

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. Ringling 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 (ringing above the traffic, and the portable music being pumped into their ears) they are quite likely to have no idea why. They love the sound of bells, but it has become just one of many sounds 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 our communities 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 by doing so 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. It’s best to tell them is before or during the ringing, so instead of thinking ‘There are some bells’ they think ‘Ah, they must be ringing for ...’. We can’t assume they will guess, apart from very high profile events like a Royal Wedding.

That’s where it starts to get difficult for us. It’s an effort to alert the press or local radio on in advance, and what if our a peal or a quarter should fail? Rather than tempt fate, we might wait until it is in the bag. It’s easier for orchestras and choirs, who don’t need to worry about firing out. 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 been won? Of course people understand that a match can be won or lost, so let’s educate them that a ringing performance is a real challenge whose outcome can’t be taken for granted.

We should also report after the event, to inform those who couldn’t hear the performance. That may give an opportunity to expand on the event or the person being celebrated as well.

We should use any and every means to inform the public about our ringing. Special ringing can be publicised in advance through local press, parish magazines, notice boards, local radio, village websites, etc. During the ringing we can put posters outside to tell passers by what is being celebrated (and if it is a long performance, how long it will last). The notice can also tell people ‘what’ is being rung. You might think there is no point telling people the method, because they can’t tell the difference anyway. But they still like to know. I was once chided by parishioners for not doing so, and told that like to know what we were ringing, even if they don’t know what it means.

Pictures speak louder than words, and local media will often be happy to take a picture of the band, before or after the ringing, to go with an article. Remember – every picture of normal people with bellropes in their hands helps to counteract the images of cartoon monks swinging from bellropes.

What to ring for

Ringling for a Royal Wedding is obvious, but events like that don’t come along very often. There are many other things that we could ring for, but how do you decide what might generate interest? And how do you find out about things far enough in advance to plan the ringing?

Let’s start with anniversaries of historic events. A couple of dozen important 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. The site also has a list of major events due to happen over the next few years, as well as key festivals, etc in the Church's calendar. These lists will be extended as more events come to light. So if you know of anniversaries or events not on the list please let us know.

Not all of the events listed are equally important, so most bands will be selective in what they ring for. Have a look, and see which interest you.

Ringers are often asked to ring in support of international campaigns, like World Climate Day and the UN Biodiversity talks in recent years. 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 soon as they appear.

At a local level many other events will have significance for your community. The CC obviously can't track them all, so the initiative must be with the rest of us to spot suitable local 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, expansion of major industries, and so on. Some of our older grammar schools will soon be 500 years old, and several English Diocese will celebrate their centenaries over the next few years.

Occasionally there are more selective calls to parts of the Exercise, for example Cambridge alumni around the world were asked to ring for the university's 800th anniversary in January 2009.

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 in the publicity. Local people (and media) will be even more interested in what you do, if they know that the same thing is happening across the country. So when there is a national or international call for us to ring for an event, as well as ringing, we should publicise the fact that our ringing is part of a much wider 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, and generate extra interest in the media. Even more ambitious is the proposal for ringling to follow the Olympic Flame around the country on its 70 day tour next year, of which more details in due course.

Next year, there is an extra bank holiday in June to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, when there will be a national call for ringling. The Council hopes that as many ringlers as possible will ring on that day. There will also be opportunities to mark the actual 60th anniversaries of the Queen's Accession to the Throne (Tuesday 6th February) and of her Coronation (Sunday 2 June the following year) but they won't be Bank Holidays.

Events for which mass ringling is requested are highlighted in the lists on the CC website.

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 to do this than others, if they are close to the centre of a village, where most people can hear the bells. Where the bells aren't audible across the community they serve, for whatever reason, people will be less aware of ringling, which makes it harder for us. So it is even more important to tell 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 ring is 7.30am at Christmas and Easter, and mostly it is shortly before 9am. We would certainly need to consult our neighbours if we planned to ring at 6am!

The local context also includes the church itself. This article is about ringing 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 ringing in Holy Week is discouraged (and in some cases during Lent). An extreme example of this constraint was when St George's Day fell on Holy Saturday this year, though that is very rare.

Attitudes to ringing in Holy Week differ a lot. In many churches there is no ringing at all, but in some there is ringing for extra services, and maybe half muffled ringing on Good Friday morning. One is driven by a feeling that Holy Week should be quiet, and the other by the feeling that people outside should know something special is happening. Neither is right or wrong, but they illustrate our need to align our ringing policy with the views of our churches. Ringing must be with the church's agreement, even if the details are delegated to the ringers.

In summary

- Seek opportunities to ring for public events, both national and local.
- Choose events likely to interest your local community or that have significance.
- Try to support co-ordinated ringing initiatives, whenever appropriate to local circumstances.
- Always inform the community about what you are ringing for.
- Use public ringing as an opportunity to create publicity and promote ringing.

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

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