

Ringers as individual members of an (inter)national ringing body Some initial thoughts

First I looked back at what I said in Thinking the Unthinkable.

A national ringing society?

Given a blank sheet of paper, some people favour creating a national (or international) ringing society. It could perform many of the functions of the Central Council, but would be directly accountable to its members, the ringers. Let's think how it might work. Members would be kept up to date with regular newsletters (e-mail as well as paper) and website updates.

The society would need specialist committees to do its work, but they and its executive officers would be elected directly by the members, the same as other interest groups and professional bodies do. Members would receive information about candidates – what they have done and what they wish to do if elected – and then vote either by post or electronically.

The society would probably need a regional structure, like many other national bodies, but the regions would be an outreach of the main body, not separate bodies, and there would probably be fewer of them than the 50 or so current territorial ringing societies. The new national society might also sponsor special interest groups allowing ringers with particular interests to share ideas, and to be more involved with the work of the relevant specialist committees. Again, there are parallels with professional bodies.

Would people join? If the new society replaced the current setup (however the transition is achieved) then we would expect bands to encourage their members to join, as they do with the current territorial societies, and as many firms encourage their staff to join the relevant professional body. We might expect additional encouragement if membership included benefits like insurance cover.

The idea of an overall ringing society has much to commend it, but it is unclear how we could make the change from what we have now. Setting up a new body in competition with the current structures might attract some ringers, but would not make a lot of sense unless it was a transition towards a replacement. How could we persuade the Central Council to make such a drastic change to its constitution, when its members are elected by societies whose role would be greatly diminished under the new order, if they even survived at all? It would require far more diplomacy and persuasion than Sir AP Heywood used to get the societies to agree to the Central Council in the first place.

Possible structures

The structure described above was a single national body with a regional structure. It could perform the functions currently performed by both the Council and the territorial ringing societies. That might be the best answer if we had a blank sheet of paper, but we don't, we have over a century of history, a lot of it engrained. Whatever we wish to achieve must be achieved by transition from that starting point.

An overlay?

We need something that could co-exist with current structures, as an overlay in addition to the existing societies.

A member organisation for ringers?

The SRCY and ASCY already provide an overlay across the whole ringing community. They do not compete with other societies, they complement them. Most of their members are also members (and often very active) of their local societies.

A more recent example is ART, which provides something extra to what its members can get from (and give to) their 'home' society, not as an alternative.

In all these cases ringers join the overlay body of their own volition. They value being a part of it and value what it offers.

A separate body?

The Central Council has many of the properties sought. It is a global body representing ringers (but only indirectly responsible to them) and delivering services to benefit of ringers. Could it be changed in some way to become a member organisation or should some other body be set up and differentiate itself from the Council in what it offers to its members.

A separate body would be organisationally simpler than trying to adapt the Council, which was created for a different purpose, but it would have two serious drawbacks.

It would have little to offer on day one – all of its value would have to be created from scratch, unlike the Council which has accrued value that could be re-purposed with a smaller investment of effort, as well as creating new value aimed at individual members.

Some of the value of a membership organisation would of course come from the growing membership – the sense of community and interaction – but on its own that would make it hard to sell the new organisation as against say the existing e-mail lists or Facebook groups.

The new body would also implicitly compete with the Council as a service provider, in the way that other recently created bodies are inevitably seen as competing.

A transformed Council?

The Council could be transformed to become a membership organisation rather than a federation of societies. That would be a radical step, with a lot of inter-related changes (legal and practical).

The transition would be high risk. Even if officers and committee members agreed to continue their existing work, the revenue of affiliation fees would cease, and there would be no guarantee of how many individual ringers would join, so the revised organisation might not be sustainable.

Less risky would be to create two classes of membership: individual and corporate, with affiliated societies automatically becoming corporate members. Their affiliation fees could be held for the first year, and then reviewed in the light of the revenue from individual members and the cost of providing enhanced services for them.

Two classes of membership would require a change of governance to provide an appropriate balance between the control exercised by the Council's ringer and corporate members.

Objective?

The aim is for individual ringers to to engage with ... what? From the Council's narrow perspective we might see it as engaging with the Council, but I think that is too introverted. Instead of trying to bolster 'us' we should be trying to strengthen the ringing community as a whole. (There should be a role for 'us' within that, but I don't think it should be the starting point).

So what do we want ringers to engage with that will enrich their experience and strengthen the ringing community? This could include some or all of:

- Activities and people outside their home tower or area
- Ideas & perspectives of ringers with other backgrounds
- Resources that might not be available locally
- Contribution to the development of ringing
- A responsible stake in the governance of the Exercise

These may seem vague, but even so, to a ringer asking 'why?', I think it would be easier to explain them than 'why should I be interested in the Central Council?'

Target audience?

Who are we trying to engage? 'All ringers' is probably too simplistic, and unachievable in a meaningful sense. The nearest you could get to 'all ringers' signing up would be if the ringing societies registered all their members en-bloc at no extra charge. How would that improve on what we have now (even if it were achievable)?

If we want individual ringers to sign up of their own volition, we must accept that not all will do so (initially or ever). Therefore it is sensible to consider what type of ringer would be likely to participate and also what type of ringer's participation would be most likely to benefit the ringing community. This could include:

- Active ringers
- Talented ringers
- Influential ringers (tower captains, teachers, officers, ...)
- Ambitious ringers (those who want more from ringing)
- Committed ringers (those willing to contribute)
- Ringers with other talents (that may help serve ringing)

The offer?

People will only participate in something if they value what it offers and can't get it more easily by another means. What can we offer ringers if they to join a national ringing body (or become individual members of the CC)? (NB - For simplicity I talk about 'the organisation' below.)

- A newsletter – Members must receive regular information about what the organisation is doing. It could be electronic and/or paper, and must be reasonably frequent, probably between weekly and quarterly.
- Relevant editorial content – This should cover any and all aspects of interest to members, and vary in depth of specialism. One suggestion is to bundle a copy of the *Ringling World* with membership.

- Information – What information would ringers want to access?
- Services – What services would ringers wish to use?
- Interaction – The ability to share ideas, take part in debate, etc
- Discounts on purchases? – Often provided by member organisations (for example members of The Ramblers can get a discount in most outdoor equipment shops). What might ringers want to buy?
- Collective cover? – Some national bodies offer group insurance, performing rights cover, etc. What might ringers need or value?

I'm struggling with this list, but what's on offer seems pretty fundamental.

Differentiation?

Some of the above benefits are already available or partially available from other sources. The new organisation would have to offer better, more complete, better integrated or better delivered benefits for them to be seen as attractive, especially if the existing sources are free.

- The organisation's newsletter by definition isn't available elsewhere. But if the organisation is a transformed version of the CC then information on its activities is already freely published. Differentiation would be limited to making a better job of it, and delivering higher quality news more effectively to members.
- Editorial content is already available from the *Ringling World* (hence the logic of bundling it with membership). Free editorial content, albeit much more limited in scope, is also provided by most societies and some websites.
- Most information ringers are likely to need is already provided somewhere, so differentiation would be limited to gathering it together and delivering it in a more convenient or coherent way.
- The Council already offers various services, most of them free (advice) or at little more than cost (publications). Could any of these be offered as premium services to members? Could it offer any new services?
- There are already many opportunities for interaction (general and specialist e-mail lists, Facebook groups, *Ringling World* letters, etc). This is fragmented and uncoordinated but clearly meets a need. A new group could only compete if it offered higher quality discussion or a more supportive environment with no anonymous 'lurkers' and less 'noise' than established versions. Closed lists can achieve this (for example the NRT discussion list) but they require a shared purpose (in NRT's case it was training) and critical mass, maybe not present on day one. Differentiation could certainly be offered in the form of open meetings or similar events, but to be 'member' benefits they would have to exclude, or limit the participation of, non members. That is in contrast to all previous 'open' meetings. (There is obviously a link here with the other action on developing the Council weekend, and perhaps extending beyond it.)

- Discounts only work when people buy things. What equipment or clothing (or services) do ringers use apart from bells (which are provided free)? Many of them buy beer, but getting discounts on that seems as likely as resurrecting the Committee for reduced train fares.
- Many ringers are already provided with benefits in the form of insurance cover by their ringing society, though how many of them value it (or even understand what it covers) is open to debate. When the Council offered to provide collective insurance cover to all ringers through affiliated societies, very few took up the offer.

Membership & costs?

Can we assume that ringers who think it worth joining at all will be willing to pay a reasonable price for doing so? I think this is equivalent to:

- Is it reasonable to provide the services we think ringers would value and charge what they cost to deliver?
- Is it reasonable not to assume that membership must be free, and thus restrict consideration to services that can be delivered at negligible cost?
- Are we willing to exclude those ringers who consider none of the offered services worth paying even a token amount for?

Until it becomes well established or acquires a strong reputation, we can assume that only the more active, ambitious, etc ringers would consider joining whatever is set up. We don't know how many that covers, but 10% may be a reasonable guess. That's a maximum potential membership of a few thousand – similar to the number of *Ringling World* subscribers. Initially the number is likely to be less.

The subscription would need to cover (at least) the administrative costs of membership and the cost of providing whatever services are offered. That will depend on the number of members and what the services are, but however low the cost it doesn't seem sensible to consider a subscription of less than say £5 per annum. 3,000 members paying £5 would generate £15,000. 1,000 members would generate £5,000. Even 500 members would generate £2,500. Putting those into context, the Council's current income from society affiliation fees is £6,000.

So even charging a nominal £5 per annum (less than most society subscriptions and much less than the cost of anything else) would generate a significant increase in Council income, which could be used to fund some additional services.

That suggests that we should focus on offering value rather than worrying about cost. If the value is right I feel sure that anyone willing pay £5 would also be willing to pay £10 or more. If the value is wrong, they probably wouldn't pay anything.

If the cost of services provided are significant then the above nominal cost would not be adequate. Bundling the *Ringling World* with membership clearly comes in that category. The subscription is currently £65 by post and £42 on-line. The cost would probably fall if the bundled version greatly increased circulation, but it that can't be assumed at the start. There are two cases:

- If a member already takes the *Ringling World* then the combined cost of both is little more than the current cost.

A member organisation for ringers?

That may help to generate a substantial number of initial members, but it won't increase the *Ringling World* circulation (so the cost won't come down).

- A current non-subscriber becoming a member would have to pay a much larger subscription (say £70 or £47 depending on delivery). The major part of that is the cost of the journal, which (by definition) the person currently is not willing to pay. Thus in effect we are hoping that the other values of membership will induce the ringer to subscribe to the *Ringling World*.

Both of these are not quite the win-win that is glibly quoted as a reason for bundling the *Ringling World* with membership. Only if large numbers of ringers who are not current subscribers become members would significant cost reductions be possible.

This requires further investigation. How would *Ringling World* costs vary with numbers produced? How many current subscribers are Council members? How many non-subscribers might be seriously interested in becoming members? How would take up of membership be influenced by a more than nominal cost?

What's in a name?

'The Central Council of Church Bellringers' does (more or less) what it says on the tin, but is it a name to inspire anyone to join? Names do influence people. Many organisations have gone through the process of modernising their name. Quite apart from the silly commercial ones (eg Yellow Pages becoming Hibu) there are good examples in the voluntary field.

- **The Railway Development Society** (which campaigns for better rail services) became **Rail Future**.
- **The National Federation of Music Societies** became **Making Music**
- **The British Cycling Federation** became **British Cycling**

An organisation can change its working name but still retain its old name as its legal name (as the first example did).

What would be a suitable name for us? Purely as a straw man to discuss, I will suggest 'Change Ringers United'.

- It is short, it says what we do and it implies unity.
- It doesn't include 'church' for several reasons. Not all our ringing is done in churches, let alone for the Church. 15% of peals are in hand. Lots of people ring single bells in churches who are nothing to do with us.
- It doesn't exclude call change ringers, despite what some people think (the name is the clue).
- It doesn't include 'England', because although we practice 'English style ringing' we are international.

One of the forums came up with 'Ringers International Guild'. That's a clever acronym (RING), but it falls down on the counterfeiting connotation of 'ringer' (or confusion with bird ringing) and the mediaeval feel of 'Guild' (or association with Townswomen). Other names should be explored.

At the RoadShow, the PR Committee stand will have posters with ideas about logos and slogans for ringing, inviting people to comment and make suggestions. I will add one for a name.

Lessons of history?

I re-read the opening of Bill Cook's history of the Council, which describes the previous proposal for a national ringing society and why it failed.

The proposers saw it as the next logical step after setting up the new ringing societies – to provide co-ordination (which the Council achieved after the original proposal failed) and a sense of community for 'the whole ringers of the country' – so similar to what we are considering.

The proposal was for two classes of membership. Societies would pay an annual subscription (not sure how much) and appoint representatives. Individuals would pay an 'entrance fee of five shillings', which sounds like life membership. Since 5/- is over £20 in modern money maybe they were aiming at the better off, more educated ringers.

The proposal failed. Bill suggests that they were expecting it to go through on the nod – they had got accustomed to setting up ringing societies and not having their proposals challenged by the membership – but it didn't. The salient reasons seem to be:

- They gave the job to a committee. Its members lacked the focus and drive. Contrast, that with Heywood, a highly respected individual with a vision, who drove through his idea for the Council where they had failed with the national ringing society.
- Many of the societies were hostile. They probably saw it as competition, which the proposers didn't anticipate. Heywood got all the key players on side, anticipating and allaying their fears.
- Ringers at large were apathetic. This was probably in part due to ignorance, since no one seems to have thought about canvassing their support,
- It failed to get on the agenda of the Church Congress. It ended up in a fringe meeting with people they wanted

to influence absent.

A lot of this sounds very relevant in the present day:

- We tend to do things by committee.
- Societies can still be hostile to new ideas. (Consider ITTS, the Ringing Foundation or the suggestion of an affiliation fee of 16p per member.)
- There is a lot of apathy among ringers. And many of those who aren't apathetic about ringing have considerable disdain for the Council.

One thing is different though. Ringing is no longer driven by the clergy. 20% of Council members were clergy when it formed. but only 1% are now. The Church won't pull levers to solve ringing problems. Ringers must.

A more recent Council creation was the Network for Ringing Training (NRT). It was set up as 'a club for improvers' after the proposal for a Guild of Instructors was abandoned because of opposition from some influential people and societies. Its aim was to create a training community (from which in due course something like ART was expected to emerge 'bottom up').

The benefits offered included a newsletter, a (closed) e-mail discussion list (fairly new at the time), conferences and a service to put members in touch with others near them.

NRT gained respect, produced several newsletters, ran two conferences and hosted high quality discussion on its discussion list. Membership rose steadily to over 500.

It failed from a combination of an extended delay while trying to replace the (free) mechanism for communicating with members, and a lack of active support and promotion by the Council following changes of personnel.

Of course, lessons from history only take you so far. In the words of the financial brochures 'past performance is not necessarily a guide to future performance'.