

Trends in Ringing - Summary Report

In 2000, the Central Council meeting, at Bury St. Edmund's, adopted the following resolution: ***That the Administrative Committee should set up a working group (1) to ascertain the current state of ringing and the developing trends; and (2) to give their views on likely future developments and how the Council and ringing associations might deal with these developments.*** (Prop. S. Coleman, Sec. A. Chantler).

This working group was duly set up towards the end of 2000 and comprised M. Henshaw, P. Newton, B. Peachey, S. Warboys, M. Davies. This report summarises the findings of the group and makes certain recommendations to Council as a result of these findings. More detailed analyses of the results are given in the appendices.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The major issue to emerge from the research is, as anticipated, that ringing is suffering from a failure to recruit and/or retain young people. Reasons why this is a problem in the longer term (though not in the immediate future) are given, and it is recommended that the Central Council initiate a ringing rejuvenation project to promote recruitment and effective training and retention of young ringers. The Public Relations, Education, and Ringing Centres committees should jointly address this.

In terms of overall health of the exercise, probably the total number of ringers, and certainly the number belonging to affiliated guilds, has increased. The level of technical complexity of methods rung to peals has dramatically increased, though it seems unlikely that this has benefited the general level of practice and service ringing.

The relationship of ringers to their churches, and particularly to the clergy, is in general good, though the enthusiasm for, and understanding of, ringing amongst the clergy could be improved.

Problems, where they exist, with clergy, and with recruitment - especially of young people - are associated in some part with image. There is a role for the Central Council in developing ways to promote ringing as a lively and exciting activity and to execute these at a national level and support Guilds in their endeavours at a local level.

SCOPE

The original resolution was adopted very much in the context of a perceived aging of the ringing population. Not surprisingly, this has been a main focus of the group's work, but the group were anxious to cover a wider, relevant range of topics in order to identify threats and risks that could impact ringing over the next few years. Table 1 provides a list of topics, and summarises the extent to which they have been covered:

Trends in Ringing	Addressed and recommendations provided
Age Profile	Addressed and recommendations provided
Finances and facilities	Not addressed by this group, but the Bell Restoration Funds Committee have surveyed guilds and this group supports their conclusions and recommendations.
Guilds	Addressed
Church	Addressed and recommendations provided
External influences	Not addressed and requiring further investigation

Table 1: Topics considered in this activity

Initially the group had wished to include ringing outside the UK within the analysis, in the event this has not been possible. It is probable that whilst some issues may be common to the international ringing community, most are primarily relevant to ringing in the UK and the recommendations made within this report reflect that.

A survey basically provides information at a particular point in time, and trends must be derived from comparing the same data recorded at different times. It has been surprisingly difficult to obtain comprehensive data of a sociological/demographic nature from which to establish trends.

There is, of course, much data available in ringing (ringers are notorious record keepers!) but it is not organised in a convenient form for analysis such as this. The Central Council survey of 1988 is an excellent summary of such data, but with no follow-on survey it is not possible to identify changes with certainty.

It is appropriate to mention here a survey carried out by Philip George (District Secretary of the Huntingdon District of the Ely Diocesan Association) of towers in his district. The survey, published in November 2000, provides an excellent and appropriately detailed snapshot of ringing in the Huntingdon district in 1999. If such surveys were carried out from time to time (say every 10 years) in every ringing area, then a wonderful historical record would be available. Philip's work is to be commended.

The Central Council should take a lead in maintaining relevant records of the 'state of ringing' and it is recommended that the Administrative Committee develop the framework through which this may be done.

Recommendation 1:

That the Administrative Committee construct the framework under which an historical record of the 'state of ringing' may be developed.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

It was made clear at the time of the original resolution that a survey of ringing (such as that carried out in 1988) was not required. As such the group endeavoured to obtain as much information as possible from existing sources. Nevertheless, some active data collection proved necessary. The following is a list of data sources and activities that have been used in this analysis:

Existing data sources

1. Central Council Committee records and data (Bell Restoration Funds, Peals Analysis)
2. Ringing World (principally the peal columns, though reports have also been used)
3. William Hall's peal records website
4. Guild reports
5. Ringing World marketing survey
6. Huntingdon Millennium survey

Data collection activities

7. Ringing Roadshow questionnaire
 8. Telephone survey
 9. Specific letters of enquiry
 10. University Societies questionnaire
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ANALYSIS OF DATA

The Millennium Effect

There have been concerns expressed in various places that data collected at this time will be 'distorted' by the millennium recruitment and restoration initiatives. It should be kept in mind that the millennium initiatives are part of the trends, and their effects will determine some of the trends in ringing for some time to come. It should not, therefore, be regarded as a distortion, but as an important component in forming future strategies.

Number of Ringers

In terms of the number of ringers, the exercise is probably as healthy as it has ever been. During the last quarter century, the number of members of guilds has shown a consistent and marked increase (Appendix 2). Similarly, the number of towers without ringers seems to have decreased.

It is possible, however, that towers are more at risk of sudden changes to their numerical (and technical ringing) strength. People move more frequently nowadays, and the likelihood of losing ringers over a short period of time is greater.

It is noted that only 10% of towers have the generally accepted number of ringers (2.5 times the number of bells) that will buffer against this (Appendix 2). There is, thus, no room for complacency with regard to recruitment.

Peal Ringing and Technical Complexity

In terms of development of the art, there has been a catalogue of continuous achievement over the last forty years, with both a significant increase in the number of peals, and the level of complexity of the methods/compositions being rung.

The peal ringing fraternity, however, remains a small percentage of the overall number of ringers and there is little evidence that these achievements are influencing a more general increase in the level of attainment for non-peal ringing.

If anything, the gap between the high end of ringing and the general level of ringing is widening (Appendix 3).

Ringing Training

Both the Council and its affiliated societies have put significant efforts into improving the training of ringers, but yet it would seem that in many towers the training is inadequate for developing recruits to their full potential.

A recent initiative that will improve this situation is the establishment of ringing centres. It is too early properly to assess the impact of this initiative, but in an environment in which the expectations of students is higher than ever (particularly now that a greater proportion are older people) setting up centres where the very best training is available is likely to be highly beneficial.

The Council's policy with respect to ringing centres is supported, and it is recommended that the Council encourage and support increased development and use of ringing centres by its affiliated societies.

Recommendation 2:

The Central Council should continue, and if possible extend, its efforts to encourage and support societies in the development and use of ringing centres.

Young Ringers

The decline in young ringers (Appendices 1 and 2) is noted with concern. The group spent much time considering the reasons for this with a view to advising schemes to reverse the trend.

It is firstly important to consider why the trend is deplored. With the apparent healthy state of ringers, based on overall numbers, it might be questioned why there should be concern at the reduction in recruitment of younger ringers (teenagers). It is clear from data collected that a considerably higher proportion of ringers who achieve the highest technical standards learned to ring as teenagers. Furthermore, the best teachers of ringing are more generally those who themselves learn young. Broadly, it appears that younger ringing masters lead the most prospering bands - and clearly ringing masters can only be elected young, if they learned young.

There are many reasons why ringing is less attractive to younger people than formerly, and competition with other 'leisure' activities must surely figure high among them. Many activities offer the participants instant, or at least fast, reward, whereas ringing is characterised by requiring patience to learn the skills and in many ways the most exciting aspects come quite late in the ringer's development.

Lack of a peer group may also have a significant bearing on the ability of towers to retain young recruits. If 75% of ringers are over 40, then the opportunities for teenagers to ring with and enjoy the company of their peers at any one tower is limited.

There is some evidence to suggest that recruiting young people of 11-13 is reasonably successful, but retaining them between 14-18 is difficult. Unfortunately, this may be due to the association of ringing with the Church. The impact of bullying and teasing of children who attend Church (in whatever capacity) may be underestimated by adults, but it is likely that a proportion of young recruits are lost for this reason.

Finally, there is the image of ringers, as so often projected by the media, as a rather strange and quaint old group of people. Not many young people want to belong to such a group.

Children's Protection Act

There appears to be variation from one diocese to another in the application of guidelines, or procedures, in relation to the Act. Furthermore, there is a perception that because of the Act it is too risky to teach young people to ring, and so some Tower Captains are choosing to take only adult learners.

The manner in which Guilds and Churches have dealt with the implications of the Act vary from complete indifference to almost a complete ban on the teaching of ringing to young people.

The issues associated with this legislation are complex and at present its impact (either in fact, or due to perception) is detrimental to ringing. The Central Council has provided guidelines, but further work is necessary to ensure consistency of approach and to reassure those who are worried by the perceived risks associated with the Act.

Recommendation 3:

That the Public Relations Committee should form a proactive, specialist group to promote good practice in application of the Act in towers and guilds, and to facilitate a

consistent approach by diocese in relation to ringing.

Ringling Rejuvenation

The Oxford Diocesan Guild and others have had some success with week-long intensive training courses for new, young recruits (organised during half-term holidays). By training a group of youngsters, from different towers, together on a fast-track scheme a number of difficulties can be overcome.

Firstly, they are with a peer group that can offer encouragement and support (and competition, upon which young people often thrive), secondly, faster results may be achieved, thus relieving the boredom they may otherwise experience if learning the basics takes several weeks.

Furthermore, the training can be carried out with people used to working with young people, which can have a motivating influence. The use of young adults (e.g. students in higher education) as part of the training team is also considered beneficial. This concept has much to commend it, and should be promoted.

Recommendation 4:

That the Education and Ringing Centres Committees help Societies to develop such courses and that the Public Relations committee develop appropriate mechanisms which societies may use to recruit young people onto such courses.

There is much work to be done in promoting a more positive and conducive image of ringing to young people. This must be achieved both at a national and local level. The Council should develop promotional materials that specifically target young people in appropriate ways. It is very important that the image projected is not undermined on the first real experience of ringing and so suitable introductory events should also be developed.

Recommendation 5:

That the Public Relations committee develop promotional material and events (that may be locally delivered) specifically targeting young people.

The former 'Planet Bell' page in the Ringing World was considered as useful in developing interest among young ringers. There would be merit in reintroducing a page specifically for younger ringers on a similar basis.

Recommendation 6:

That the Editor of the Ringing World be requested to introduce a regular feature for young ringers.

University Ringing

Although not conclusive, evidence suggests that university ringing has remained intact, despite the overall decline in the number of young ringers (Appendix 4). A number of university guilds teach recruits and there may be ways in which the Council can support this activity.

There are also a number of possibilities for local societies to support the university guilds (as outlined in Appendix 4). These should be investigated further, though no specific action is recommended in this report beyond that.

Recommendation 7:

That the Education and Public Relations committees investigate the ways in which the Council and/or local societies may better support university guilds.

Church and Clergy

The conception among many clergy that ringers have little to do with the Church apart from ringing turns out to be a misconception (Appendix 5); indeed ringers are generally rather heavily involved in Church mission and business.

Generally, the relations between Church and ringers appears to be good, but ringing is considered by the clergy to have little relevance to the overall mission work of the Church and the ringers are - perhaps not surprisingly - regarded as an interest group similar to Sunday School teachers and other volunteers.

It is apparent that many of the clergy have only a very sketchy knowledge of bells and ringers, but opportunities to have an input into the training of Ordinands would need to be dealt with on an individual training institution basis, rather than through the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' council.

Informing Ordinands of matters related to ringing and ringers is an activity in which the Council has formerly engaged. This work should be restarted.

Recommendation 8:

That the Public Relations and Publications committees should produce a concise information booklet about bells and ringing which can be distributed free of charge through the ministry training centres.

Recommendation 9:

That the Public Relations committee work with appropriate societies to establish applicable training activities at ministry training centres.

Recommendation 10:

That the Public Relations committee develop an initiative to promote awareness among ringers of the need to, and means of, fostering and maintaining good ringer-clergy relations.

AREAS NOT COVERED BY THIS WORKING GROUP

Bell Restoration Funds

There has been no assessment of the resources or policies of societies in respect of their bell restoration funds. However, the Bell Restoration Funds committee have carried out their own survey, which revealed that many societies feel that their funds are severely depleted post-millennium.

The BRF committee has formed a policy on the way in which the Council may support the societies and address this issue, and this working group have nothing to add at this time.

Standards of Maintenance

We have little information regarding the general state of maintenance of bells, beyond the results of the Huntingdon survey and our limited telephone survey. These indicate that the general state of repair of bell installations is good, but the results are too limited to be reliable on a national scale.

The reliability and usefulness of a national survey may be of limited value unless the information gained could be used to achieve improvements more effectively. The group suggest that the Towers and Belfries committee consider the value of a more detailed survey, but make no recommendations beyond that.

Recommendation 11:

That the Towers and Belfries committee consider the merits of a detailed survey of the state of repair of bells installations nationally and take appropriate action based on those considerations.

Public Perception of Ringing

It is known that the number of serious complaints about bells has decreased, and it is believed that the complaints hotline established by the Public Relations committee has been instrumental in that achievement. It is also believed that the millennium ringing effort strengthened the perception of ringers and ringing in the public mind.

However, there is merit in learning of the public perception of ringing in more detail so that more effective promotion and recruitment strategies may be devised. This would be a large and difficult undertaking.

The Public Relations committee should consider the resources required for such a marketing investigation and determine the manner in which it should be carried out. This feasibility study would determine future action.

Recommendation 12:

That the Public Relations committee carry out a feasibility study into the marketing of ringing and management of its image in the public mind, and consider further action based on that feasibility study.

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