

First World War centenary feedback

Thank you to those ringers who responded to the request in our previous article (RW p818) for input to help formulate Council policy on how the ringing community should respond to the centenary of the First World War.

As anticipated there were strong feelings about an event that showed the failure of humanity by killing millions of people from the nations involved. The 'war to end all wars' did not do so. As well as another world war we have been continually involved in many wars around the globe killing combatants and thousands of innocent civilians.

Some of the feedback suggested that even veterans felt the war was a chapter of history that should be forgotten, but others felt that by doing so we do a disservice to those who died by making their deaths seem futile. Despite the undoubted horrors of the war, we should not judge it solely from our much later perspective. Society was very different then, with different attitudes to authority and different perceptions of our nation, all of which influenced the way that people willingly supported the war.

The most positive suggestion for ringing to emerge from the feedback was not related to national events and the Government's key dates, but was focused on a local scale – ringing on the centenary of their deaths to remember local men who gave their lives. Over 1250 ringers died in the war. They are listed on the Rolls of Honour pages of the Central Council website, along with their tower, society, age, date of death, military unit and details of their grave/memorial. It would be a fitting tribute if each tower rang a half muffled performance of some kind in memory of their local ringers who died, supported wherever possible by publicity about the individual.

A quarter peal will be the obvious length for most bands to ring, though some may want to ring a peal. Bands wanting to be a bit more distinctive may like to ring a 'backdated date touch' for the year when the ringer died. Date touches of 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917 and 1918 changes will be made available on the Council website before they are needed. Bands that don't feel confident to ring a quarter could ring a shorter performance of something that is within their capability.

There was little support for ringing at the start of the war or on the date shortly afterwards when Britain joined in, though one person suggested half muffled ringing for it. There will be a vigil in Westminster Abbey on 6th August 1914 ending at 11pm, for which there will be no ringing. This may be the example to follow elsewhere.

Ringing for the end of the war is less contentious since most bands already ring half muffled for Remembrance Sunday each year and/or on Remembrance Day itself. It is likely that the nation will take Remembrance rather more seriously in 2018, so ringers should follow the lead of their local churches and communities to determine what ringing is most appropriate.

One person suggested tolling as an alternative to half muffled ringing. Slow tolling can be an emotive sound, and would clearly be the only possibility at a church with only one bell or with no band of ringers. But it seems likely that many ringers will prefer to offer half muffled ringing. Local publicity for the ringing should explain about half muffled ringing so that non-ringers will know the significance of what they are hearing.

Of the few comments about ringing for significant events during the war, the only one gaining any support was the Christmas interlude when opposing troops played football together. Most bands are already fully committed with ringing over Christmas, so it may be difficult to find a suitable slot to fit in any more, but mention of the football in no man's land in local publicity might add extra meaning to the occasion. There may be a case for ringing to commemorate those on both sides who were lost in major battles, but it seems more appropriate to be after, rather than at the start of, the centenary of the battle.

There was a suggestion that new bells might be given in memory of local people who died during the War, which might give added momentum to an augmentation or restoration project.

The Council remains in contact with other public bodies planning commemoration of the centenary. The Department of Culture Media and Sport has agreed that national ringing is probably only appropriate for the centenary of the Armistice in 2018.

Whatever one's views about it, the centenary of the war will be in the news and many other activities in our communities will be linked to it. Some school children are being encouraged to research local people who served during the War, both those who did not come back and those who did. Activities like these present opportunities for ringers to connect more closely with their communities, perhaps by helping people to find information about local ringers who served, through the Rolls on the Council website or from local tower or ringing society records.

The Council website will in due course contain material suitable for use in local publicity.

John Harrison (on behalf of the CC PR Committee)