

Universities Association dinner – 24 March 2018

Thank you for inviting me to your 75th anniversary dinner .

Background

For those who don't know me, I learnt to ring when I was 15, with my brother who was 12. The tower captain consulted our parents and then approached us, but he didn't ask my sister who was mid-way between us in age. That seems odd today but society was different in the '50s. Most wives didn't go to work, women wore hats in church, and wardens & sidesmen were all men.

Soon after we started the old ringers stopped coming – and by old I mean in their 20s – so there were too few for a practice. We 'got on our bikes' – long before Norman Tebbit used the phrase – and cycled 4 miles each way to a 6 bell tower every week to learn the basics of Plain Bob & Grandsire. Later we cycled 8 miles each way to an 8 bell tower to learn more advanced methods.

With the older generation out of the way, we taught other youngsters – including my sister. We didn't ask permission, and we didn't know that teaching ringing was supposed to be difficult – we just did it.

We re-started practices and we rang whenever we could – for every service going. We won the East Derby & West Notts Jubilee Shield for progress, and we rang lots of quarter peals as well – 29 in 1962 when I was tower captain, and 39 in 1965 when my brother was. ... Not bad for a band of teenagers running a tower. ... I did teach one adult, probably in his late 20s, but he was harder to teach.

Most Saturdays I went ringing. We were in the overlap between two societies so there was a local ringing meeting (usually ringing – tea – ringing) two weeks a month and the other weeks I looked in the *Ringling World* for the nearest ringing within cycling distance. My longest round trip was 70 miles for two towers and 30 miles each way for one – two hours there, a couple of hours ringing, and two hours back.

My ringing really took off in Cambridge. I also met my future wife and taught her to ring, but a couple of years after we married she gave up and I didn't ring regularly again until my mid 30s. The rest, as they say, is history.

The UA

I was elected to the UA in August 1965 and I rang a UA peal on the day of Churchill's funeral in January that year. It was a CUG band apart from one from Reading University ringer. She must have been friendly with one of us since we had taken her and another Reading girl to the Bristol dinner the previous weekend.

I remember that weekend – instantly understanding when I heard half muffled ringing on the Sunday and sleeping on a hard, cold, stone basement floor the previous night.

I did a bit of research on the UA. I was surprised not to find a website, but I found a picture of last summer's tour, with several familiar faces. I was also fascinated to

read about the UA origin in *The Ringling World* for 1943, which occupied the editorial two weeks running.

The first said the Editor was: 'ignorant of what was said and done' (because he hadn't been at the OUS dinner where the idea was mooted) and that since he 'lacked first-hand information' he would 'hold over any comment which may seem advisable until we receive the full report'. He then went on to comment at great length on 'the general subject of ringing at the universities'.

He extolled the contribution of Oxford and Cambridge men to ringing in the 16th & 17th centuries, and as leaders of the Exercise since Belfry Reform. He ended: 'So long as we can look to Oxford and Cambridge to supply us with worthy leaders, we can face the future with hope and confidence, and anything which will promote the knowledge of change ringing among the other universities cannot fail to be productive of good'.

There was a report of the dinner the following week, with a letter about the formation of the UA. The Editor said its fortunes would be followed 'with sympathetic interest' and that at least one of its declared objects 'may prove to be of lasting benefit to the Exercise'.

He thought ringing peals for a society was a throwback to when knowledge of peals might be lost unless societies recorded them, and saw no need for it – presumably publication in *The Ringling World* was sufficient – and he disapproved of peals where ringers only had a token connection with a society.

He didn't like the idea of a society restricted to ringers who'd been to university, which was divisive. But he felt it a price worth paying if the new society could promote change ringing among students of 'the newer universities', which he described as 'altogether different from those at Oxford and Cambridge, due chiefly to the absence of colleges'.

He echoed the previous week's eulogy by saying: 'the benefits the Exercise has derived from the ringing societies at the two older Universities are so great that the attempt is eminently worth making, and is a full justification for the new association'.

He approved of excluding London University since: 'a ringing society there would hardly be possible, and if possible would not be advisable'. – Goodness knows why! In any case, he'd misread it – London wasn't excluded.

The guest speaker at the OUS dinner had spoken about 'the ideal university society'. It was none other than Frank Haynes, Master of the CUG in 1928, who moved back to Cambridge while I was an undergraduate and became an avuncular figure – nearly 40 years older than us, but still with a twinkle in his eye.

Your founding fathers wanted to encourage other university societies, and a lot have since appeared – a couple of dozen are listed on universityringing.org – though I don't know how many owe their genesis to UA.

New organisations often have grand ambitions, but I see that yours were refreshingly modest: few officials, no regular meetings, and a tour 'every two years at any rate, and annually if possible'. ... That sounds really laid back!

Change in the past

The UA was created at a time of change. The war had forced a hiatus in everything: Tower bell ringing was banned for several years, life in general was disrupted and bands were much depleted.

Ringling had barely recovered from the effect of the previous war – in fact hadn't fully recovered – 1932 was the only inter-war year when there were more peals than in 1913. And after yet another war ringing had to start rebuilding again. But the recovery was much faster this time. More peals were rung in 1948 than in any previous year. And the number doubled over the next 50 years. ...

To put that into a wider perspective. ... For two centuries before Belfry Reform in the late 1800s change ringing was less widespread.

It's easy to think of Belfry Reform as the clergy cracking down on bad behaviour, making ringers attend services and generally taking over ringing, but it went far deeper:

- All ringers could now belong to a ringing society – not just an elite, or those in historic centres. That brought ringers together in a new way.
- The novel idea of ringing for services gave regular ringing a purpose that it didn't have before.
- And above all, the way the clergy promoted change ringing moved everything up a gear.

For a dramatic illustration of the impact of Belfry Reform, plot the number of peals rung each year since the early 1700s. For a first century and a half there were several dozen a year, going up and down a lot, and hardly ever reaching 100. But from the late 1800s the number just kept growing –except during the wars.

So the post 1945 period – 70 years of modern ringing with continual growth, uninterrupted by war strife or social upheaval – is a unique period in the history of ringing. And those of us who learnt in the post war decades have spent our entire ringing careers in this unusual period.

But a lot of things have changed. Looking at peals, the number has doubled – from 2½ thousand a year to 5 thousand a year – and some things have stayed the same – around 40% of those who ring peals only ring one, and around 20% conducted.

But the number of people ringing peals changed drastically. At first it went up from around 4,000 to

nearly 5,000 but since 1980 it's halved to around 2½ thousand now. So there are far more peals, with far fewer people ringing them. In 1950 the average peal ringer rang 5 and now the average is 16.

Most of those peal ringers are getting older, and we aren't replacing them. In 2015 we made an impressive effort and got 387 ringers through their first peal – more than twice the previous couple of years – and we felt jolly proud. But historically that's nothing. Before 2000 the total hardly ever went that low. There were 602 in the year I rang my first peal, and 667 in the year I joined the UA there were 667, way more than in 2015.

In 1950 a sixth of people who rang a peal were ringing their first – so in six years they could replenish the stock. Now it would take well over 20 years to replenish

The present

But there is a lot to be positive about. Look at what's being rung. For example, Bristol Maximus was first pealed in 1960 but now it's rung so regularly that Simon Lindford used it as the entry level for the 'Black Zone'.

And look at who is ringing. As well as the hordes of retired ringers knocking out Surprise Major peals, plenty of young ringers are doing spectacular things.

The youngest person to ring a quarter, and a peal both went down in recent years. The National Youth Contest is thriving. 10 and 12 bell peals were rung by a band with average age under 16. And the youngest to conduct a particles peal, by a large margin, was 19.

The need for reform

So with the present a bit like the curate's egg, what are the prospects for the future?

When I wrote *Thinking the Unthinkable* back in 2010, I wasn't setting myself up as a prophet, I was merely responding to what I saw as mismatches between perception and reality in ringing.

For anyone who doesn't remember the articles, I looked at quality of performance and teaching, ringing societies and the Central Council, our relationship with the Church and with the public, our attitudes to money, our demographics, and possible future scenarios for ringing.

I intended to be provocative, and you'd think at least one of those raise some hackles. But there was almost no reaction. Were my thoughts not so unthinkable after all? Or was complacency so ingrained that nobody was listening? The articles faded into history.

Central Council reform has been discussed for decades, but nothing much happened. Then in 2016 the balloon went up. Someone had to press the trigger to make reform happen, and I happened to be in the right place at the right time to do it.

The Council overwhelmingly approved the motion in Portsmouth to set up CRAG, despite some diehard

opposition. The same was true when CRAG presented its proposals in Edinburgh, which were approved by a large majority. And I hope the Council will also approve the rule changes and new structure in May at Lancaster.

But reform is only one step. With a remit focused on modern needs, and a more responsive structure, the Council should be able to deliver more. But it's only one cog in the machinery of ringing. It can provide central services and support to ringers, and it can foster the interests of ringing in the wider world. But it doesn't control all the levers.

The ringing societies are closer to the coalface – from the giants like ODG, Bath & Wells and Yorkshire to the tiddlers with a few dozen members.

The territorials owe their origin to Belfry Reform, and at the time they had a huge impact on the development of ringing. But their influence has waned.

In 1886, a quarter of ODG members attended the Guild Festival in Oxford. 130 years later, despite 2½ thousand members on the books, the AGM failed to raise a quorum of 50. And in my own branch 30% of our 'resident ringing members' don't ever ring, let alone attend events.

There's a huge disconnect between most ringers and the organisations who should be serving them – who's fault is it? Societies claim they are doing their best but members aren't interested.

Trains suffer from the wrong kind of snow, so maybe ringing suffers from the wrong kind of ringer. ... Does it matter what kind of ringers we have so long as we keep the bells ringing? ... I think it does matter – a lot.

Quality

And I don't think counting bells rung on a Sunday is a sensible yardstick for the health of ringing. If you were concerned about cycling or piano playing would you launch a campaign to keep all bikes ridden or all pianos played? Of course not. You would focus on the rewards of cycling or piano playing, and you'd help people develop their skills to the point where they enjoy doing it, and want to keep doing it and progress.

Don't confuse short term expediency with long term strategy. Of course a tower captain wants her bells rung next Sunday. And if she has to scrape the barrel in terms of quality to get them rung then she'll do it.

But while poor ringing, from unambitious, unenthusiastic ringers might get you through next week, or next month, what about next year, or ten, twenty, fifty years ahead?

Can we rely on ringers who don't care about the quality of their own ringing to teach and inspire the next generation of ringers? It seems unlikely. Poor ringing degrades the experience of everyone taking part, and saps the will of anyone who has the potential to do better. Doing things well motivates people but there's little lasting satisfaction in doing things badly.

Talk to the Universities Association 75th anniversary dinner

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

The future

In my teens I ran a tower, in my 30s I ran a tower and I was Branch chairman, in my 70s I ran a tower and was Branch chairman. Our generation has contributed to ringing over many decades. If no one else steps forward we are happy to continue. We have the skill and experience, and even more time now we are retired

But it's self perpetuating. Everyone gets used to old folk running everything. Today I couldn't get the formative experiences that I had as a teenager.

Before he died, Steve Jobs said: 'The old must leave to make space for the new. This is a critical tool that nature employs to make evolution happen'.

I don't feel guilty for still being active, thanks to peace, the NHS and prosperity, but I'm aware I'm part of deeper changes that ringing is undergoing. I have no desire to go yet, but when I and we do go, I'm confident that those following will carry ringing forward, even if they are less numerous.

Our generation's had a longer run than most of our predecessors whose ringing careers were cut short, and we've remained healthy and active. But we won't be here for ever, and when we pass we'll leave a big hole.

The peal ringer

Death and continuity leads me on to a story about an obsessive peal ringer. He'd rung thousands of peals, he rang several a week, and he almost lived for peal ringing. But as he got older, he pondered his own mortality. He believed in the afterlife so he wasn't afraid of dying, but one question gnawed away in his mind – were there any bells in heaven? He couldn't face eternity with no peal ringing to take his mind off incessant harp playing.

One day he met a medium who claimed to communicate with the other side. Did he communicate often? Could he find out about things on the other side? And in particular, could he find out if there were bells in heaven? The medium said he'd see what he could do.

When they met again he repeated his question. After a silence the medium replied:

'There's good news and bad news. – The good news is that there are lots of bells in heaven, including a 50cwt Taylor twelve just a stones throw from the Pearly Gates'.

And the bad news? ... You're in a peal there next Friday.

Finale

So without further ado I'd like to congratulate the UA on its 75th anniversary, and ask you all to drink a toast to the future prosperity, of the UA, and of ringing.