

Biographies Committee – initial thoughts

[I have added some 2011 comments in italics to the original 2009 text.]

Our terms of reference are: *To maintain an account of the work and general ringing activities of past and present ringers.* That is a significant change, possibly more significant than we realise.

We could respond simply by feeding a few non-CC members through our existing processes, or we could look afresh at why we are here and how we can best serve both the Exercise and Council. This note takes the second approach, and gives my initial thoughts about how we could respond.

1 The motivation for change

To make sense of the open ended directive that we have been given, we should try to understand the motivation behind the change. On their own, the revised words in our terms of reference are not enough, and a superficial response to them is unlikely to satisfy our stakeholders.

The clear message behind the change is that we are not ‘the problem’, but a part of a wider problem that ringers at large see Council as inward looking, with members who see themselves as more important than other ringers. Our previous terms of reference epitomise that problem, and widening our scope to include ringers at large rather than just CC members was an essential step to help reverse that perception. But it is only a first step, and it won’t mean anything unless we can deliver results that live up to the aspirations of ringers.

2 Why are we here?

The world today is very different from what it was in 1935 when the Biographies Committee was set up, but our terms of reference have been virtually unchanged until this year. The 1935 minutes just say: ‘That a record be prepared of past members of the Council, giving a short account of their work, and where possible a photograph, and that a committee be appointed to undertake this work’, with no hint of the motives behind it.

So we must look to the Council’s objects, and ask how we can help to achieve them. The objects are:

- (i) To promote awareness of and educate the general public in the ringing of church bells and the art of change ringing;
- (ii) To make available advice, assistance and information to church authorities, ringers and ringing societies and to promote good practice on all matters concerned with bells and bell ringing;
- (iii) To encourage development of the art of ringing through innovation;
- (iv) To bring together ringers to discuss matters of common interest and to represent ringers both nationally and internationally;
- (v) To encourage high standards of performance in ringing;
- (vi) To recommend technical standards in change ringing and maintain such records as may be necessary to uphold these standards;
- (vii) To assist in the provision, restoration, maintenance and transfer of church bells.

Some of the objects are of no relevance to our work. The closest are (i), (ii), and (iv).

Towards object (i) we can contribute a richer picture of the Exercise. Ringing is a living heritage, and its social history is an important part of that, alongside its technical or musical complexity. It is also an aspect that is potentially more approachable by non-experts.

Towards the ‘information’ part of object (ii) we could help to provide knowledge of local ringers who have been prominent in former times. That could be of value whenever restoration is being promoted, centenaries celebrated, etc, and it may also be of interest at other times.

Under the ‘common interest’ aspects of object (iv) we could foster a greater awareness of how the Exercise came to be where it is now, helping ringers at large to take an interest in their predecessors and what they did.

All of these objectives entail dissemination of one form or another, so our remit should not be confined to generating information – we should also pro-actively seek to bring it to those who may have a use for it, either on our own or in co-operation with others.

3 What should we be doing?

Being told to widen the scope of our work falls far short of being told what to do or how to do it. Council can reasonably expect that having given us a broad direction, we will go away and translate that into practical objectives, and the means of achieving those objectives. So our first task is to work out what we need to do. It seems convenient to do that under the headings of who, how, what, when, where, and finally ‘so what’? For each of these questions, it is sensible to consider two distinct activities: gathering information and using it.

3.1 Who?

What makes someone’s life of interest? Common sense says it is doing noteworthy things, ie things that make a difference to other people, or that were difficult to achieve, and that those who do them in greater measure, or for longer, would be of more interest. That seems a good starting point, albeit somewhat general.

Opening the remit beyond Council members removes the idea of ‘completeness’ (whether or not that was intended). Whereas we could be criticised for failing to document all Council members (even the boring ones who did nothing, or the secretive ones who wouldn’t tell us about it) there is no equivalent ‘all’ when considering ringers at large. We can’t document everyone, and we wouldn’t expect to, so we have room for interpretation. That might seem a recipe for failure (because however many people we cover, there may be complaints about the omission of someone else) but I suspect that in practice it will be less so for several reasons (see below).

Should we produce a biography on everyone on whom we have opened a file, or should there be a secondary choice based on what information has actually been accumulated? It seems unlikely that having made a case for starting a file, there would be nothing worth recording at the end, but there will almost certainly be a big variation in the quantity and interest of information about different people. Thus while it is unlikely we would not produce any definitive record, the decision to produce a substantial biography should be made on a case by case basis.

3.2 How?

How do we gather information about people. There are many sources. We can invite submissions from people themselves or from others, we can scan the open literature, and we can undertake focused research. Different approaches may suit different cases.

With an open remit, we actually need two sorts of information. The first is to know who it may be worth opening a file on, and the second is the information to put into the file. The case for opening a file would be based on an individual having done something significant. We might have a list of appointments that automatically qualify (CC Officer? Society officer? CC member?) but we should certainly invite nominations. They are likely to come from someone other than the subject, but perhaps we should allow self nomination?

The second type of information is substantive, factual evidence about the individual’s contribution to ringing and the contextual background of their lives, which will go into the file. Some such information will accompany the nomination, since to justify opening a file on someone, we would need evidence that he or she did in fact stand out in some way from the ordinary ringer. Once the file is open, other information would be added as it became available (from contributions, from news scanning or from active research).

When a new biography (or biographic sketch, see below) is needed, the material held would be the main source. If it contained obvious omissions, and the subject warranted it, then further work could be done to fill the gaps.

How should we use information about people? This is closely connected to ‘what’ we produce (see below) but there are additional questions relating to validation, security, data protection, and so on. These should not be seen as barriers, simple as matters of good practice to be clarified and adhered to. Note that security – looking after information – doesn’t just mean preventing inappropriate access, it also means protecting the information against loss. For example it would be wise to keep multiple dated copies of master information in different places, in formats, and on media, that are not likely to become obsolete. We should seek advice from ICT Committee.

Where possible, we should seek co-operation from subjects, since that will provide access to more information more readily, but even where co-operation is not forthcoming we should in appropriate cases maintain information that is readily available from open sources (or links to it).

After a subject’s death, we should seek appropriate co-operation of other interested parties to build a richer picture. In the short term, we should try to co-ordinate the production of obituaries with people who are close to a subject. We should also where appropriate co-ordinate our work with that of the PR Committee (seeking public exposure of ringing through the lives of notable ringers, as well as awareness within the Exercise) and also the Library Committee (in terms of historical research and other shared interests).

3.3 What?

What information should we gather about people? In principle, it should be anything that could be of potential long term interest. That might seem to duck the question, but it is based on the two key aspects of biographical material: (a) someone must want to read it, and (b) since biographies are read after the event (often a long time) the information must not be of too transient a nature. That will all vary from case to case.

Factual information is preferable (eg 'chaired xxx committee for y years', 'ran xxx course from 19yy to 20zz', 'wrote xyz book', 'rang in x record peals'). I suspect that will be the routine bread and butter information filling most files. Subjective information will be needed to provide a richer picture for 'fuller' biographies (see below). Subjective information runs the risk of bias, misrepresentation, etc, so it is probably better to record source material (or pointers to it), from which the eventual biographer can draw his or her own conclusions in due course. So for example, rather than recording that Mr X was a bit of an eccentric (which is the sort of colour the writer of a fuller biography needs) we would record references to letters from Mr X to the RW, reports of his intervention in society meetings, any press coverage, and so on.

What information should we publish about people? Several types of release may be appropriate, including:

- a) Obituaries – Relatively short overviews shortly after death. The RW is the default medium, but in some cases we should seek coverage in non-ringing publications. As noted above, we should co-ordinate the production of obituaries with other interested people. We need to develop a policy on when and when not to produce an obituary. Should we do so for anyone on whom we hold a file? Should we only do so when we would not cut across one written by someone much closer to the subject?
- b) Biographic record – This should be the routine output for anyone on whom we hold a file (subject to a sanity check on the contents). It is closest to the current 'Page' produced for CC members, though we may review its format (should it be a fixed length), and how it is made available (see below). [*Recent records have been fuller, and given a richer picture of lives than the historic sheets.*]
- c) Published biography – Major figures would warrant a full scale biography, published via the Publications Committee. The length would vary depending on the subject matter, as with any book. Such major works could be produced from within the Biographies Committee, or by interested third parties (as with the recent Pitman biography). The committee should seek to sponsor, and work with, external authors as multipliers of the Committee's available effort.
- d) Themed biography – The Committee should be able to take a broader and longer term view than many individual authors. One output of such a view could be biographies covering more than one ringer, where there was a strong link between their work. Possibilities include: Family dynasties of ringers, groups of ringers who were collectively responsible for major innovations, contemporaries who shared a common background, and so on. [*The two 'Giants of the Exercise' books group subjects in this way.*]

3.4 When?

When should we gather information? The sooner the better. That is the logic behind the current biography form for members. The forms might have become discredited, but the principle is sound. In fact it is quite possible that with the new way of working, many who have withheld information in the past may change their minds. Apart from information provided directly to us, we probably need a balance between routine scanning and periodic focused research (eg triggered by the need to produce an obituary).

When should we publish the information? Most biographies are retrospective, so publication will normally be after death. Given our expanded terms, and the backlog, some will be a long time after death. It would be a good target to aim for routine publication of information eventually to be reasonably soon after death for more prominent (currently living) ringers. There may be a case for publishing some, strictly factual, information on living ringers (see below). [*The on-line biographic database will do so.*]

3.5 Where?

Where should we gather information from? Anywhere we can get anything useful is a good principle, but in practice some sources will be more rewarding than others, and we need to be practical.

Getting information from individuals is the most direct route, so we should encourage subjects to supply us with factual information, and to give periodic updates. We need to develop a climate where that is seen as a normal thing to do (see below), and not self aggrandisement.

Published information is the other route, and we should exploit that as well. In Tom Lock's day the RW was pretty well the only readily available source, but ringing information is now much more widely published on the Internet. Many events appear on Campanophile, many societies put news on their websites, and many make

information on-line that was previously only in printed reports, etc. Some society reports include periodic commentaries (eg 'points from the peals'). When looking for contextual background of ringers, there is similarly a wealth of information on various websites and elsewhere.

Where should the information we create be made available? This is an area where we need to go well beyond what the Committee has done before if we are to satisfy the the aspirations expressed in the Council meeting. Some of the more obvious routes are:

- a) Formal records in the Library – as now
- b) CC website – As a minimum, there should be an index of known ringing biographies, both printed and on-line. There should also be copies of CC produced biographies, either in native web form (for new ones) or as scanned copies of historic paper ones. [*Currently the new ones have been produced as downloadable PDF, rather than as web pages.*]
- c) RW articles – In addition to obituaries (generated by the Committee, or with its help) there should be periodic biographic articles. How many, how often, how long, and on what sort of themes will need deciding, but it should certainly be a goal for them to appear. Maybe there could be a regular feature where we give updates on our work and preview new additions to the biographies (in summary if the substantive version is too long). The RW likes CC committees to provide such regular contributions, and doing so would increase the visibility of, and help to generate an interest in, ringing biographies.
- d) Books – Significant biographies should appear in book form. We should discuss with Publications Committee the style, frequency, size, etc.
- e) Other websites – We should encourage societies and towers to provide links to records of their former members on our website. We should also encourage those who have notable former members to provide their own biographical pages, to which we can link. See for example: www.east-garston.com/pages/bellringers/revd-jenkin/rev-jenkin.htm or www.allsaintswokinghambells.org.uk/ASRingers/Robinson/
- f) Disc – A number of historical ringing resources are now being published on disc. It permits historians to have quicker and easier access to very large volumes of data, so we should consider this option too, after discussion with the Library Committee which has experience of doing this.

3.6 So what?

I include this heading as a reminder that our work (and our expanded scope) has a purpose beyond simply 'doing our job'. Bells can be rung well without biographies, so their purpose is secondary, not primary. If we believe biographies have a role, it is to help cement ringers together as a community, and to give them a sense of their history. Working within the CC, we have the added responsibility of helping ordinary ringers to understand the contribution that Council makes to them. So the test of whether we are doing the job is as much about how ringers perceive our work as it is about the number of pages written up in a book or on a website.

4 Organising and managing the work

Setting out a vision of what we ought to do is the easy bit. We then have to organise ourselves and manage the work to make it happen. I am new to the Committee, so what follows in this section does not benefit from the practical experience of the biographical work (and problems) to date, other than what I have gleaned from reports and previous presentations of the Committee's work. I trust that other more experienced members will be able to add this perspective.

The items below are probably incomplete and need revising, but they should give us a starting point to discuss.

4.1 Selecting subjects

Our wider remit creates two new tasks: deciding whether or not to document the life of ringers (when they die) and deciding which ringers to track (ie gather information on) while they are alive. The two decisions are not quite the same, and we should be prepared to consider recording the life of ringers of obvious significance, even if we have not tracked them. It would entail focused research, but such people will almost certainly have many contacts on whom we can draw. We should also in principle consider not producing a biography of anyone whom we have tracked, but whose ringing career (since the decision to track) does not indicate sufficient significance to merit biographic action. In practice, we might not exercise this option, and in such cases we would either create a minimal record, or push the task down the queue if our resources are stretched by higher priority biographies. Or we might just act as a clearing house for obituaries written by friends of the people concerned.

How we select will undoubtedly be a high profile aspect of our expanded remit. It is probably impossible to please all the people all the time, so it is vital that we develop an objective policy, and then make it available for

public comment. If we make clear our reasons, and the limitations of what we can do, we should be able to gain broad acceptance, especially if we can develop the mechanisms where people who feel that someone they know merits a biography can materially contribute to helping to achieve it. This might lead to a three-level selection, something like:

- a) Ringers who we list as significant enough that we will take action to create a biography
- b) Ringers who we list as significant, and we seek offers from others to contribute to a biography
- c) Ringers who we have not listed as significant, but who we include if others ask us to accept an externally written biography

Since we cannot possibly know everything about everyone, collaboration with other people will be essential to bridge the gap between what people would like to happen, and what we could do on our own.

4.2 Gathering information

- a) Review how we currently gather information in the light of our expanded role (SWOT¹).
- b) Agree any changes, and allocate tasks. [*Forms have been updated and are on line in PDF (for printing to fill in by hand) or Word (to fill in and send electronically).*]
- c) Make explicit any limitations that we can't overcome – to share with stakeholders (eg RW article, see below) and for reporting back to Council. [*RW article written Nov 2009*]
- d) If appropriate, seek ways to set up links with other providers (see below).

4.3 Writing up

- a) Assess the current backlog, and decide how best to tackle it. [*Backlog has been greatly reduced!*]
- b) Allocate tasks, and if appropriate seek external assistance for some of them. [*David did searches before joining.*]
- c) Review current policy for writing up (eg how much, where to draw the line, whether to accept omissions versus delaying completion).
- d) Determine a policy for selecting subjects for additional coverage (ie other than a basic record).
- e) Select any initial subjects for special coverage and either allocate tasks or seek appropriate external authors.

4.4 Dissemination and awareness

Things we can do to make the results of our work accessible.

- a) Put in place a website structure that will be capable of holding the volume of information we expect to make available. [*Part done*]
- b) Generate an index of what exists and what is in the pipeline.
- c) Put existing biographies on-line (including appropriate biographical sketches and obituaries). [*Part done*]
- d) Explore the digitisation of existing paper-based biographies [*Done*]
- e) Put digitised images of paper-based biographies on-line as they become available. [*Done*]
- f) Write one or more initial articles for the RW, explaining our work and new directions, and seeking offers of help, contributions, etc. [*Done*]
- g) Begin a periodic series of biographical articles for the RW (after deciding scope, approach, frequency, etc).
- h) Create a growing web archive of our biographical articles (and any others offered to us by contributors)
- i) Discuss with other committees (Library, PR, ICT) how best to provide links, etc between respective web pages (and any other information outlets such as bulletins or newsletters). [*Started*]

4.5 Getting work done

We each have different aptitudes, and different amounts of time available. We need to allocate work in a way that makes best use of our resources and skills. With new people and a new job to do, we need to find a way to match the two. Maybe we should start by listing the jobs that we think we could each do. Then we can see where the gaps are. Given the scale of the task, we should also be thinking about how we could draw on people outside the committee to help us do the work. Not only would that share the load, but it would also help to connect it more widely to the ringing community.

¹ Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

One potential way to multiply our effort would be to seek to develop a network of supporters or collaborators. They might be individuals interested in biographical work, or they might be officers of ringing societies who could act as front line gatherers of locally available information (changes of officers, leaders of major events, members given special honour, etc).

4.6 Reporting back

We will meet problems, some of which we may not solve. We probably won't meet all expectations (our own or other people's) so when we report back to Council next year (and before then to the officers and Admin Committee) we need to present a clear view of what is, and what is not, working. Where we have made improvements we should tell people about it. Where things are not going so well, we should not try to hide it and wait to be found out when we don't deliver, but we should be open, and if necessary seek help. We may even need to ask Council to refine out terms of reference. That is more likely to be accepted if we have a clear view of why we want change, and we can demonstrate that we have made significant progress towards achieving the vision that Council put before us. It might seem premature to think about next year's meeting before we have even started work, but it is not that long until we will have to produce it, and focusing on that as a goal may help us to deliver more in our first year! [*'Next year' passed without incident, but when we eventually introduce the new facilities, we need to back them up with a well presented explanation of how they will be used.*]

5 Some open questions

What I have written above may seem comprehensive and confident, but there are lots of of unanswered questions, a few of which I list here.

Should we still document all CC members? – We need to debate that, and if we think the answer is no, then we should seek Council ratification of our decision. My suggestion is that we will always open a file on a CC member, and as a minimum we will accept information offered (from the member or from others), and we will collect any information found from routine scanning, but that a decision to undertake additional research, or to track the individual's career explicitly would be made on the same grounds as for everyone else, ie the significance of what he or she had done (as far as we knew from the evidence). That would ensure some sort of record for all Council members (as in the original 1935 motion) but the size of the record would reflect the (known) contribution of the individual, using the same criteria as for other ringers.

Should we publish information on live ringers? – People increasingly expect to find information about anything and everything on the web. Google is their first port of call, and if information is available anywhere, Google will find it. (I entered the names of several ringers and mostly got hundreds of hits – on the ringer, after discounting namesakes). There is a lot of information about ringers out there, and as time goes on more of it will be on the web. Anyone who wants to find it can do so. The issue isn't about privacy, but about convenience and usefulness. Finding information via Google is tedious because the searches produce too much unsorted, incoherent information, whose coverage is erratic. Putting coherent information (or pointers to it) on the Biographies website would mean that anyone wishing to find information could do so more quickly and more efficiently. In addition, as its use increased, so would its ranking by the search engines, so people using them would also be brought more often to the CC site. In both cases, the increased prominence (and usefulness) of the CC site, would help to enhance external perception of the CC.

Because there are sensitivities about holding information, we would need to produce a clear, defensible policy for what we would and would not include, how we would check it, and so on. Perhaps we should look to 'Who's who' for a parallel, since we would effectively be creating an on-line ringers' version of it. [*This question was answered with our decision to set up an on-line database to which ringers could contribute information.*]

Should we seek to become a 'clearing house' for ringing biographies? – There are probably far more potential ringing biographers out there than ever get round to writing a biography, because there are many barriers to overcome. (How do I publish? Can I afford it? Will someone else do it before me? How much should I include? ...) Should we seek to support (and stimulate) such activity? Offering information and advice to people in our field would mirror what other CC committees do, and offering web publication (subject to suitable checks) could remove some of the barriers. Over time, it may also help to extend the network of supporters (see above).