

Student Recruitment – a successful Autumn in 2014

Student bellringers are working hard and mainly successfully at promoting our activity at universities. For the Autumn 2014 recruitment season, the Central Council Public Relations Committee updated and expanded a contact list of ringing in university towns. An informal survey of university contacts shows that many societies and towers with student ringers have worked hard and successfully to recruit this year – but there's more work to do.

In this article, I have highlighted particular points of interest – but this is by no means a full account of the information I've received. So please, if you know of good work that I haven't mentioned, don't take it that I don't think it's important – it's just that there is so much good stuff going on that I can't mention it all!

The 2014/15 academic year seems, in general, to have been quite successful for recruitment, with the Nottingham, Sheffield and Liverpool Societies all reporting substantial increases in recruitment over previous years. Exeter (who recruited around the same number as last year) point out that the number recruited can fluctuate greatly year to year – but only one society seems to have suffered from this with lower figures than the norm. In all cases, the recruits are a mixture of experienced ringers and learners: Imogen Diver from Cambridge comments that they have got between 5 and 10 completely new beginners. When they wrote to me, some five weeks into term, they were still getting very fluctuating beginners numbers with around 4 turning up regularly.

It's probably no great surprise to find that there are more student ringers where there is an organised society, but in towns where ringers are welcomed at local towers, much the same pattern shows up. 3 Swansea students have joined the band at Sketty (up from one last year) and students have joined local bands in Leicester, Loughborough and Canterbury. As one might expect, it tends to be existing ringers who join the bands where there is no organised student society.

In broad terms, recruitment has been successful where towers and societies have managed to make themselves visible to students. Liverpool certainly worked hard at this: Lillian Halewood tells me that they distributed around 20 posters with tear off contact slips attached around university buildings (for both the city centre universities) and local cafes / book shops / shops (mainly in and around the student area of town, and local bus and train stations). Liverpool also advertised in the Ringing World, on Campanophile and Facebook. Lillian joined a lot of Freshers groups on Facebook and posted about the first practice, she posted about ringing as her Facebook status a few times and a few student ringers shared it, also mentioning ringing when she went out with friends and their student friends, and also asked local ringers and Liverpool Universities Society members to mention to students.

Nottingham advertised at their Freshers Fair and ran a taster session at their church for people to come along and try. Chris Field says that 'this is our normal strategy although the taster sessions were new about 3 years ago and have worked quite well'

Emily Waters tells me that 'at SUGCR (Sheffield Universities Guild of Change Ringers) this year we created flyers for students to take away at the activities fair where we had a stall including a model bell and mini handbells (borrowed from a local tower). Following the activities fair we had a give it a go session where we allowed people to learn more about SUGCR, ringing in general and most importantly have a go with tied bells at a local tower. This has led to us recruiting the most new ringers for 4 years (if not more!). This has included 2 learning to ring from scratch and 5 people who could already ring. One thing we have discovered is that our most important tool is the 'digital world' because many of our new people discovered us through this as well as our presence at the activities fair. This year was the first year we haven't advertised in the Ringing World as we have not had any recruitment through this means and so invested more money and time into our 'digital presence' through our twitter and facebook account'.

Sheffield and Nottingham are by no means alone in making use of their freshers' fair: Emily Poultney of Aberystwyth comments that 'for recruitment of students, we used the societies fair. This involved a day at the fair handing out leaflets, general advertising and collecting emails to later get in contact. However most of the new members either contacted us by email previously provided on our website or just turned up to practice, again using the website for practice times'.

Durham, Liverpool and (to some extent) Aberdeen have had success working with their local cathedrals on open days. Megan Corless of Durham says that 'The ringers in Durham held an open day at the Cathedral which encouraged a lot of students to have a go, although none of them have come to us to learn properly. However, I think it was a really good idea because a lot of students don't even know we exist'. In Liverpool, the cathedral bell ringers help out with one tower open evening (billed to the general public as 'Twilight Tours') each month throughout British Summer Time, finishing in October. Lillian Halewood and other Liverpool Universities Society members distributed over 100 Twilight Tour leaflets, with details of LUSCR practices added. Jenny Holden, an academic at Aberdeen, tells me that 'We participate in Doors Open Day and have demos and get interested people to give us their details (every year). We participate in the time and talents information day at the cathedral and have publicity material in the cathedral information.'

A clear factor that emerges is the importance of a presence on the internet. A website is valuable: Emily Poultney of Aberystwyth tells me that 'most of the new members either contacted us by email previously provided on our website or just turned up to practice, again using the website for practice times'. But Liverpool and Sheffield (who I have quoted above) emphasise the importance of social media – which these days means Facebook and Twitter.

Jacqui Brown of the University of London Society also comments on this, and rightly emphasises an additional project this year: 'We wrote the UL edition of the Ringing World, used the ringing grapevine (word of mouth) and also social networking sites (Twitter & Facebook) to discover who would be joining us this year. Other university societies should definitely consider a special issue of the Ringing World themselves'. Megan Corless of Durham is by no means alone in saying 'We also wrote an article for the edition of the Ringing World which came out on 22nd August and was put together by the University of London. I thought it was a brilliant idea to have an edition that was solely for universities, especially so soon after A-level results came out.'

Whether there is a university society or not, two points are clearly emphasised: student ringers need the basic information about ringing at their destination university to be readily available (Imogen

Diver of Cambridge: 'I think it would be really useful if the Central Council could in some way ensure university ringing contacts could be published in the Ringing World in August so any existing ringers who see it are encouraged to find their university ringing society', and areas including Canterbury, Leicester and Loughborough report that if there is a contact listed, students do get in touch) and personal recommendation to students that they should go to ring in their new city is invaluable (a tower contact tells me 'that I was advised by his tower captain via the Association website, of a student coming to our city who I subsequently contacted and received a positive response').

Laura Dickinson, in Boston, Massachusetts, emphasises the benefits of links into students: ' We always attend the activities fair at MIT in the fall and advertise ourselves during the January independent studies period. I think we got one person from that this January, and one in September. Often nobody. Additionally, as several of our ringers are keen square dancers, new ringers are recruited from that community (there is an active square dance club at MIT that, like Boston area ringing, is open to people of all ages and affiliations). Two of the people mentioned above got pulled in through the square dancer connection, which has also happened in the past from time to time. The unusual thing this year was the Northeastern students. One of our long-time ringers (forty years) is a professor there. This year he sent out an email to the honors program students, two of whom were in one of his classes. Both of them came (and have stuck), plus one other who isn't directly one of his students. This fall, he sent another email out. Ten honor students got together at a pizza dinner hosted by the three, then came to practice, and then we bought them ice cream. Haven't seen them again. We'll see if we can get more of them next year. The library student found our web site and emailed for details about practice times.'

What can we do to support students to get involved in ringing? MRFS (the Canterbury branch secretary), Jenny Holden of Aberdeen and Jacqui Brown of London all suggest that more publicity material could be produced centrally, to be used locally.

All ringers can play an invaluable role by making sure that students know they will be welcome to ring at their university. The Public Relations Committee's view is that we need to do the following:

- We can all encourage students to ring when they go to university, providing contacts so they know who to talk to when they get there.

- the Central Council's Public Relations committee can

- prepare a 'university friendly' recruitment poster and other material as appropriate, to be used 'as is' or tailored for local needs;
- where there are universities but no society, the committee should encourage the local ringers to provide a contact;
- update and maintain the contact list currently held on the Central Council website, and should see whether the contact list can be published in the Ringing World at an appropriate time of year;
- encourage the Ringing World and university societies to repeat the widely praised University of London edition with a different society.

Giles Blundell, for the Central Council Public Relations Committee