

2012 Snowdon Lunch

Yorkshire

Thank you for inviting me to this illustrious gathering in God's Own County. As a child I assumed that phrase just meant that Yorkshire was superior, but Wikipedia say it's because Yorkshire is so green, and apparently has displaced Kent as the 'Garden of England'.

My mother told me that there were more acres in Yorkshire than words in the Bible, which I never questioned. It's true. The King James bible contains 783,137 words, which is nowhere near Yorkshire's 2.9 million acres – and it used to be over 3½ million.

My mother also told me that Yorkshire was bigger than Wales. But that's not true. Wales is just over 8,000 square miles, while Yorkshire at its peak was only 6,000, and is now nearer 4½.

But Yorkshire is about four times bigger than Lancashire. As a child, I imagined the north of England in two halves – Lancashire on the left and Yorkshire on the right. I realised that was wrong the first time I travelled along the A65 – and didn't leave Yorkshire until about 10 miles from the Irish Sea.

And I'm sure you all know that Yorkshire folk won more Olympic medals than the Australians.

From all that, you might think I'm a true born Yorkshireman, but sadly I'm not, though I am proud to be ¼ Yorkshire. My great grandfather, William Wrightson Harrison, was born in 1846, and lived at various places including The Black Bull at Denholme and Doncaster Brewery, where my grandfather John Herbert Harrison was born in 1872. That's a rather ironic pedigree for someone who doesn't drink beer!

Ringling in Yorkshire

As a student in summer 1965, I worked at Doncaster power station – and of course I went ringing every evening. I met many of the great names that I knew from the pages of *The Ringing World* – Eric Critchley at Doncaster, Dick Price at Thrybergh, Wilf Moreton at Wakefield, and Norman Chaddock at Rotherham.

Norman invited me to ring in a peal of Double Norwich Caters, which of course I accepted, though I'd never rung it before. He recorded the peal, and since the best place for the microphone was inside the pendulum case, he stopped the clock for the duration of the peal. I wonder how many ringers can claim to have rung a peal where time literally stood still?

Also in that peal was a young lad called Neil Donovan, who seems to have done quite well for himself since then.

Then & now

Ringers of my age have a habit of saying that 'Things were better in my day'. I try not to, because they weren't all better. But things were certainly different, and it's worth a few comparisons.

I learnt to ring at 15, with my brother who was 12. We could still do that today. The tower captain approached my parents first, which would also happen today, but what probably wouldn't, is that he didn't offer to teach my sister, who was midway between us in age.

Soon after we started, the old ringers faded away – by old, I mean in their 20s – so we didn't have enough for a practice. We 'got on our bikes'. Every Tuesday we cycled 4 miles each way to the nearest 6 bell tower, and later we cycled 8 miles each way every Wednesday to an 8 bell tower with a good band and a supportive tower captain. How many youngsters would do that today? How many parents would let them, even if they wanted to?

A few weeks ago I rang at that same 8-bell tower – and I was met by the same tower captain – still there after 51 years!

In our home tower we taught more ringers (including my sister). We didn't know that teaching was supposed to be difficult. We just did it. We didn't seek permission, and we didn't have supervision. But we developed a very active band, of which I became tower captain before I left school. How much of that would be possible today?

I wonder where would I be now without those early opportunities. I probably wouldn't be ringing.

Longer ago

We can look even further back – to the late 1800s when ringing societies like the Yorkshire Association were formed. When I was doing the research for my book – [which looks like this, for anyone who hasn't got a copy] – I was struck by the degree of engagement of ordinary ringers with the Guild. In 1886, 200 members attended the Oxford Guild Festival – well over a quarter. Your website tells me that Yorkshire was doing even better, with attendances around 300, when your membership was still below 1000.

That seems unlikely today. Our AGM attracts 2–3% of members, and even in our 125th year, when every member had a personal invitation, the Festival only attracted around 12%.

Yorkshire does a bit better, with 5% at your AGM, and about 5% here today.

The present

Back in the present day, the doom merchants are predicting collapse in a few decades when most of us over 50 will be dead.

The 1988 survey said we had ‘one ringer per bell’, and we declared a ‘decade of recruitment’ to find 10,000 more ringers. We didn’t, but later on we recruited a glut of ‘Millennium learners’ – mostly older, which really skewed the demographics. A quarter century on, we still have around one per bell – which is too few to ring them all regularly.

But is ‘ringers per bell’ a sensible measure of health? And should our main aim be to ‘keep all bells ringing’?

I don’t think so. You wouldn’t judge the health of music by counting the number of pianists per piano. And cyclists don’t aim to ‘keeping all bikes ridden’.

Counting bodies tells us that ringing isn’t dead yet, but doesn’t tell us about its health, or long term prognosis. For that, we must look for vital signs, especially performance. And from that perspective, ringing is very much like the Curate’s egg.

The good parts are very good. In centres of excellence, people are ringing to high standards, many ringing methods their grandfathers wouldn’t have dreamt of.

But they’re the exception. Many bands find it hard to strike simple methods reliably. And even in the so called ‘Red Zone’ there’s a lot of poorly struck Surprise. Why?

A lot of ringers were never taught to strike properly. They weren’t helped to acquire full bell control, to ring rhythmically and to listen. They were taught ringing as a mainly visual skill.

But there’s another, more insidious reason for so much mediocre striking. Outside the centres of excellence, much of contemporary ringing culture sees good striking as a vague ‘nice-to-have’ extra. It might happen if you’re lucky, but don’t upset anyone by complaining if it doesn’t.

Many bands of ringers accept performances that would embarrass a third rate village choir. Many ringers have never heard good striking, let alone taken part in any.

Within that culture, there’s no incentive to learn to strike well, and with little opportunity as well, it’s hardly surprising that so few ringers make the effort.

Two worlds

Does it matter? After all, any activity has a lot of people at lower achievement levels, and relatively few top performers. But I think there’s more to it than that with ringing.

Musicians, whether they’re playing in a top flight orchestra, a village band, or with a group of friends at home, try to play the right notes at the right time.

Talk to the ‘Snowdon Lunch’, York

Some achieve it better than others, but at each level they’re trying to achieve the expected standard.

Ringing seems to be more polarised, with performers at all levels from exalted to humble, but we also have many ringers who don’t see themselves as performers at all, and who aren’t motivated to achieve any particular standard, low or high

The ringing community has divided in two: the performers (at various levels), and the non-performers.

So whereas musicians and sportsmen have a wide base of ‘village level’ opportunities to start their performing careers and then progress, ringers in bands of non-performers find it hard to break out of the mould, and progress even to mid-rank levels.

This divide seems to have opened during my lifetime. 50 years ago I don’t remember good striking being marginalised in the way that it often is today, nor do I remember a landscape of ubiquitous ‘lumpy Bob Doubles’. I remember grass roots ringers as ‘artisans’ – they only rang basic methods, but they took pride in striking them well.

Am I being an elitist to emphasise performance? If ringers don’t care about striking, does it matter – as long as the bells are rung?

To keep things going from Sunday to Sunday in a tower, poor ringing might be better than no ringing – and I have huge sympathy for tower captains hanging on against all the odds.

But that won’t work in the long term. Poor ringing degrades the experience of everyone taking part, and it saps the will of anyone who has the potential to do better.

People enjoy doing things well, and it motivates them. But there’s little lasting satisfaction in doing things badly.

If we want to get more people hooked on ringing, especially those with the aptitude and motivation to do well, and to lead and inspire the next generation of ringers, then we must find a way for them to experience the joy of taking part in good ringing, before the novelty or the sense of duty wears off.

The way forward

What should we do? The ITTS (Integrated Teacher Training Scheme) is a positive move to help raise the standard of teaching. But ITTS alone won’t solve the problem, even with good take-up. Better trained ringers have more potential to succeed, but there is a huge gulf between skills taught, and the emergence of long term, motivated, competent ringers.

Drip feeding well taught novices into bands where poor ringing is the accepted norm, will waste a valuable resource.

We need to look at the wider problem of the culture in which ringers are developed, but who is? ITTS is training teachers, not reforming the collective mindset of established bands of ringers.

We need to provide environments where ‘performing’, at whatever level, is the norm – where good striking is both respected and encouraged. But culture is notoriously hard to change – can we do it? I’d like to think so, but it might take at least a generation.

Organisation

Are we organised for change? The Exercise is an aggregation of thousands of autonomous bands. The bands are overlaid by ringing societies, but they exert no control, and are peripheral to most ringers, apart from the activists – and I assume most of you here today are the activists.

This structure won’t deliver more, better new ringers. If we want to change the outcome, we have to find a better way to do things.

Could we create more centres of excellence? That was the vision behind the ringing centres movement, but three decades on, there are fewer than 40 – less than 1 per 100 towers, with limited impact on most bands.

Could the resources spread thinly over many bands be pooled to create a critical mass of competent teachers and ringers, with a performance culture?

That would mean bands giving up some autonomy, perhaps giving up individual practice nights, and travelling more. Would they make such drastic changes, even in return for a share of the more competent ringers generated?

Change

We can’t just preserve things as they used to be. The world changes round us, and we must adapt to survive.

We all live longer, and people continue active leisure pursuits for longer, so we should expect more older ringers. I don’t feel guilty for still being active!

But the longevity of post war ringers has lulled us into ignoring reductions in the number of younger ringers. If they drop out and take it up later, we’re OK, but if they just give up, then it does matter.

If many of the ex-ringers in their 30s never return to ringing, there will be a major problem when the post-war generation bows out. Ringing won’t collapse, but there will be far fewer ringers, and much less ringing.

But on the bright side, the younger ringers who are around will have lots of opportunities – like we did!

The role of ringing societies

Where do ringing societies fit into the picture? The Victorians set them up to bring about sweeping change. Belfry Reform was the biggest thing to hit

ringing in the last 200 years, and it brought huge benefits, with the promotion of change ringing, the seemingly inexorable rise of peal ringing, and much of the infrastructure that we now take for granted.

Far sighted leaders like Snowdon in Yorkshire, Robinson in Oxford, and others, must have faced their doubters and detractors, as we do, but they had the vision to carry the Exercise with them through a period of massive change.

For 70 years we’ve been coasting along with only a few minor irritants to stir us out of our complacency, like noise complaints and child protection.

Ringing now faces major demographic and social change, when many bands are struggling to survive.

Can our ringing societies rise to the new challenges, like our predecessors did?

Have we still got the energy to transform the Exercise? Or will we become clubs for an interested minority, sitting on the sidelines as the Exercise fragments, with an elite that doesn’t need us (concentrated in fewer and fewer towers), and the rest that aren’t interested in us, and are slowly disappearing?

Conclusion

I’ll leave those as open questions, and end on a more lighthearted note.

Of the good things that have come out of Yorkshire, two that we take for granted are Dove’s Guide and Snowdon’s ‘blue line’. Have you ever wondered who else uses the phrase ‘blue line’?

There are several railways (like the RER from Charles de Gaulle airport through central Paris), and there are some airlines (including a defunct one that used to operated out of Charles de Gaulle).

In Yorkshire, there are Blue Line Taxis in Harrogate and Barnsley, and there’s a Blue Line car dealer in Barnsley.

Then there’s the Blue Line bus company of Armthorpe, which has pictures on the Web of pretty well every bus it’s ever owned.

There’s even ‘Blue Line Horse and Carriage’ in the Pennistone equestrian listings.

Obviously my search for ‘Blue Line’ & ‘Yorkshire’ found some ringing websites, but I skipped over most of them. One did catch my eye though. It was a Learning Curve article that I wrote back in 2007, about learning Lessness as a variant of Yorkshire.

Isn’t the web wonderful! And so of course is Yorkshire, which brings me neatly back to where I started.

So I ask you to stand and drink to the good health of the Yorkshire Association.