

Biographies – the key to ringing history – Valuing the lives of former ringers

The seminar was held during the Central Council weekend in Lancaster in May 2018, billed as:

The heritage that we have inherited is bound up with countless ringers who preceded us. Learning about their lives can give us an extra perspective on how we got here. Interest in family and social history is growing, with ever more capable research tools to support it.. But tools can't answer the big questions. How do we decide who merits a biography? Should we have one central collection of biographies or lots of inter-linked ones? Should we just catalogue biographies or should we link them in networks by geography or theme? How much material should be online and how much in libraries?

On Saturday 26th, A select group of some twenty historically-minded delegates gathered for a seminar on ringing biographies and related subject matter. Mary Bone introduced three speakers, starting with John Harrison on the CC Biographies Committee.

This was founded in 1935 specifically to focus on Council members, past and present. At that time a backlog of about three hundred names was immediately to be dealt with. Early records display beautiful calligraphy but little content. A pro-forma, in more recent years computer generated rather than handwritten, was designed with spaces to record essential information, in terms of ringing achievements and contribution to the exercise. All this material is now presented on the website, but the pro-forma is felt to be both restrictive and space wasting. Nowadays the committee seeks to create a free essay on each subject, together with a portrait photograph. A seminal change in 2009 was to broaden the scope of biographies to include any ringers worthy of mention. This, of course, leads to judgements about the significance of individuals. Mischievously, John suggested that some council members might not be significant either.

Nearly a thousand records have thus far been compiled, and the committee has turned its attention to how best to develop the website. Individuals could be linked, online, to a timeline, and to maps, placing them in their social and historical context. Additional pages could develop themes, such as teachers and disseminators of information, notable peal ringers, composers and so on. Societies past and present could be recorded, and in this area some research has already been done.

John then considered the relationship between biographies and obituaries, of which many are published in the Ringing World. An obituary tends to present the personal assessment of the writer, coloured by anecdote and memory. A biographical record seeks to take a longer term view. Gathering material depends on the cooperation of surviving relatives, friends and

fellow ringers, and in some cases is surprisingly difficult. Despite Data protection issues, which are surely surmountable, John felt that ringers might like to contribute their own biographical information. Autobiographies, he said, are gladly received.

Finally, John raised the question of records held by local Associations and towers. Should there be an attempt to share this material nationally.

Bob Cater spoke next, offering an example of one man's biography, namely Jasper Snowdon. The first President of the Yorkshire Association is well known as the author of Ropesight, Standard Methods and Diagrams, which introduced the now ubiquitous 'blue line' to represent a bell's path through a method. However, little is known of Snowdon the man.

Bob told us he was born in 1844, one of six surviving children of the vicar of Ilkley. (Bob admitted he liked to think the vicar's children may have known the Brontes in the next valley, but conceded that Jasper was only twelve when Charlotte died!). He was sent to Rossall school at Fleetwood, a northern offshoot of Marlborough School founded for sons of the clergy. At sixteen he was sent to a firm at Hunslet, Leeds, to learn mechanical engineering. By 1875 he was managing an engineering works, and subsequently set up his own engineering consultancy in Leeds.

Snowdon was a keen sportsman with a particular passion for cricket. He had learned to ring aged seventeen, joining his father and brothers in the tower, but it was in his mid twenties that he became seriously keen on change ringing. His first peal was in 1876, on the six at Ilkley. In 1878 these were augmented to eight, and Jasper recorded another peal.

He then started to write his practical books on ringing, which seems to have become the central interest of his life. The railway system made ringing meetings possible, at first informal gatherings of friends. In 1885 a group of them formed the Yorkshire Association, and Snowdon was chosen 'by acclaim' as President.

A decade later he died in Leeds Infirmary, having caught cold at a ringing meeting, an infection that deteriorated into typhoid fever. A detail gleaned from the contemporary accounts suggests that he may have been infected by a diseased parrot bought recently at Leeds market.

A single man, Snowdon was buried at Ilkley where the church has a memorial window.

Alan Regin then took up the baton to speak on the Rolls of Honour. He explained that the original book, commissioned by the Council in 1924, was prepared by the then Librarian, Revd Cyril Jenkyn. He was himself a recipient of the Military Cross for his contribution as a military chaplain, in particular for helping to retrieve the wounded from the front line. He wrote to the affiliated Ringing guilds, most of whom

responded with names of their fallen members. However, this method missed the non affiliated guilds and towers.

Until recent times there were many large gaps in the Rolls, for example Devon ringers were much under represented. Alan then described some methods by which many more records have been accumulated. Aldershot tower records, which were well kept by the tower captain, indicated many ringers who passed through, and these names can then be matched to those on war memorials. It is in fact more difficult to gain information about ringers who served and survived. References in the local newspapers can be followed up, although these can be unreliable. Researchers are advised to check to see if the local tower, where an individual may be said to have rung, actually had a ringable peal of bells at the time. Another source of possible victims of the conflict would be pre-war ringing records: if a man's name subsequently disappears from peal records he may have served and died. Sometimes a correlation can be made with a war memorial.

In summary, Alan felt that Jenkyn's achievement was marvellous for the time, but to be more complete he would have needed to contact every individual tower. He added that, regrettably, Jenkyn's original papers have disappeared, leaving little more than a list of names for present day researchers to follow up.

Mary invited questions and general discussion, from which it emerged that the Rolls now have nearly 1500 names, and a new book for their inscription has been crowd-funded, in part by family members. Alan mentioned that it is harder to gather information about ringers who perished in the Second World War. Bob described the annual memorial service for cathedral ringers held by the band at Winchester.

More general discussion explored problems encountered with historical biographical research, including difficulties with digitised material, the disappearance of records, both personal and from defunct Associations. A general appeal through the Ringing World might provoke information, as might the involvement of local Associations.

In conclusion, Bob wondered, with reference to his account of Jasper Snowdon, whether information not directly relating to a person's ringing career was of general interest, and lamented the impossibility of grasping much of personality from the surviving facts. John felt the way forward was to explore the wider human history of ringing through biographies. Alan agreed that it was frustratingly hard to capture what people were like, but he was pleased with the work done. He hoped it would be possible to explore the website by area.

On behalf of those present Mary thanked the speakers for a very stimulating hour.