

Thinking the unthinkable – 9

Ancient and Modern

For most ringers, those words probably evoke a memory of a time when *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was 'the' hymn book. To the modern generation, the idea that most churches would use the same hymn book might seem quaint, but for us older ringers it was a stable feature of church life. If like me you sang as well as rang, you might well have known the numbers of your favourite hymns and carols in A&M. Today, the old familiar hymns appear in different places in different books, if they appear at all.

I mention this because many ringers are old enough to remember when *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was the almost universal hymn book in the Church of England. As we keep being reminded we ourselves are becoming ancient. That has been obvious for some time just by looking round at our fellow ringers, and it has now been quantified by the work of the Central Council's Ringing Trends Committee.

Just as the hymn books we see in our churches have changed dramatically in recent decades, so too have those who ring the churches' bells.

The change

Let's look at some numbers. More than 60% of ringers are over 50 years old. Comparing now with the time of the previous survey in 1988, the number of ringers aged between 40 and 60 is more or less the same, but there is a big increase in over 60s (from about 12% to 40%) and a corresponding fall in under 40s (from nearly 50% to just over 20%). There has also been a significant reduction in the number who learnt to ring when under 20 (from nearly 60% to just over 40%) and an increase in those who learnt when over 50 (from about 6% to just under 20%). Of the ringers who learnt in the last three years, almost half were over 40.

What does it mean?

There is no doubt about the size and nature of the change in the ringing population that has happened, but it is less clear what will happen in the future. That is one reason why the Central Council set up a committee on ringing trends, rather than just commissioning a one-off survey as was done in 1988. As well as meeting the immediate need to quantify the current situation, the Committee is also expected to form a long-term and sustainable view of trends in ringing, so that future decisions can be much better informed than they have in the past.

More people are taking up ringing in later life. Is that a bad thing? Lots of other activities are also seeing more people take them up in middle or old age. The population as a whole is aging because we all live longer, and many of us remain more active. This has been boosted in recent years by a boom in early retirement of a privileged generation that have a much better pension deal than their parents did, and which their children will not be able to afford.

More significant is the fact that fewer people take up ringing early in life. A teenager who becomes a competent ringer has a long potential period in which to contribute to ringing, and historically teen learners are also more likely to become the high flyers of the future.

On both counts, we should be concerned about the loss of valuable potential with fewer

youngsters learning to ring, but we shouldn't be surprised. Our modern world presents many barriers to young ringers, which didn't exist when those of us with grey heads learnt to ring. We could go to ringing on our own, we could 'get on our bikes' to ring at other towers, and we didn't need chaperones wherever we went. We needed parental approval to take up ringing, but having done so, it was 'our' activity, and we got on with it unfettered by parental presence, or reliance on parental transport.

More significantly, our expectations were different. We expected to be active, because we spent much of our 'play' time doing things like roaming unsupervised in local woods. We didn't sit glued to screens, and although we had television, it was available for a limited number of hours, and viewed communally.

What the figures don't (yet) tell us

The age profile tells us how things look now, but it doesn't predict the future. It is clear that many ringers in their 50s and 60s will be dead in thirty years, and that the number of current ringers who will then be in their 50s and 60s will be far fewer. But will the trend for older learning continue? If so, then other ringers who have not yet learnt will swell the numbers.

Nor do we fully understand what is happening at the younger ages. Currently there are more ringers in their teens than there are either in their 20s or in their 30s. That might point to a resurgence of teenage ringing in recent years compared to 10 or 20 years ago. Or it might show a steady pattern of teenage loss that is greater than the number learning in early adulthood. These two possibilities could play through quite differently in future years.

There is a sharp rise of number of ringers in their 40s (compared to those in their 20s and 30s). The pessimist will see that as the tail end of the last 'good' decade for recruitment, so in ten years the curve won't rise until the 50s. A more optimistic interpretation is that the number of ringers in their 40s will continue, either with people learning in their 40s, or with ringers who learnt in their teens returning after a break. If significant numbers of teen learners do return, they are higher up the learning curve, and more likely to become leading performers and teachers.

Deeper concerns

Numbers are impersonal, and quoting them doesn't offend anyone. But the real concerns lie deeper than just the number of ringers. The bulge of oldies is not a homogeneous group. Some are the so called 'millennium learners' (though many learnt after 2000) – ringers of modest ability and limited aspirations. Others are those who learnt long ago as teenagers, with a lifetime of achievement under their belts. Many of this latter group helped to push (and in some cases continue to push) the boundaries of performance, and many play leading roles in the Exercise. The real fear is that these veteran high flyers will only partly be replaced by the, less numerous, next generation of high flyers, whose influence will be diluted with (post) Millennium learners making up the numbers.

Will this happen? We can't be sure. And there might be some surprises. Many of the oldies who currently run the Exercise have been doing so for decades. Is this a failure on the part of younger generations to replace them, or is it

just a measure of the strength of the post-war generation of ringers that is working its way through the Exercise, in the same way that the 'baby boomers' are working their way through the general population? Either way the domination of ringing by the oldies causes distortions.

The younger generations of ringers are not without talent or inspiration, as can be seen in many areas of ringing. Did we deny them the opportunity enjoyed by our generation to take widespread control at an early age, because so many of us are still around, still active, and still able to contribute? When we finally go, and the next generation has to manage without us, they may find it hard work because there are fewer of them, and they won't have the benefit of our experience, but they will have fresh ideas, they will have more energy, and they might bring about a renaissance that we oldies have so far failed to do.

How should we respond?

Many people are jumping up and down saying that we must 'do something' about the aging ringing population, because in twenty years most of us will be dead and ringing will collapse if we don't recruit more youngsters. That is too simple a prognosis, and it doesn't really get to the nub of the matter. Our whole society is aging, and older people are becoming more active in many other activities. The health of ringing is not determined by the age of ringers, but by their competence. We need quality more than we need quantity, and as we saw in earlier articles, we waste many of our resources because poor training either loses ringers prematurely or condemns them to a life of under-performing.

The ability to learn does not stop at twenty, even though most of us get out of practice at doing it. Many people successfully take up sporting activities much later in life. Some of the actors that we taught for the *Midsomer Murders* film *Ring Out Your Dead* were in their 50s and 60s, but after only a few hours of instruction they could all handle a bell competently. One of them even rang at a wedding, and in the scene where they ring two bells, the tower captain really was doing so. (See: <http://tinyurl.com/ringoutdead>)

So should we write off people who come forward in their 40s and 50s keen to ring? Or should we ensure that we are capable of training them in a way that maximises their potential, and turns them into competent performing ringers?

Of course we still want young ringers as well. So we must find ways to overcome the barriers that prevent them taking up ringing. We must learn to train and motivate them to become long term, competent ringers, so that even if they give up for a while, they will return later.

Ringing demographics are the product of how we do things, and in particular how we relate to the changing society around us. We need to look not just at the symptoms, but also at the underlying causes, at our relationships, our perceptions and our values, which I have discussed in previous articles.

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Reference: *Central Council report 2010: Ringing Trends Committee*, RW pp 457-459.