

Contrasting modern and historical issues in ringing (and a possible place for ringing in academic history)

David Jones

Introduction

Firstly, I'd like to thank John and Stella for inviting me to speak at this event and to all of you who have come down to support the event. My presentation is divided into two main sections although each section has a number of subsidiary elements. Some of the talk is more theoretical than actual evidence based history and, I hope, to encourage people to think critically about ringing history by asking a number of questions. The first section will be a comparison of ringing issues in the past and today. Are the issues we face today different to those in the past? Can history be used to provide answers to the questions we now face? The latter section of the talk will be a discussion about the historiography of ringing; how it has developed and who has written it before going on to suggest some potential ways in which ringing history can be included in academic history and finally if a wider focus on ringing history can attract new people into the exercise.

In the build up to the series of Trevelyan Lectures in 1960, the historian E H Carr wrote to a friend that he had been and I quote 'looking for some time for an opportunity to deliver a broadside on history in general'. The series of lectures was the basis for that classic text *What is History?* Written in 1960 it is still used and useful today. I am not aiming today to deliver a broadside on ringing history. I do aim, however, to highlight the importance of thinking critically about ringing history.

I would like to make a couple of comments before I start. Firstly, what I say about the writing of ringing history may imply that I am criticising ringers and certain individuals. I can assure you that this is not my aim. Most of what has been written so far has been well researched, well written and absolutely fascinating. Secondly, I was once told by a former vicar of Neston that in polite society one did not talk about religion, politics and sport. As a ringer for 21 years, someone with an interest in politics and a lifelong Liverpool fan, I have rarely been able to avoid the three forbidden topics. Today is no different.

But, before I start, as the qualifications for the speakers at this event have been questioned by at least one person, I should perhaps explain who I am and why I am speaking to you at this event. Although it makes it sound as if I am having an existential crisis, as you can see from the slide, I am David T G Jones and I am, until September at least, the Master of the Chester Diocesan Guild. The insistence of the T G in my name is not just pretentiousness on my part, but to distinguish myself from the other David Jones' both in the exercise and, as I think it is still the most common, or as I generally prefer the most popular, name, beyond. I began to ring as a 13 year old in Neston on the Wirral peninsular. I have put in brackets the year I started as many people seem to struggle to age me correctly. It is always nice to be thought of as younger than I am although someone recently thought I was 50! At the age of eighteen, I went off to Keele University to study Geography and History, graduating in 2003. After a few years working full-time and ringing when not working, I decided to fill my time further by studying for a Masters in History with the Open University, which I completed in 2014. The final part of the Masters was a dissertation on local history linked to one of the themes studied earlier in the programme. Although none of the themes were bell-ringing related, as one of the themes was religious history, I managed to persuade my tutors that my project would look at the development of change-ringing in Wirral from 1880 to 1914. I will utilise part of the research and also some of my conclusions later in the talk.

So those are my qualifications for speaking to you but why am I here today? Well, in 2013 I was persuaded to become Master of the Chester Diocesan Guild. Convention dictates that the Master is a member of the Central Council. When attending my first meeting, I introduced myself to and volunteered to become a member of the Biographies Committee. It was in the email exchange discussing the committees role in this event that I made the schoolboy error of making some suggestions for some potential discussion points and was consequently asked if the suggestions could be made into one of the presentations. The rest as they say.....

Contrasting modern and historical issues in ringing

The first half of my talk is a comparison of the past with the present. I aim to ask and hopefully provide some answers to a number of questions. Are the issues and problems we face today really new? Are they part of a longer term cycle? Can the lessons learned in the past provide us with the answers we crave today? Can history be misused? Finally, and this is important for the event today, for the future study of ringing history and the work of the Central Council, does ringing history matter?

Before I start with the main thrust of my presentation, I would like to pose this last question; does history, specifically in our case, ringing history, matter? In my advertorial for the event today I quoted L P Hartley from his novel *The Go Between*. He writes 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.' Many individuals, both ringers and otherwise, subscribe to this view. That history can't tell us anything and that it doesn't matter. I would like to put the counter argument; that history does matter. Some of the ways that history can be used will, hopefully, be established during today's event but the number of people here today together with those watching in the comfort of their homes highlights that ringing history is of interest to many. How and, to a large extent, what we ring is shaped by history. It is also part of the collective identity of ringing. Tradition and history are therefore important in ringing as in many other organisations. Many forms of nationalism are fundamentally based on a shared history; as part of a collective identity. This can and has been used and in some cases misused by many leaders. A short book by Margaret MacMillan entitled *The Uses and Abuses of History* is one of a number of books that highlights this issue. It is something we need to be wary of when citing historical precedent in terms of ringing history.

Collective identity underpinned by history can also be seen in many sports. As a Liverpool fan this is highlighted before every match at Anfield. Shortly before kick-off and immediately prior to that other piece of Liverpool sporting ritual, the collective singing of *You'll Never Walk Alone*, a huge banner is unfurled and passed over the heads of those standing on that most iconic of sporting stands, the Kop. Displayed on the banner are the pictures of the trophy winning managers; Bill Shankly, Bob Paisley, Joe Fagan, 'King' Kenny Dalglish, Gerard Houliher and Rafael Benitez. Hopefully, Jurgen Klopp will soon be joining them! But I digress. It is a visual reminder to the fans, both home and away, of the history and the past glories of the club and plays a key part in focussing the home fans of the importance of history to the shared identity of the club. History is also a key part of the songs that are sung throughout the game. Many clubs, especially Chelsea and Everton, are taunted for their lack of history and success.

Ringing, of course does not rely on banners or songs, although with moves afoot to make it a sport, who knows what the future may hold. However it does rely on the past to promote a collective identity. The attachment to our ringing organisations, both territorial and otherwise can be seen as a prime example of this use of history in promoting a shared collective identity. One example will suffice here. When elected to the Ancient Society of College Youths, each new member is issued with a copy of the history of the society written by Bill Cook, with amendments by Dickon Love. History is therefore seen as a key part of belonging to the society.

When carrying out research for my dissertation on ringing, and subsequent research for my work with the Biographies Committee, not to mention reading past copies of *Bell News* and *Ringling World* and the books written on ringing history it was fascinating to note how many of the issues we currently face were in evidence in the past.

Before I go on, I should perhaps outline my dissertation research methods. I looked at the development of ringing in the Wirral Peninsular from 1881 to 1914. If any of you who are unfamiliar with the area, the Wirral, as it is generally known, somewhat erroneously according to some, is a peninsular connected to Cheshire, with the river Dee separating it from North Wales on one side, the River Mersey separating it from Liverpool on the other. There are currently 19 towers with ringable bells, with one, Moreton, currently unringable and one ring of bells, Birkenhead St Mary's, which were removed when the church was demolished in the 70s and contributed to the augmentation of Wallasey St Nicholas. Why did I choose this area and this period?

Firstly, apart from my period at Keele, I have been a lifelong resident in the area and for six years I was Ringing Master of the Wirral Branch of the Chester Diocesan Guild. Apart from the inevitable interest in the area from a personal level, it also offered an interesting study area. Prior to the installation of the first ring of eight, at Bromborough in 1881, there is no evidence of change ringing in the area despite evidence of ringing in both nearby cities; Chester and Liverpool. By the end of the study period, there were eight completely new rings of bells and a further six rings had been augmented.

Secondly, the period coincided with the spread and development of the institutions that were the result of the belfry reform movement that we have heard Richard talk about. The two major ringing publications, *Bell News* starting in 1881 and *The Ringing World* in 1911 began in the study period. Both can be seen as contributing to the national spread of change ringing. Another result of the Belfry reform movement was the formation of the territorial ringing societies. The Chester Diocesan Guild and, a few weeks later, the Wirral Branch of the Guild were both formed in 1887. I had two main research questions. Firstly, how did change ringing develop on the Wirral? Secondly, did belfry reform have an impact?

As I mentioned at the start of this section, it was fascinating to see that many of the issues of the period I studied remain the same today. Articles in the ringing press, the minute books of the Wirral Branch, the remaining secretary's reports of the Wirral Branch from the 1890s, and the annual reports of the Chester Diocesan Guild, originally quinquennial reports, highlight that what we think of as new problems are not necessarily unique. After providing some examples, I will come back to that point as it is an interesting theoretical point.

So what are the similar issues that I keep referring to? There are two perennial problems facing Guild or Branch officers; levels of membership and participation in events. In the early days of the Wirral Branch, both were raised regularly in the secretary's reports. They were both issues I faced as a Branch Ringing Master and now as Master of the Chester Guild. The general perception is that the number of ringers is declining and that there is not enough participation in Branch or Association meetings, events, etc. I will return to these issues shortly as again there are some interesting theoretical questions I wish to raise.

Some of the other concerns raised in the past also give the impression that lightning often strikes in the same place twice. The early years of the Wirral Branch saw a clash between those ringers who enjoyed ringing peals and those who didn't. Some of the ringers involved appear to have tried a range of different approaches to ring peals in certain towers, from ringing peals prior to Branch meetings to paid visits by ringers so they can ring peals. Neither approach is applicable on the Wirral today but the number of pealable towers and the pool of peal ringers is relatively small so the tension is still present. Linked to this is the issue of complaints. It was fascinating to note that one of the first reports of a Branch meeting that I came across in *Bell News* was one stating that due to complaints, the opportunity to ring at Oxton had been extremely limited. I don't think I am being controversial to mention this example by name as it is well known that ringing at Oxton other than for services or a practice night is limited due to complaints. We often think concerns about complaints is a new phenomenon, it clearly isn't. It is interesting to note that one of the first committees set up by the Central Council considered the issue of noise. The committee to advise on the repair and preservation of bells, frames and fittings was formed at the first Annual Meeting of the Central Council in 1891. The provision of a body of advice, suggestions and instructions on the repair and preservation of bells, frames and fittings was one of four aims. The committee was also tasked to provide advice on noisy bells both within and without the ringing chamber, the furnishing, ventilation and heating of ringing chambers and a list of 'approximate prices, according to weight, for the several items of bell and frame furniture. Here we see, bell restoration and noise abatement, still concerns today, as a key part of the initial role of the central council. The Chester Diocesan Guild has recently had to discuss issues of tax and insurance. Again, these items have been addressed in the past.

Another issue that struck me as one which seemed to be constantly recurring is that of politics. Clashes between individuals in towers and as a Branch seem to crop up regularly in the minutes of the Wirral Branch. I am not saying here that the Wirral area is a divisive area merely that it demonstrates the inevitability of dispute amongst ringers. I should perhaps widen that statement out to include any group

or organisation. The Central Council minutes highlight this issue and there are several, shall we say robust debates, lengthy discussions and arguments. We can probably all think of examples of this at council level, local association and even tower level. As an aside, if you think ringers can be argumentative, historians are possibly even more so. If you read some of the controversies listed in Richard Evans' book, or even some of his response to the original reviews and criticism of his book, *In Defence of History*, you will see what I mean. I also enjoyed reading Michael Oakeshott's review of E H Carr's, *What is History?*

Probably the issue that has most concerned ringers throughout the history of ringing, and which is still being debated today, is that of the place of ringing and ringers within the church. Richard has discussed the belfry reform movement so I do not plan to discuss it in any great length. What I would like to say is that we need to see this as a long term historical question rather than a short term problem for the here and now or even a time limited movement in the mid to late nineteenth-century. It is interesting that two academic historians, one a lecturer, the other a PHD student, who have researched and written about ringing have highlighted the attempts to reform bell-ringing and ringers earlier than the so-called belfry reform movement. We can also see the attempts to place religion at the centre of ringing with the number of boards listing rules and prayers for ringers. The debate has recently been reignited by Michael Foulds article and the subsequent dialogue in the pages of the *Ringling World*.

Perhaps here it is worth considering why so many of the issues we face today are so prevalent in the past. Surely, one of the main reasons is that ringing has retained many of its key features. If we play a twist on the old schoolboy game of selecting a world eleven to play a hypothetical game of cricket against a martian eleven (if we can suspend logic for a moment or two), would a time-travelling band of ringers from the late nineteenth-century who popped in to a local branch meeting be able to ring with us? The answer is yes. The style of ringing hasn't changed. Many of the institutions, the territorial associations, the central council, for example, will have remained the same or only changed slightly. If we stick to the straight forward methods Plain Bob, Grandsire, maybe Kent Treble Bob, if we can find a modern band to ring it, or perhaps Stedman, the ringers would be able to join us. Maybe even Cambridge, Superlative or London if the time travellers are at the upper end of the ringing spectrum. If we are a couple short for a peal and the time travellers were willing to help out, many of the compositions rung today would be familiar to them. You get the idea. Problems learning methods, problems ring methods and problems teaching a band of learners would all be familiar to those from the nineteenth century as they are today.

Of course not all issues or problems perceived or otherwise, are consistent over time. It is interesting to look at the work of the committees of the Central Council to note the passage of concerns. Some committees were set up to focus on certain things and had a short shelf life. For example the committee looking at rail fares and attempting to negotiate set up in 1893 and lasting for ten years was clearly addressing an important issue at the time and, although train fares now can be exorbitant, if anybody suggested a committee to look at this now, they would be laughed into submission I suspect both by the central council and the various rail companies! Another example of a committee set up for a particular issue was the bells of Belgium committee set up in the aftermath of the Great War to help Belgium restore the lost bells that, it was believed, had been stolen by the Germans. As the belief that bells had been stolen turned out to be unfounded, it was wrapped up relatively quickly.

Problems also change over time. A regular feature of Chester Diocesan Guild committee meetings in the past few years is the highlighting of communication, or lack of it, within the Guild. What a nineteenth-century ringer would make of this complaint would be fascinating. In today's world of websites, email, mobile phones, social media, etc, communication is relatively easy. How many of us have sent an email to get a peal band together and had almost instant replies? Or not as the case may be. Imagine the difficulty of this in days before this. Think of how difficult it was to travel any distance to visit a tower and compare it to now with almost universal car ownership. I also suspect that a nineteenth century ringer would be perplexed by the modern fixation about health and safety and safeguarding, to name a couple modern concerns. Composition proving software would also be of interest. Although some compositions have stood the test of time, development of proving programmes has led to a huge improvement in the peal compositions rung. The Stedman Caters or Cinques composer previously

restricted to mostly tittums before a turning course into handstroke homes, would be amazed at what is produced and called today.

Of course looking at the past we can see that there have been attempts to address the concerns of ringers and the problems facing them. It is interesting to look at these past attempts to see what people have tried, what worked and what didn't and of course, why this might have been the case. I think it was Rod Stewart and the Faces who sang the line 'I wish that I knew what I know now, when I was younger.' This is how I feel when I look back at some of the solutions that ringers from the past came up with and I think about my time as Ringing Master of the Wirral Branch. As I have outlined, many of the things I faced had already been faced by others. I will argue later that history does not repeat itself, but it would have helped shape some of the modern solutions. I could go on at length here, but as lunch awaits I will restrict myself to one example. The problem of training a band, or a collection of bands, of ringers is one that has faced many of us at various times. On the Wirral we came across the idea, when two towers had newly formed embryonic bands that we would hold a Saturday morning session every week for them to be taught bell handling before sending them off to their own towers. We thought this was new and cutting edge. Of course it wasn't. If we had known about earlier attempts, would we have come across the solution earlier? Would we have tried it if we had come across it or would we have assumed it wouldn't work? It is interesting to think that we are often encouraged to look at other areas to find best practice, but rarely look at other times.

Another example of an attempted solution to the problem of training ringers, would be the solution provided by many of the earlier associations when first formed. Many of them paid an instructor or instructors to visit towers to train bands of ringers. This may seem strange to us today as ringing remains largely based on voluntary activity. Is this something we should look at again?

I would now like to look at a couple of things in greater detail in order to highlight the importance of challenging received wisdom, or the historiography of ringing history. These are things that have regularly been defined as problems and solutions have been sought to address them. What is the general perception of the number of ringers? From the pages of the Ringing World, discussions in meetings at local tower, branch, association and a national level, the general view, I believe is one of declining numbers. Is this the case?

The slide now on the screen shows the total membership of the Wirral Branch of the Chester Diocesan Guild from 1888 to 2014. This data has been extracted from Guild reports stored in the Chester Record Office with the early years taken from reports compiled by the Wirral Branch Secretary. The blue line is the membership level, whilst the red line is the average membership; 126.55 to be precise. Yes, there is a decline in membership in the last couple of years, but in terms of numbers, Branch membership is currently well above the long term average and overall has been one of increase rather than decrease. Of course, this is only one, relatively small sample. To get a more complete picture, we would have to look at every association in the country. I am sure, some areas would show a declining number of ringers; others would show an increase. What I am trying to highlight is that for the number of ringers, we should not just accept the hypothesis that ringing is in decline. A long term perspective is essential.

As someone taught by postmodernists, I should perhaps highlight some potential issues with the data. Firstly, this data was taken from membership of the Chester Diocesan Guild. There were, I am sure, ringers who were not members of the Guild in Wirral towers during this period. A couple of examples will suffice to illustrate my point. In the 1890s, both West Kirby and Eastham gave up membership voluntarily. Both, I think would have continued to ring. It is also interesting to note, one Wirral tower, Port Sunlight, did not enter union with the Chester Diocesan Guild until 1948. Prior to this, the ringers were members of the Lancashire Association. Finally, in the 1970s it was highlighted in the Annual Reports that both Burton and Liscard both had call change bands but neither tower had members of the guild. Secondly, it is not a complete record. There are a couple of annual reports missing from the archives and those reports produced during World War Two are greatly reduced due to paper shortages. Membership levels are therefore not included. It is my choice to present the data in this way, rather than have gaps showing no membership. Thirdly, the total membership levels do not take local differences

into account. Again a couple of examples will suffice to illustrate this. Some towers, for example Oxton, Wallasey St Hilary's and my own tower, Neston, membership levels remain relatively consistent. Others had a strong presence before fizzling out, for example Liscard from the late 1880s to the start of World War Two. Other towers, for example Shotwick and Thurstaston have had either no or very little history of membership but have recently exploded. One final point about this chart is that numbers do not relate to the quality of ringing nor does it say how many towers had ringing for Sunday services. This is one of the limitations of the sources we use in ringing history. I will discuss this further in the second part of my talk.

All of this may seem as if I am questioning my own evidence. What I am trying to suggest is that as historians and ringers in general, we need to look very carefully at the evidence, especially statistics, before we make decisions. We should not accept hypotheses or the evidence underpinning them without critically looking at the sources. Here I would like to point out one of my pet hates. Statistics, and in a more general way, scientific theories, are often reported as fact, when often they are merely a demonstration of evidence or a theory. In the early twentieth century, historians tried to make history more scientific. What they didn't realise, and many people still don't, is that science is based on the premise of a theory based on rigorous research with evidence to back it up. It is also a hypothesis to aid further study. This is surely what history is. This can be seen with the blind acceptance of so called science based reports such as man-made climate change or recently the report on safe drinking levels. But that argument is for another time.

The second concern that I wish to raise again to highlight the need to think carefully about a perceived issue is that of attendance at local association meetings. There seems to have been a constant effort to try and boost the attendance at meetings. On the Wirral, when I was Ringing Master and in subsequent years, the general yearly average is in the mid 20s. Certain meetings generally seem to do well, for example the AGM in November and often the striking competition if numerous bands enter, others do less well. The general perception is that this attendance level is not entirely satisfactory and that in the past attendance was a lot higher with various strategies utilised in an attempt to boost numbers. In the 70s and 80s, attendance at meetings was usually averaging in the mid to high 30s, occasionally in the early 40s. In the 1950s, there was even one year where the average attendance was 61. Here, I would like to highlight the importance of looking at the longer term view. In the early years of the Wirral Branch the average was pretty similar to what it is now. We now seem to be going back to a more sustainable level. It also begs the question, one which I raise regularly but very rarely get an answer back, what constitutes a successful meeting? If I was a learner attending my first branch meeting and there were 60 people present, would I go away happy? Would I have had many rings? The answer to both of those questions would depend on the individual but I suspect would probably be negative. This is an aside, but it is useful to think how engrained perceptions need to be looked at carefully, questioned and not merely accepted as fact.

Another example of looking critically at evidence can be seen by looking at the number of peals rung. John Harrison stated in his concluding article about the First Peal Project in 2015, that the number of people ringing peals is declining. I am not disputing this; the evidence provided by Pealbase supports this. From a local level, the pool of ringers who are prepared to ring peals in Cheshire and Merseyside is relatively small and has declined. But I am going to highlight a point from the number of peals rung for the Chester Diocesan Guild since 1950 to illustrate the limitations of statistics. The chart shows the number of tower bell peals rung for the Guild since 1950 and is taken from Andrew Craddock's excellent website, PealBase. The red line shows the number of ringers, the blue one the number of peals. The best year for both peals rung and the number of people taking part, and incidentally, the number of people ringing their first peal, was 1987. This coincided with the centenary of the Guild with the ringing of peals being part of the celebrations. It shows a dramatic decline in both peals rung and ringers taking part after 1998 with a gradual improvement in the past couple of years. There are many reasons for this decline. As I've mentioned the pool of peal ringers is relatively small. The number of towers where peals can be rung regularly is equally small and the number of towers where peal requests are rejected is increasing. There are many social and demographic reasons behind this. However, what the chart doesn't show us is that in 1998, the rules for peals rung for the Chester Diocesan Guild were changed.

To stop certain individuals ringing peals for the guild with only one resident member and taking advantage of the cheap peal fee, the rule was changed so that more than half of the band had to be resident members of the Guild. I suspect, that the number of peals rung for the Chester Diocesan Guild in the period since the rule change is more of a true reflection on the capabilities of the Guild than in the previous years. Whether the rule change was right or wrong, and incidentally it has recently been rescinded, is beside the point. What is the point is that we need to look carefully at any evidence in detail and constantly to ask the question 'why'?

Implicit in my use of evidence so far is the contention that ringing history can be useful. I am not alone in this, with many people using history to support arguments. Should this be the case is a very important question and has been hotly contested by historians discussing the study of history from the nineteenth-century onwards. On one hand are the idealists who believe that history should be studied for its own sake with no thought to utility. As John Tosh suggests, this view was a key belief of the nineteenth-century historicism. One man from the twentieth-century who strongly believed in this was the conservative philosopher, historian and writer Michael Oakshott. I find his writing absolutely fascinating and can recommend the collection of his essays entitled *What is History and other essays*. It is a worthy view on the study of history. The slight problem is that it is idealistic and as Marnie Hughes-Warrington suggests, excludes most of what we would call historical scholarship. We can see the search for relevance for history in schools and universities and, dare I say it, the work of the Central Council trying to establish a position for the discipline as going against this view. I would suggest that many people writing the history of ringing meets Oakshott's ideals. The study of ringing history has largely been done out of interest in the past for its own sake and its attempt to provide a coherent account of the past rather than an attempt to utilise it for any particular purpose.

Many people do use history in a more practical manner. The search for progress by Whig historians, Marxists and religious followers all search for progress from point A to point B, whether it be the formation of stable government, the overthrow of the bourgeoisie or towards the final judgment. We can see the history of ringing as a search from the start to its current position. History has been used to provide answers to current problems and to predict the future. Ringers, politicians, journalists, sportsmen and women, not to mention historians all fall into this category. Can history predict the future? The historian Richard Evans clearly believes not. I quote from his entertaining, and occasionally cutting, book, *In Defence of History*, 'It is always a mistake for a historian to predict the future.' He also suggests that 'time and again history has proved to be a very bad predictor of future events.' Tosh also supports this view before suggesting that to do so is a 'habitual and unavoidable part of human reasoning.' Why is this? Well, both Evans and Tosh both highlight the important belief that history, although it often appears to do the opposite, does not repeat itself. Tosh states 'No one historical situation has been or ever can be repeated in every particular.' This may seem to contradict some of my earlier points, but it is very much worth remembering when we see evidence of the past being used to predict the future.

So, the obvious question following this is what can history be used for? Fortunately, Tosh, Evans, Carr, et al, give us some answers. History, Tosh suggests summarising various historians, reminds us that there is usually more than one way of looking at a situation and that rather looking for a precedent we should look at possibilities. The context provided by history can help us look at past options; what works and what doesn't and apply them to different situations. Finally, Tosh suggests that the purpose of history is to 'anchor it in a real past instead of a mythical construction.' Ringing history needs to look at all three uses proposed by Tosh. Looking at the issues facing ringers in the past, looking at how they dealt with them and how successful or otherwise they were, can help us develop in the present day. The importance of providing a coherent and accurate history can help us avoid making mistakes or possibly learning the wrong lessons provided by history.

A possible place for ringing in academic history

I would like now to turn to the study of ringing history. I will be looking at who has written the history of ringing, and for whom. I will ask how the historiography of ringing has developed and will question if this can be challenged. The potential for ringing to be studied as part of academic or popular history will

be considered and finally I will ask if a wider focus of ringing history can attract people to the exercise.

My first point with regard to this is that ringing history has been written by ringers, primarily for ringers, read primarily by ringers. Bell ringing and ringers has, for the most part, been ignored by academic historians. This absence of interest has been acknowledged by one historian, Christopher Marsh, who included a chapter on bells and their ringers in his book, *Music and Society in Early Modern England*. The reason for this lack of interest, Marsh believes, is that historians have tended to regard ringing as not properly a musical activity. This is likely, but I would also suggest that there are other causes for the lack of interest in ringing history amongst academic historians. From a personal point, prior to proposing ringing as a potential topic for my dissertation, it was relatively clear that the tutors who reviewed my proposal were not clear about the distinction of bell ringing and change ringing and the difference between bells hung for change ringing and that of a carillon. This lack of knowledge about bell ringing in general and change ringing in particular is a barrier, not only for ringing history to get a foothold in academic history but also for the wider public who despite our best efforts are unaware or indifferent on what exactly we do. A focus originally on the state and its actors and then a search for relevance by historians to justify funding, jobs and students may perhaps also explain the lack of interest in ringing. I am not going to give a detailed literature review as you are probably aware of most of the books written on the history of ringing.

I have said that the writing of ringing history has largely been left to ringers. We have to ask ourselves, is this a problem or not? Like most questions, there are pros and cons. As I have suggested above, ringing is not widely understood by non-ringers. Are non-ringers therefore qualified to write about ringing? Would not knowing the difference between a Surprise and a Delight method make a difference? Would they be more objective than ringers in writing the history of ringing? For example, as ringers do we tend to assume that ringing is the prime importance? Is the social context more important than what was rung, how many changes were rung and how long it took? In another study of ringing in Early Modern England, this time a PHD thesis by a Robert Hill, it is stated, that the primary focus of campanologists and bell historians has, and I quote, 'traditionally been upon bells as objects, or upon bell founders, methods for ringing, bell technology, and bell ringers.' Perhaps this narrow focus needs to widen in order to attract greater attention from professional historians. Despite the article by Katherine Hunt, a lecturer in English, on the interest in methods during the seventeenth century, there has been nothing about England to match the study by Corbin on the role of bells in political and social life in France. Of course, there are many sub-disciplines of history which have debated the merits or desirability of outsiders commenting on their group, identity and activity. Gender, sexuality, race and religion have all gone through consistent debates. The idea that only Christians can write about Christianity or that only women can write the history of women is perhaps an out of date view. If only ringers write the history of ringing, it could very quickly turn into autobiography, creating a vicious circle of it being of even less interest to non-ringers. As long as the subject is studied in a fair and consistent manner, I don't think it would matter if a non-ringer wrote the history of ringing. It is up to as ringers interested in history to help the debate and ensure what is written about us and our way of life is accurate.

Objectivity and the potential of bias, both accidental and deliberate are key issues for the study of history. I mentioned in the first section of this talk that we have to look at evidence critically. I cannot stress this enough. How we select and how we use evidence can affect our interpretation of history and of ringing. The choice of evidence we select as ringers may be very different to what would appeal to somebody looking at history from the outside. The misuse of history and the lasting impact of myth also need to be regarded. An example of this can be seen in the letters to the Ringing World about this event. One of the letters criticised the College Youths for its failure to allow women to be members before 1998, not mentioning that a number of women had been members before 1919. To criticise an organisation for only allowing women to join 18 years earlier, seems to me absurd. Of course, no criticism was made of the women only society; the Ladies Guild. I say this not to spark controversy but to show that what we write can have an impact on the historiography of ringing.

Of course, there has also been a constant debate about the difference between amateurs and professionals. Much of what has been written on ringing history has by definition been written by amateurs. That is by

ringers. Perhaps that is another reason why professional historians have avoided the history of ringing. So what is the difference? Generally speaking it has to be said, not very much. Perhaps professional historians include academic levels of referencing and footnotes. Perhaps they provide more context by having access to recent books and journal articles. However, I would point out that one of the main contributors to ringing theory, and probably the most widely read, E H Carr, who I mentioned earlier, was himself not a conventional historian. He studied Classics at Cambridge before entering the Foreign Office. He didn't take a PHD. His first academic job was at the University of Aberystwyth as Professor of International Relations before going into journalism. He then obtained a tutorship in Politics at Balliol before his final position as a Senior Research Fellow at Trinity, Cambridge. The postmodern mantra of knowing who is the author of history, can be quite enlightening at times.

It is important to state that although ringers have been the main writers of the history of ringing, it has not entirely been ignored by historians. I have already cited the work by Marsh and Hill on ringing in the early modern period. Added to that is the article by Katherine Hunt, an English Literature lecturer at Queen's, Oxford. We await her book about change-ringing in the seventeenth-century imagination. Urban historian Peter Borsary has also written on ringing, suggesting it should be included in urban musicology. Sadly, he does not mention ringing in his extensive work on provincial towns. Of course, it is always possible to combine academic study with a hobby. Professor Ron Johnston, a former president of the Central Council, has written a wide ranging geographical article on ringing which contains an introduction to ringing history. A few more articles like that would be very beneficial.

Although I have highlighted that ringing has largely been ignored by professional historians, and advanced some possible reasons why this has been the case, I do find it interesting that the history of ringing hasn't been picked up by them. Richard Evans states that 'virtually everything of meaning or importance to contemporary humanity now has a written history.' It is important to note that he does not distinguish between the professional and the amateur. However, it is odd the one sub-discipline of history in particular has not picked up on ringing; that of religious history. My own dissertation attempted, and reading it back, probably failed, to link ringing and trends in religious history. The general historiography of religious history was one of a generally declining interest and involvement in organised religion, especially the Anglican Church, specifically amongst the working classes. This decline in religious observance among the working classes, especially in the rapidly expanding urban areas was highlighted by Christian commentators in the nineteenth-century, for example by Reverend Dr Thomas Chalmers in 1821 to the clergyman A F Winnington-Ingram in 1896 as well as by Horace Mann in his report on the 1851 religious census. This contemporary nineteenth century view has shaped the work of religious historians, most notably Inglis and Wickham.

However, more recent research has shown that not only was the decline not as bad as either contemporaries or subsequent historians have thought but religious engagement was widespread. Private religion, the importance of the church in the key parts of the life cycle, namely birth, death and marriage, albeit not necessarily in that order, and the community offered by the church institutions have all been identified within this sphere. The role of organisations like Sunday Schools has been a major focus of historians, highlighting their contribution to working class life in terms of literacy, religious teaching and, in providing the opportunity of parents of having a couple of hours away from children in what were largely crowded homes, the contribution to the growing population! The expansion of formal ringing societies, their religious focus and the working and lower middle class involvement must surely be worth a study.

Many of those writing the history of ringing have identified the link between the Oxford Movement and Belfry Reform. Although I think this is something that perhaps needs more research, the increased discipline of other groups within the church, most notably musicians and choirs has been identified by some historians. Sheridan Gilley, to name one religious historian, has identified this process without going on to comment on the similar process of bell-ringers following the formation of the geographical associations. This saw the informal musicians of the early modern period being replaced by the organ and robed choirs of the nineteenth century. This is still the case in many churches today. Elsewhere, Asa Briggs also hints at a restriction of ringing for secular purposes in Birmingham in the nineteenth-century

without offering further explanation. Here again, lack of knowledge would seem to have prevented further discussion. The installation of bells, as well as things like stained glass windows has also been highlighted by historians. Rosemary Sweet defines this as part of a national trend but again does not develop the idea. The installation or augmentation of bells was often the final piece of the church jigsaw; a final luxury to complete the job. For example on the Wirral, there was considerable church building, extension and restoration during the nineteenth-century. Only St Nicholas, Wallasey and Port Sunlight had bells installed at the same time as the churches were built, many being installed many years after the work. Bromborough for example was repaired and extended in 1846 with the bells only being installed in 1881. The installation of bells in churches could be seen as part of an increased confidence and wealth of the church, going against the perception of decline. This again would be a worthy historical study.

Perhaps the counter argument can be levelled at those ringers who have contributed to the history of ringing. Perhaps the lack of a wider context has had an impact on those who would seek to study the history of ringing from an outside perspective. This is something we have to address as ringing historians. Context is key. The general historiography of a gradual spread of change ringing followed by a dramatic increase following the belfry reform movement, itself driven by the Oxford Movement, and it's resulting institutions of the ringing press and the growth of the territorial associations perhaps needs to be investigated further and possibly challenged. It is a shame that there has been no definitive history of the nineteenth-century growth in change ringing. The three volume *Change Ringing: A History*, unfortunately ends at the start of the nineteenth-century. Yes, the nineteenth century is covered elsewhere, but we still wait for the history to be written fully. A key part of history is the debate about it. We should not accept one idea as fact, we should explore other interpretations. We should look carefully at the evidence. Does all the evidence point to the same interpretation or do they point at difference? Historiography is always changing.

Religious history is not the only sub-discipline of history that could or should consider ringing as a topic of investigation. In fact, as the recent debate on ringing as sport, we should perhaps not restrict ourselves by linking ringing with religion. The history of leisure could also be a key area of research. Cultural and Music History could also be a prime sub-discipline to focus on ringing. I am sure we can all think of other sub-disciplines that might benefit from the study of ringing, and of course, might help ringers understand the past, the present and, who knows, the future.

As I have previously outlined who has written the history of ringing, I will now turn to how it has been written. In his book entitled 'What sport tells us about life', the former England and Middlesex cricketer and now author, journalist and commentator (as an aside he was awarded a double first in history at Cambridge), analyses how historians would write the history of the 2005 Ashes series between Australia and the victorious England team. Perhaps as someone who, despite being born in England, is proud of his Welsh roots, I should clarify that as the England and Wales team! In his entertaining chapter, he outlines some of the different possible historical interpretations. The Whig historian, he says, would have written a multi-volume, long term and over-arching theory including progress by meritocracy, the emergence of new world sporting power and the ending of the class-ridden anachronisms that were previously part of the game. The institutional or administrative historian would highlight the restructuring of the English game and the institutional reforms that led to things like central contracts. The so called 'great men' historians such as Carlyle, with apologies to those who may be offended by the non-PC language, would have focussed on the players involved. The head coach, Duncan Fletcher, the captain, Michael Vaughan or the various players who performed to heroic standards. Finally, Smith outlines the view of the counter-factual historian that it could have been very different if, for example that scourge of English batsmen, Glenn McGrath hadn't stepped on a stray cricket ball during a warm up to the second test, or if Ricky Ponting hadn't chosen to bowl first at Edgbaston.

Ringling History can be and has been written, certainly in the first three interpretations. The overarching history of progress and development can be seen, for example, by the three volume *Change Ringing: A History*. The administrative and institutional history of ringing has been demonstrated by the large number of studies on the societies, both geographical and non-geographical and the history of the Central Council. The 'great men', and increasingly 'great women' histories' can be seen in books or collections

of individuals; the work done by the Biographies committee, for example or the two *Giants of the Exercise* books. A counterfactual approach could be taken to examine Katherine Hunt's suggestion that change-ringing was only one response to the question of what to do with bells hung in churches. Why did change-ringing develop in Britain, primarily England and not on mainland Europe? If the booze-driven, noise obsessed youths had turned to something else, would we be here today?

Of course these are not the only interpretations of history that could be used. Smiths example of English crickets longest awaited victory, ignored some obvious other examples. Local history is a prime example. Many of the histories of bell ringing have concentrated on ringing at a local level. The history of individual towers is an interesting concept and ranges from nationally recognised towers such as David Potter's history of the bells of York Minster, to less well known towers such as John Harrison's study of Wokingham. Increasing the geographical scope but still retaining the local theme, the history of the geographical associations is a neat example of local history. There are a number of examples but I personally think John Eisel's history of the Hereford Diocesan Guild is an exemplar of this type. Increasing the scope a little further, Paul Cattermole's history is a good example of a county approach without necessarily focusing on a particular organisation. I mentioned gender history before, but a gendered interpretation could be valid. I don't particularly want to discuss this in too much detail, partly because Steve will be talking about it after our break for sustenance, partly because I am desperately trying to avoid the slow handclap threatened in the pages of the Ringing World! I will however point out that up until the twentieth century, ringing was almost exclusively a male dominated world. In my own study, there is no mention of women ringers until 1915. This is perhaps surprising, as Davidoff and Hall argue, that the church was a major public sphere for women. One final method of interpretation is a class-based history of ringing. It has been identified that the early days of change ringing was driven by the upper classes, before passing down to the lower classes in the nineteenth century and finally ending up with the middle classes today. This perceived view needs to be researched more thoroughly in my view, with the dynamic between the groups being an interesting topic of study. Karl Graves entertaining book on forbidden methods demonstrates that class-conflict can be a focus for study. Of course, there is always postmodernism with the concentration on language over experience. That the histories we assign to things are as Keith Jenkins writes, 'composed, created, constituted and always situated literatures' and that 'they carry within them their author's philosophy on the present, the past and the future'. I think that a lot of what has been written does this. In case you accuse me being a hypocrite, I would say I have done that today.

Thinking about the theory of ringing history and the possible interpretations for how we write it may seem like a waste of time and that we should just research and write rather than get bogged down with theory. It is important as how we write history and how we have written it in the past affects how we look at not only the history of ringing but also how we look at the present and, a key point to today, the future. That we have not done this as ringers is perhaps not surprising as it has been suggested that historians have also avoided it. Michael Oakeshott for one believed that the philosophy of history should be left to philosophers as historians tend to become too absorbed in their research to turn their thoughts back onto themselves. The postmodernist Keith Jenkins has also picked up on this theme, suggesting that it can be argued that history is theoretically backward compared to other disciplines such as philosophy and literature. His short book on *Re-thinking History* was first published in 1991 so it is perhaps a little out of date, as there has been a raft of new books, and in some cases, revisions of old ones, on history theory and philosophy.

The range and volume of available sources makes ringing a potential area of academic study. Perhaps the lack of attention so far is the lack of knowledge of these sources. If that is the case it is our job as ringing historians to publicise them. When conducting research for my dissertation on Wirral ringing I was able to utilise a number of sources. Firstly, there is the physical evidence of bells themselves. The online version of Dove's Guide provides details of the current rings of bells and therefore a picture of installation, augmentation and restoration can be drawn. There are also peal boards, belfry prayers, rules, photographs and the general ephemera of ringing chambers. Then we come to the documents. The early development of change ringing is fortunately recorded in the newspapers and periodicals during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thanks to the work of John Eisel and Cyril Wratten, a large

collection of these extracts are now compiled in a series of books. I am sure Stella and the Library Committee will thank me when I remind you that these are on sale here today! Equally important are the ringing periodicals, primarily *Bell News* and *The Ringing World*. They provide a wealth of material recording performances and details of installations and augmentations as well as providing information on the contemporary concerns, issues and stories of the day. Available on DVD, although searching is sometimes haphazard and occasionally requires a bit of imagination, they provide easy access to the history and development of ringing. Incidentally, *Bell News* also included job adverts, especially those ringers looking for a situation, often highlighting their prowess as a ringer and/or as a conductor. This is perhaps another study in waiting, as it could be used to look at the social make-up of ringers in the period.

I think it is fair to say that ringers enjoy keeping records and there is a wealth of material contained in the archives of the Chester Diocesan Guild now stored in the Chester Record Office. Minute books and meeting attendance records are a wonderful source of ringing history. They record the concerns of the day but also provide a snapshot of life at the time. This is also the case for individual ringers with their records, peal books and occasionally diaries.

Of course, as I have mentioned previously, the sources are not perfect. We have tended to keep and maintain items that are of interest to us as ringers. Peal books, for example, are fascinating but are they as interesting to someone looking at, for example, the leisure activities of the working classes in the nineteenth century or for religious observance? I think they can be, we just need to shift our focus slightly when recording or reporting them. The evidence is also highly skewed towards the top end of ringing. Peals are recorded; the people who turn up to ring call changes in a village church aren't. As ringers and ringing historians, we need to try and find evidence of both.

We also have two more important resources. Firstly, we have a number of resources on the Central Council website. The biographies of Central Councils reps and increasingly, ringers who have never served on the council, provides details of many ringers. Work on local associations, central council committees and the minutes of council meetings are also contained. As with items stored in archives, it is very easy to lose a lot of time when finding some absolutely fascinating material. There is also us as ringers who can be used as sources. Fortunately, ringing seems to help our longevity. The span of our collective knowledge is immense. I have always enjoyed listening to stories of the 'old days' from the likes of Brian Harris, Alex Martin and Ernie Carvell. It is important that their stories are not lost.

Talking of sources, it is interesting to note that they provide a clue to the perception of ringing within the wider, non-ringing public. What I mean by this is that coverage in the press of bell ringing in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, would suggest a wider knowledge of ringing and a more widespread interest than there is today. I would be very surprised to see a peal reported in the local press today, whereas it used to be fairly commonplace. Another example can be seen in the way that bells were often included in local trade directories. The 1902 edition of Kelly's Directory of Cheshire, contains references to the bells of each of the towers on the Wirral and wider county of Cheshire. Knowledge of the quality of bells is part of the detailing of year of installation, etc. This is in comparison to the most recent collection of histories of Cheshire churches, where I believe there was a conscious decision not to include details of bells. It would be great, if the previous levels of interest and knowledge could be regained. Perhaps ringing history could play a part in this.

Perhaps we should ask if it is necessary for non-ringing historians, either academic or popular, to write about ringing history? Perhaps not but as History with a capital H has become so popular, we are perhaps missing an opportunity to spread the word about ringing. Think of the amount of books written and published each year. Think about the history programmes, websites, popular and non-academic magazines. Think of the number of museums covering practically everything that could possibly be shown. Yes many of the books written and TV programmes shown cover general topics and are heavily weighted towards the twentieth-century conflicts but also think about the number of local history projects that inspire the imagination not to mention the rise of family research. Ringing History can provide a valuable introduction to our wonderful world of bell ringing.

I think you have probably gathered by now that I think we should be encouraging the wider study of ringing history. Hopefully I have managed to outline some of the possible things we can do. Firstly, we need to have an ongoing theoretical debate on how we should write the history of ringing; it's interpretations and methodology. We need to write more articles, deliver talks to local history societies and have more events like today to provide a focus on ringing history. Articles need to be written for both ringers and non-ringers. Linked to this, we need to think carefully on the available evidence and sources and show that there are elements of ringing that can and should be studied. Providing context to link bell ringing and the wider world is also a key part for moving forward. We should encourage our young ringers who go off to university to look into and to study ringing. Of course, we have lots of older ringers who may be persuaded to study for a degree after retirement. They should also be encouraged to write about ringing. As both a graduate of the Open University and the new Ringing Master of it's ringing society, I can thoroughly recommend it. Finally, and this is probably the most controversial suggestion, is a Central Council led focus on ringing history. Today, we have two committees who have a historical focus. The combined efforts of the Library and Biographies Committees have led to this event today. Perhaps a long term proposal that we should consider is the merger of the two committees to produce a combined Ringing History Committee. This would not control the writing of ringing history but would be a focus for its encouragement and development. A model, I suppose, would be the Compositions Committee, where composition is carried out by many people, with a committee to collect and encourage composition. Perhaps this is a debate for another time.

Ringing and History are both passions for me and I think the combination of the two can and should be pushed as much as possible. We should encourage ringers to read, write and debate the history of ringing. We should encourage those who write, research and read history that ringing is not only an interesting subject to study. Who knows, it could be a great source of potential new ringers. Thank you for listening.