

CHANGE RINGING FOR THE FUTURE

Report of the conference on 12th November 2011 at Wellesbourne, Warwickshire.

Statistics show that we all need to consider seriously the decline in numbers of ringers in the UK:

- in 1914 there were 40,000 to 50,000 ringers out of a population of 40 million
- in 2008 there were less than 39,000 ringers out of a population of 60 million, approximately.

Nationally people over 50 years of age now represent:

- two-thirds of ringers
- over three-quarters of Tower Captains and
- one-third of those learning to ring

Combined with these facts, unless some significant changes take place in the foreseeable future, the number of ringers is expected to drop to 20,000 - 30,000.

At the beginning of the day, we were all asked to focus on young ringers in particular. We were asked to:

- consider if ringing was keeping track with society
- understand that the conference would not be the beginning of the task in hand but a continuation of all the sterling efforts that had been taking place by so many in towers throughout the UK for many years
- consider what would happen if we did nothing more or in different ways
- think how we could work *harder and better*
- acknowledge that the Central Council cannot achieve significant changes on it's own; *local delivery* would be desirable and vital and
- use the conference as a catalyst for new approaches

Our attention was drawn to a number of national associations that had been transformed in recent years, for example the Scouting Association, the National Trust and the Youth Hostels Association; one common denominator was that all these had a very recognisable logo. They had achieved significantly increased membership numbers. There was a suggestion to help change the image of ringing - and fast - by using *branding*.

The individual groups of ringers that met throughout the day were an integral part of the following seminars:

1. How does local leadership make a positive difference?

Attitude was deemed to be very important. Perhaps we all need to consider and really take on board a radical culture change; we might all have to make significant changes. Some principal thoughts were:

- To advocate and sell ringing by grasping the concept of *engaging* more with the Church and the Community i.e. the outside world - our audience - every time we ring it's a public performance
- To be less introspective and to consider promoting ringing as it might appeal to others. We could feature the skills involved (e.g. maths, music, sport and leisure) and highlight the benefits of learning to ring. This approach should help engage with Heads of School, Maths teachers, parents and, for possible project funding, the Arts Council, for example
- To strive to work together more to *coach the coaches* and to really work at sharing best practices. (Apart from the organisation necessary, note the change from the traditional speak of *teach the teachers*)
- To consider being led more by younger ringers (with the necessary good quality training in place).
- Regarding vision and strategy, positively invite ideas being put forward from local level to the national body.
- Try to be very flexible overall

2. What can we learn from the church and other youth-focused organisations?

The Guiding Association representative said that the Association had focused on Training, Recruiting and Retention. Their membership was in the region of 600,000 now and, in addition, there were 100,000 - mostly volunteer - adult leaders and helpers. She said that the young members thrived on:

- new challenges
- learning new skills
- meeting new friends
- having fun
- working together as a team and
- joining in national events

All these resulted in increased self-esteem for the Guides.

There's an average of 25 meetings per year. Each local Guiding unit is self-sufficient financially; the Guides pay £2.00 per night - 50p covers rent of hall, £1.00 covers costs of activities and 50p subscription goes to Guides UK. There is good quality training for leaders, including the provision of mentors; there was great flexibility; the volunteers were well recognised and thanked for their work.

The Guiding representative considered that funding was vital for resources and training and that a logo for ringing was necessary.

The representative of **Church Music organisations** (a self-supporting Church Minister) advised that the organisations were intimately concerned with the church and therefore there was a challenge to work with the church at all levels. He said that the Royal School of Church Music had *re-invented* itself by having structured development training for choir mentors, recognising standards and all being supported by good materials. It was an *easy to use* structure for people running choirs.

He mentioned The Association of British Choral Directors with 700 members. The annual subscription was £45.00: professionalism was implicit. The benefits included a quarterly magazine, discounts, training courses and an annual convention (training focused).

He suggested that ringing would need to be organised and funded nationally and transferred from a representative body to a service organisation. The aim should be to establish what is needed and how to change the existing structures. He advised that we should consider making a market model of which national organisation could provide services for local groups and could demonstrate that the local members could get *value for money*.

He suggested that ringing could be promoted as culture and sport, for example, and that it might improve academic progress, too. He felt that target groups should be identified to improve recruiting; for example parents who, in his experience, would buy opportunities for children if the benefits of an activity were illustrated.

He said that applications for grant funding should be considered. His own example was *youth music*.

He concluded that our aim should be *more ringers, ringing better*.

3. What opportunities does new technology offer us?

The background appeared to be that there was an innate fear of technology in older ringers, generally. It seemed that there's a need for training older ringers to help them understand technology in ringing and to help them if something goes wrong with equipment, for example.

IDEAS

Relationship with the outside world:

1. More need to use technology for showing the community about ringing e.g. screens in public areas and possibly large screens for special events.
2. Use of video link to the bells.
3. We must recognise that youngsters generally use the mobile phones and computers, e.g. email, Facebook, Twitter, and so on, to organise and publicise events, and to keep in touch generally. It was thought desirable that we should review, and consider updating, our communication methods generally to take this into account.

Research needed for:

1. A way of measuring the forces involved in *the pull* so that help could be given to individual learners to improve their technique.
2. Possibility of software development to help ringers to improve their rope sight. Currently simulators provide assistance with listening skills only.

4. How can we organise ourselves for a sustainable future?

This was a really big question on the day. We were reminded that previously bell ringing was a secular sport and leisure activity.

To explain to some extent why ringing was in its current situation, many opinions and factors were acknowledged including:

- the church appeared to be in a state of decline
- ringers were ageing
- the teaching expertise was declining overall and was spread geographically
- there were often many frustrations borne out of poor handling and poor striking skills, such that poor ringing might be accepted as the norm whereas others' more advanced ringing was seen as elitist
- some recruits apparently wanting to progress in ringing but appeared to be unwilling to do all the necessary work involved
- ringers not wishing to pay for their ringing activities, so maybe it's not seen as a worthwhile or valuable pursuit
- an apparent lack of duty or commitment in some cases

So, despite all of the heroic efforts to date of many up and down the country, are we fit for purpose? How is this backdrop for ringing seen by non-ringers (potential recruits) and therefore, versus other social networking activities, will it attract young recruits? People tend to be more discerning generally so, some might try ringing but if they experience a shoddy introduction one way or another, these days they're likely just to walk away.

It was felt that good publicity and excellent training was vital for improvement and advancement of *The Exercise* overall. Success often comes from the inspiration of the tutor. Younger ringers in particular seemed to demand excellent training as well as loving challenge and appreciating achievement recognition. It appeared that improvements overall would help recruiting overall but especially of younger persons.

Further questions and thoughts arose:

- in order to raise standards, to achieve consistency overall and to attract more ringers should there be a national based strategy incorporating branding (to improve identity), a network of standardised and accredited training and recognition of grades of expertise? (The majority seemed to answer, "Yes.")
- should we encourage a culture of paying more for ringing to afford improved (national?) financing of resources? Should ringers be prepared to pay more for a service-led organisation? Would they be prepared to do so? It was thought that ringers would be prepared to pay more if *value for money* was demonstrated
- are bodies such as a representative Central Council and County and Diocesan Associations the best structures for delivering activity based strategies? If not, what could be? The general view was that changes probably needed to be made and that a new structure needed to be more professional - employing some people might be advantageous. Existing structures might be a way of delivering changes
- could there be a National Youth Organisation of ringers?

5. Who do we want to attract to ringing and how best can we do that?

How best to go about it:

1. Who is your target?

So, *who is our customer?* It was recognised that core needs vary locally, so some questions in each area might need to be asked. For example, *what have we got now and what do we need?* and, as local issues

would determine strategy, *is going to church part of the deal?* or, *may ringing be looked on as a fun hobby?*

It was thought that we needed to try to attract a wide range of recruits in order to achieve diversity and balance, so we need to aim across the age range, to include many faiths and to be more inclusive ethnically. It was suggested that, with some appropriate planning, it was ideal to approach schools (teachers and parents), Scouting and Guiding groups and Youth Clubs (including the parents of those youngsters attending), church members and lapsed ringers.

There were discussions about the desirable characteristics of potential recruits; they included: Commitment, being easy to get on with, coordinated, mentally able and have the ability to *stick with it*.

2. How is ringing appealing?

We need to give good and objective consideration as to how Change Ringing is perceived, now, by the majority of the members of public, to establish the many *features and benefits* of Ringing and to aim at raising the profile of Ringing both locally and nationally.

Ideas of helping the new recruit included - we need to be friendly, inclusive, relaxed and not *get cross* when recruits "Go wrong" and we should avoid discouraging recruits by moaning at them if they miss a session.

3. Go out and sell it.

Locally, the way forward is to *go seek 'em out!* Appropriate engagement with the relevant authority would be vital e.g. the church's incumbent, the school's head, and so on.

Ideas put forward:

1. We need to create an appealing and attractive atmosphere. Do we have it?
2. Recruit when you're *on an up!*
3. Arrange taster sessions.
4. Recognise and encourage *peer to peer selling*.
5. Retrieve lapsed ringers.
6. Train the trainers.
7. Instigate publicity with media.
8. Take the ringing to the people

It would be absolutely necessary to ensure that we didn't create a market for a "Big order" and then not be able to supply it. Recruiting is important but retention is vital, therefore a structured training system must be in place. With this in mind, surely we need to establish a structured training system for teaching the teachers?

6. How do we ensure we retain the young ringers we want?

Regarding recruitment and retention it was felt that *young ringers* had different needs than older ringers. For example, how do we motivate say the two groups - 10 - 13 year olds and 14 - 17 year olds? The first group would want *fun* out of their ringing and would need very good teaching and different ringing times possibly - maybe Saturday mornings and school holidays. The second group should be given more responsibility, as appropriate, and respect accordingly. They'd prefer more socialising such as tower outings and non-ringing get-togethers.

If ringers went away to University, it would be helpful if the Coach paved the way by making the initial introduction to the University ringing organisation perhaps?

Could District practices be made more "Fun" and challenging? If so, how?

Try out:

1. *Method of the month* - say an unusual one for skills development.
2. Kaleidoscope ringing perhaps?
3. Whole pull stands, etc.
4. A variety of format, times and focus.

7. Youngsters' Round up at the end of the conference:

1. Make everyone welcome at practice nights.
2. Please don't demand serious Sunday ringing commitment as some will, some won't but some might in due course, too.
3. Think about Mini Rings for free trial sessions.
4. Get ringing into schools.
5. Try to get The Duke of Edinburgh scheme on board.
6. Transform the image of ringing and ensure there's a greater awareness of it, too. Use celebrity figures. Get the public to perceive it as an activity encompassing sport, music and maths, for example.
7. Design a ringing logo for national use.
8. Give young people responsibility and respect (At the Worcester Ringing Centre the kids look after their own equipment).
9. Recognise the Tower Captain even if he/she is young.
10. Don't be afraid to use the young people's talent.
11. Advise the youngsters of the Central Council and organise a *decent* C.C. website!
12. *Just get on and do it!* and "*please don't have so many meetings and committees!*"
13. Consider appointing a Young Persons' Representative.
14. Consider having a permanent Youth Panel nationally, at Guild and local level too, perhaps.
15. Set up and encourage an On-line Youth Forum.
16. Younger ringers would willingly help older ringers to overcome their Techno phobia in practical ways, such as building websites and helping out with computers and simulators.
17. Keep younger ringers interested by:
 - a) using Goals and Certificates, for example the National Youth Contest and the Award Scheme.
 - b) considering the day-to-day life of a young ringer. He or she may be intimidated especially on the first visit to a tower; providing a mentor could be helpful.
 - c) organise young ringers' events like 10-pin bowling.
18. Regarding the Integrated Teaching Training Scheme, is there a possibility of shortening the length of time it takes to qualify, please?
19. Youngsters would not be in favour of (Local) charges as their income is so limited.
20. **Please do not refuse to teach people if they don't go to church, as it's a skill to learn not necessarily for church service.**
21. **Don't try to make bell ringing *cool* - it never was, it isn't, and it never will be!**

Next steps:

1. The Central Council would write a report for the *Ringing World*.
2. Elva Ainsworth (Conference Chair) would put together a document reflecting all outputs from the conference and it would be circulated to all those that had attended, ready for the next steps in our own area.
3. A small committee would be set up to move everything forward; Ringing Centres would be an integral part.
4. These all to report to The Central Council in May 2012.

Our local role:

1. Delivery of ideas to Guilds, Associations and Districts, for example.
2. Advise if we wanted to be part of the sounding board group.