

Thinking the unthinkable – 7

Relationship with the public

As ringers, we can get wrapped up in our own little world. And our world is little, since ringers account for under a tenth of a percent of the UK population (and far less outside UK). Even if you add in ex-ringers we are still well under one percent.

We take part in a very public activity. We rely on community goodwill, and we must recruit from the community. Yet many ringers don't see the relationship with the public as a high priority. Even those that do, tend to see it purely in terms of recruitment, with a very narrow focus. Often if I mention that I have given a talk on ringing, I am immediately asked 'did you get any recruits?' as if that was the only reason for telling people about ringing, and the only measure of whether it was worthwhile. I want to tell people about ringing because I know from experience that they will find it interesting. I have given talks to many who would not be capable of ringing, but they are still valued members of the community. Not everyone takes that view though.

Begging bowl or welcome sign?

Let me illustrate the two perspectives by describing two alternative scenarios.

You are a non-ringer walking down the street of life and you see a beggar with a sign saying 'Ancient art and historic bells to support'. He doesn't want your money, but he wants you to give up an evening a week to learn to ring. You wouldn't want your friends to think you swung on bell ropes, so you make your excuses and pass by. Then you see a poster 'Welcome to the fascinating world of ringing', with someone smiling and inviting you into a small exhibition.

You are amazed to learn how ringing evolved, and how bells work, and you even almost understand how bell 'methods' work. You meet several ringers, old and young, big and small – all nice, 'normal' people, wearing tee-shirts that say 'I'd rather be bellringing'. You begin to realise how people get hooked on ringing. You are glad you went in. You admire the ringers for their obvious skill and enthusiasm.

The beggar got no recruits, and went home feeling miserable, but the exhibition left everyone – ringers as well as visitors – feeling positive. Which did more for the health of ringing? Which is more likely to stimulate future recruits, and to foster general support for ringers?

Grass roots PR

It is all too easy for 'ordinary' ringers to see 'PR' as about open days and recruitment drives – things they don't need to get involved in unless asked to help. But we shouldn't put the relationship between ringers and the public into a box labelled 'PR', for someone else to do. Our relationships should never be 'someone else's problem' – they are our problem. Major initiatives might best be left to ringing organisations, but they should be overlaid on, and not be a substitute for, what we all do in our everyday contact with non-ringers.

There are something like 50,000 ringers. Just imagine what a 50,000 strong PR team – or even a 10,000 strong team – could do for ringing. It

would be hugely more powerful than the collected efforts of all the CC and ringing society PR officers combined. So how could it be done, and what could it achieve?

What should this PR army of ringers be like? Above all, they must be comfortable with ringing as an activity, and with its place within society, otherwise they will hide their involvement, apart from immediate family and friends. They must also feel positive about ringing as something of interest to outsiders, otherwise they will be passive rather than proactive, answering when asked but not seeking opportunities to reveal ringing to others. Finally, they must be able to put over an adequate picture of ringing – one that will interest and inspire non-ringers.

How many ringers would fit that description? Most of us could think of a few who already act as ambassadors for ringing, but what about the majority? What is stopping them, and more importantly how can we remove the barriers that hold them back?

To be comfortable with ringing as an activity, you need to have mastered it, or be reasonably confident that you will. If you haven't, then you are faced with using your own inadequacy as an explanation, which is not very appealing. To be comfortable with the place of ringing within society, you need to feel confident that the ringing the public hears is of reasonable quality, and ideally you would also want to be part of a band that engages with its local community.

Many things can help you to feel positive about ringing. As well as personal ability and the qualities of the bands with which you ring, there is the richness of your own ringing experience, which might include wider interests as well as performance.

Being able to put over a picture of ringing to interest outsiders requires communication skills, though at the individual level most people can get by with a little enthusiasm, especially if they can draw on fairly rich ringing experience and knowledge.

Coping with reality

It is obvious from the above descriptions that those whose own experience of ringing is rich, fulfilling and positive are likely to make good advocates of ringing. Sadly, for many ringers that vibrant description is not true. Someone who only rings out of duty or habit, who is content to handle a bell rather than control it, who has no desire to ring any more than the minimum required, and has neither knowledge of nor interest in any other aspect of ringing (history, theory, technology, etc) is unlikely to have 'a good story to tell' about ringing, though he or she might have good stories to tell about fellow ringers, their sociability, the place where they live and so on.

I suspect that many ringers don't feel positive enough about ringing and its relationship with the public to want to project that image on to the many people they meet in everyday life. I might be wrong, but if most ringers are already informing a wide circle of acquaintances about ringing, how is it that so many of the public are still uninformed?

So enhancing ringers' own perspective of ringing is also likely to enhance their ability to give the public a positive view of ringing.

Love thy neighbour

This is nothing to do with Samaritans, but it is about caring for others, specifically, caring enough about other people to want to make their lives more interesting. To make a good grass-roots advocate for ringing, you must actually care about the people in the communities in which you ring. We impose our performances and our practices on them, and we live among them. If we are proud to be ringers, we should want other people to understand why.

Ringing has a fascinating story to tell, which we should not keep to ourselves. There may be no immediate benefit to us, just the satisfaction of opening people's eyes to ringing, but there will be a longer term, if less direct, benefit to ringing, in terms of community support and the likelihood of recruitment.

Doing more

I started with the personal level because it is the one most likely to be forgotten, and because its potential is huge. But it is not the only one. Much more can be done locally, regionally and nationally, by tower bands, ringing societies and the Central Council. There are many things we can do, ranging from talks, open days, and articles at the local level to the portrayal of ringing in the media at the national level. Some of that is already being done, but the question, as with so many aspects of ringing, is whether we should be doing more, doing it better or doing it more widely.

We will know that we are doing enough when we stop seeing cartoons of monks swinging on bellropes, when people stop asking us if we have ever been taken up with the rope, and when the discovery that you ring isn't met with 'Oh, you are a campanologist then'. Until then, we need to do more than we are to promote understanding and to banish the ignorance that feeds misconceptions.

Benefits

Just imagine the benefits that could flow from an enhanced relationship with the public. Ringing could become a widely understood and respected activity. The acquisition of ringing skills could rank alongside those of instrumental music or performance sports in terms of both its challenges and its longer term benefits to individual development of capability and confidence. Ringing could acquire a cachet among aspiring individuals young and old. Begging for recruits could be replaced by selecting the best volunteers on the basis of their aptitude. Dropouts from training would be fewer, because no one would want to be seen to have failed at an activity like ringing, but most of those who did drop out would be the ones who couldn't develop performance skills on a par with their peers.

Is that wishful thinking? It is if we continue as we are. But can we afford to do that? We know that top rate ringing performance ranks alongside top performance in any other sphere. We also know of the richness and diversity of the Exercise as a community of interest. But we are fewer than a tenth of a percent of the population. Just think how different things would be if even 20% of the population shared our view.

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