The experiences might not be typical elsewhere, and may be seen as too general by some, but mostly we think they are fair. It might be different where an established band recruits older learners into an existing team. We have written our thoughts as tutors and interspersed them with comments from some of the mature learners (actually septuagenarians) who've been on the receiving end – their comments are printed in *italics*.

### Are mature learners different?

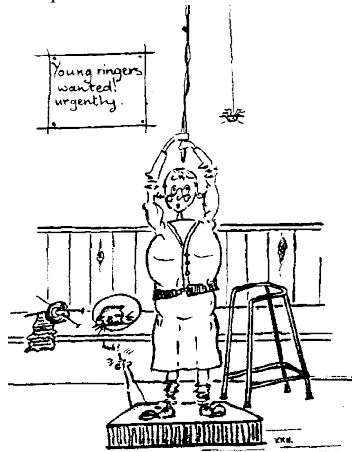
Firstly they are probably much more tenacious at the learning process than youngsters, and probably less likely to pack it in after a year or so; their aspirations are more likely to be to provide a service to the local church; they are much more likely to stay in the area because many will have finished with the corporate ladder and are happy to settle in one place; folk are retiring earlier, and in many cases they are ready to get involved locally with the church or are looking for new challenges.

*"Other factors may include an interest in the mechanics of ringing, and/or a sense of duty to the church, the community or to a benefactor".* (This last point is relevant to the towers in question, since both sets of bells were donated by a local resident.) *"Tenacity is probably partly due to the reasons mentioned above, but we also have a sense of obligation to those who spend valuable time teaching us".*

These points all seem to be in favour of older trainees, but there are many other things to take into consideration. Because most older learners have long since stopped formal tuition, they find it difficult effectively to go back to the classroom – mature students at colleges of higher education often say that going back to school is a very hard task. Older learners have quite often retired early from fairly prestigious positions and find it hard to

take instructions from youngsters of 35 or so. This can be quite a serious matter if, as is sometimes the case, some of the tutors are very capable teenagers, and extreme tact is needed; there is also a feeling that older men will take advice more readily from male tutors than from female ones.

*"We welcome advice from anyone competent to give it, whether man, woman or child",* say our advisers, but it would be interesting to hear of other tutors' views on this. *"I am quite sure that as they get older most people disregard the age of their instructor, only wishing to be sure that he/she is competent to teach".*



It's important to explain right at the outset that ringing is not easy, whatever some may say, and that bell control can take some time (ie, months, not days). I also usually explain that "over-21s" will find it harder to learn than teenagers.

*"Bell control is indeed elusive – even on good bells. I came back to ringing after about 50 years, thinking it would be like riding a bike – never forgotten – but I quickly discovered that all I remembered was faulty ringing, and that I was frightened by the flying rope. I think that as one gets older one understands more the dangers involved and this is likely to trigger attacks of panic".* This is again something that must be borne in mind. Youngsters have little fear (watch seven- and eight-year-olds learning to ski) but we have to remember that the more mature will be more cautious; quite a lot of patience is often needed to help them overcome what may seem to be completely irrational fear.

### Time invested in teaching

Now for a contentious one. With tutor time usually at a premium, is it always a good idea to spend a vast amount of valuable time with people who are less likely to be able to make it? This has nothing to do with patience or tenacity. It's simply a logistical problem in that we all, pupils and tutors alike, have limited time.

*"Clearly it is a burden on the tutor to have to continue instruction for a learner who is insufficiently apt, but if a band does not have enough younger ringers it may be desirable from their point of view for the tutor to persevere; deciding whether and when to stop must be difficult – broaching the matter more so; discuss this frankly and be reasonable – it could be a major problem".* With all teaching one must maintain a sense of humour, and touching on a tricky subject like this would be much easier in a relaxed atmosphere. *"I suspect most people would prefer to be told that they will not make a safe ringer, rather than continue driving themselves into a state of panic".*

It seems that after about 25-30 or so the ability to learn drops off, probably to the point where anyone over 65 is going to have a lot of difficulty; possibly we may have to suggest politely that some people are never going to make it when they are over some age or other – though this is a difficult decision; over 80 is probably almost always too old, but how much time should we expect to give to over-70s, say?

*"It's true that learning becomes more difficult with advancing years; as septuagenarians we find that our minds are no longer as clear as they were, they work more slowly, short-term memories are poor and loss of hearing can also be a severe handicap. These factors can prove a distinct hazard in an occupation where you can't easily stop and think. The mere fact of insecure bell control means that you can't stop anyway, and blind panic easily ensues".*

### Responsiveness

The thought above leads neatly on to the apparent tendency for older learners to say "yes" every time any advice is given, but take nothing in the way of corrective action – this seems to be a fairly common problem. We need to check that they have actually heard and understood (hearing difficulties may be a reason). Often a different way of explaining what's required will help – though this applies to all teaching, whatever age the pupils are.

*"Failure to react quickly to advice is often due to inadequate bell control; we do not deliberately disregard it".*

People over 70 generally need to be taken very slowly – to try out every movement of the hands many times before doing it with a moving bell – moving from sally to tail for instance.

*"Ideally, and in fairness to their tutors, older learners should probably devote more time to the subject than younger ones – but unfortunately this is not always possible".* This is an important point – it's easy to assume that wrinklies have nothing to do but learn to ring, whereas the person who takes up ringing at the age of 73 probably still plays tennis, swims and is a member of the local drama group.

In the later stages of development, eg when ringing call changes comfortably and well, should you take them on to the next stage, as you would automatically with younger learners? If their motivation for learning to ring is to enable the (possibly new) bells to be rung for services, they might be happy doing what they are comfortable with rather than once again tackling something new and challenging.

### The future?

We started this discussion with the intention of highlighting the problems, if any, with teaching mature people to ring. Apart from being a little more patient, much of the preceding paragraphs should apply to all teaching. Given the pros and cons of young and old learners, perhaps our future lies with more mature folk than we've reckoned on in the past. Also most of the people doing the teaching are likely to be more of an age with their pupils when they are older and may therefore have more empathy (dreadful word that it is) with them. Having said this, the Exercise still does need the young to become "mega ringers" and ring umpteen Spliced Maximus, or the impetus to aspire to greater heights will fade out.

Would any ringers, young or old, like to comment on the views in this article?

*Tail End*