

Ringling for Public Events

Much of our routine ringing is to announce church services, to train and develop ringers, or just for our own pleasure. We also ring for public events and celebrations, but probably less so than our predecessors did centuries ago. We could do much more, and in the process we could help to raise the profile of ringing.

Ringling and the community

Most bells hang in churches, but when they were first put there people thought of them as ‘their bells’ rather than the church’s bells, and ringing was an integral part of community life. When people heard bells ringing they knew why they were ringing, which was quite likely to be for a secular event. Ringing marked all manner of things, from local fairs or the squire’s homecoming, to coronations and victories abroad.

Contrast that with our modern world where people live complex lives amid a sea of information and rolling news. If they hear bells (above the traffic, and the portable music being pumped into their ears) they quite likely have no idea why they are ringing. They still love the sound of bells, but it is just one more thing on the margin of their cluttered lives.

Our challenge is to rise above this clutter, and through our ringing to engage with people’s lives. As the practitioners of a very public art, we should seek opportunities to connect with the community by ringing for public events. We should look for local events where ringing bells could add an extra dimension, and we should ring for national events, especially when we can share in nationwide publicity.

Publicising the ringing

As well as ringing, we need to tell people why we are ringing, which our forebears probably didn’t need to do. The best time to tell them is before or during the ringing, so that those who hear us won’t just think ‘There are some bells’ but ‘Ah, they must be ringing for ...’. Only for very high profile events like the Royal Wedding can we assume that people will guess why we are ringing.

That’s where it starts to get difficult for us. Not only does it mean making the effort to alert the press, local radio or whatever in advance, but there is that worrying thought that the attempt might fail, so best not to say anything until it is in the bag. The risk of losing a quarter or peal is indeed a hazard with no equivalent for orchestras and choirs. But we don’t have a monopoly on performances that might not succeed. Can you imagine a football team never publicising a match until after it had won it? Of course people understand that a match can be won or lost, so let’s educate them that a ringing performance is a challenge whose outcome can’t be guaranteed.

Reporting after the event is worth doing as well, to inform those who couldn’t hear the performance, and it may give more opportunity to expand on the event or person being celebrated as well.

We should inform the public about our ringing using any and every means at our disposal. Special ringing can be publicised in advance through local press, parish magazines, notice boards, local radio, local websites, etc. During the ringing itself, posters outside can remind passers by what is being celebrated (and if it is a long performance, how long it will last). They can also tell people ‘what’ is being rung. You might think there is no point telling people what the method is, because they can’t tell the difference anyway. But they still like to know. I have in the past been chided by parishioners who just like to know what we were ringing, regardless of whether they understood it.

Local media will often be happy to take a picture of the band, either before or after the ringing, and to run an accompanying story. Remember, every picture of normal people with bellropes in their hands helps to counteract the images of monks swinging from ropes in cartoons.

What to ring for

Ringling for a Royal Wedding is a no-brainer, but events like that don’t come along very often. There are many other things that we could ring for, but what are they? How do you decide what might generate interest? How do you find out about them far enough in advance to plan the ringing?

Let’s start with anniversaries of famous events. A couple of dozen major events of the last few centuries will have major anniversaries (50, 100, etc) over the next few years, and they are listed on the Central Council website. There is also a list of major events due to happen over the next few years. These lists will be extended as more events come to light. If you know of more events, please let us know.

Ringers are often asked to ring in support of international campaigns. Recent events include World Climate Day and the UN Bio-diversity talks. There will be others, but they are often announced at only a few months (or even weeks) notice. These too will be added to the lists as they appear.

At a local level there will be many other notable events. The CC can't track them all, so the initiative must rest with us all to spot suitable opportunities, of which there are potentially many: opening new buildings or facilities, local fairs or shows, anniversaries of civic events like receiving a charter, victories of local teams, and so on. For example, some of our older grammar schools will soon be 500 years old. More selective calls to parts of the Exercise included for example Cambridge alumni around the world being asked to ring for the university's 800th anniversary.

Co-ordinated action

Mass actions always attract more attention – from the public, from the media, and from the powers that be – so it makes sense to co-ordinate multiple ringing for the same event, not just in the ringing, but as a feature of the publicity. Local people (and media) will be even more interested in what you do, when they know that the same thing is happening across the country. So if there is a call for us all to ring for an event, as well as ringing, we should make sure that people know that our ringing is part of a nationwide (or worldwide) action.

Ringling at the same time (like 12.00 on New Year's Day 2000) is an obvious way to coordinate, but ringling sequentially is another. For example, the sound of ringling might move progressively up a valley, or along a coastline, in much the same way that the light from hilltop signal beacons used to move across the countryside in the days before telephones. Some branches of early ringling societies defined their area along a railway line, because that was how ringlers travelled between towers. They probably don't do that now (even if the railway is still there) but ringling sequentially along the line could add extra interest when ringling for its anniversary. Even more ambitious is the proposal for ringling to follow the Olympic Flame around the country on its 70 day tour next year.

Local conditions

Whether the event being celebrated is international, national or local, the ringling is ultimately local – local ringlers ringling local bells, heard by the local community. Some towers are better placed than others to do this, for example those close to the centre of a village, where most people can hear the bells. If the bells aren't audible across the community they serve, for whatever reason, it is harder because ringling is less prominent, so it is even more important to inform people about what is going on.

Another local factor is the impact on the church's immediate neighbours – which our forebears probably found less constraining. In my home tower, the ringling for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 began at 6am and continued at intervals throughout the day. There are now 8 flats right next to the tower. The earliest we normally ring is 7.30am at Christmas and Easter, and we would certainly consult our neighbours if we planned to ring at 6am.

The local context includes the church itself. This article is about ringling in the community, but the bells we ring are not ours, and their use must be consistent with the wishes of the churches who own them. Most clergy are delighted when a church-based activity reaches out to engage with the surrounding community, but there are times when a church might not want its bells rung. For example, secular ringling in Holy Week is discouraged (and in some cases during Lent). An extreme example of this constraint is when St George's Day falls on Holy Saturday, as it does in 2011, though this is very rare.

Attitudes to ringling in Holy Week typify the differences that can exist between churches. In many there is no ringling at all during Holy week, but in some there is special ringling for extra services, and maybe half muffled ringling for the Good Friday morning service. In one case the feeling is that Holy Week should be quiet, while in the other it is that people outside ought to be able to hear that something special is happening in the church. Neither is right or wrong, but we need to align our ringling policy with the views of our churches. All special ringling should be with the church's agreement, even if the details are delegated to the ringlers.

In summary

- Seek opportunities to ring for public events, both national and local
- Try to support co-ordinated ringling initiatives, whenever appropriate to local circumstances.
- Always inform the community about what the ringling is for.
- Use public ringling as an opportunity to promote ringling.

The Central Council provides free supplies of a leaflet about ringling (see: <http://cccbr.org.uk/pr/pubs/leaflet/>)

There is advice about local publicity on the CC website (see: xxxxxx NB we need to create it!!)

There are lists of things to ring for at: cccbr.org.uk/pr/things-to-ring-for/).