

## A reporter called – 1



Cartoon by Yvonne Hall

"We're doing a story about bellringing ..."

How would you react if a reporter rang you out of the blue and opened the conversation with that line? Excited at the prospect of getting some PR for ringing? Or apprehensive that you might say something wrong and be quoted in print? Or maybe somewhat cynical based on previous disappointment?

It can be a bit daunting dealing with the media but any opportunity to help raise awareness and promote ringing is worth taking. There's a lot of public ignorance and misperception so the more we can chip away at it the better.

Many reporters are prone to the same misconceptions as the public at large, so when talking to them you often have to overcome false preconceptions as well as providing information.

This is the first of a series of articles in which we eaves drop on interviews between a ringer and a journalist whose initial approach to the story is coloured by misconceptions about ringing. The interviews are as much about correcting those perceptions as they are about the topic in question.

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Our band tries to get articles in the local paper whenever we can, but despite our efforts they sometimes get squeezed out, so a call from a reporter doing a story about bellringing seemed like a gift. But my heart sank when I heard what the story was about. This was our conversation. (J = Journalist, R = Ringer).

J – We're doing a story about bellringing and I've been given your name.

R – I'm always happy to talk about ringing, what would you like to know?

J – I understand ringing is a dying art, which seems rather sad and ... [I cut him off in mid sentence]

R – What makes you think ringing's dying?

J – There was an article in the Daily Blab recently.

R – I've not seen that one, but articles like it appear from time to time, often based on exaggerated half truths. What did it say?

J – It was about a church that can't get any ringers. It seems no one's interested in learning to ring any more.

R – There are churches short of ringers, but there are several thousand churches with bells in this country, so extrapolating from one hard luck story is a bit of a jump.

Finding it hard to recruit people is true of other activities as well as ringing. Did the article compare the numbers of towers that are struggling with the number that are thriving?

J – I don't think so. Are there any thriving towers?

R – Lots, but I can't put a figure on it. As you might expect there's a wide spread. The most successful towers have vibrant bands, teach lots of youngsters and achieve high standards. And there are lots that are quite healthy but don't hit the headlines.

J – But surely some bands can't get ringers, like the one in the article.

R – That's true. As I said, there's a whole spectrum, and at the lower end bands do struggle and some towers are silent. There are thousands of towers overall so even a few percent can be quite a lot. There probably always have been struggling towers – and silent towers – but we tend to look back on the past and see it as a golden age, so we remember the active ones.

J – OK I can see that some towers are successful but the article said the reason they couldn't get any ringers was because people weren't interested these days but it was easy to get ringers years ago. I never hear bells ringing at my local church but they always used to ring at the church where I grew up.

R – Where's your local church? [Bring up Dove website while he's talking.]

J – Little Snettingham.

R – I didn't think Little Snettingham had bells but let me look it up. [I keep talking while I enter Little Snettingham.] Ringing is very well organised and there's a website with details of all the ringable bells, not just in this country but around the world. ... Very useful ... OK ... Little Snettingham's only got 3 bells so I'm not surprised there's no ringing. You can't do much with 3 bells. Most active towers have 6 or 8 – or more – which gives a lot more scope and makes it all much more worthwhile.

Where did you grow up?

J – Towncastle, and we lived quite near the church so I heard the bells on Wednesday evenings and Sundays.

R – OK ... [Quickly check Dove again] ... Yes ... Towncastle has 8 bells, Tenor 15 cwt. And the tower's got its own website so there must be an active band. In fact ... [fire up BellBoard] ... there's a website that records ringing performances everywhere, and ... Yes, Towncastle is a pretty active tower. They've rung a dozen quarter peals in the last year. That's a continuous performance lasting about three quarters of an hour.

[Tongue in cheek & wry smile] How about running a nostalgic story about growing up within earshot of a tower that has a thriving band of bellringers?

J – I don't think that would work because we don't cover that area.

R – Have you ever seen ringing in action?

J – No, I haven't.

R – Then come along to one of our practices. We'll show you the bells, show you how ringing works and you can talk to the ringers about what got them hooked on ringing and what keeps them ringing.

J – When do you practice ...

[I mentally chalked up a success.]

...

Are there any questions about ringing that you find particularly difficult to answer? Do you have any examples of difficult encounters where you have successfully turned round misconceptions people have about ringing.

John Harrison ([john@jaharrison.me.uk](mailto:john@jaharrison.me.uk))

## A reporter called – 2



Cartoon by Yvonne Hall

Another story in which a ringer encounters a journalist and is confronted with misconceptions or misinformation about ringing.

I invited the reporter I had spoken to on the phone to visit our practice. I asked him to come 15 minutes before we start ringing so we could show him the bells before we started.

At the appointed time a young woman arrived, explaining that her colleague had to go to an urgent job but since she was available she had come instead. Just after she arrived the key holder rang me to say that she was delayed. So I chatted to the reporter in the churchyard. (J = Journalist, R = Ringer).

J – You'll have to fill me in a bit. All I know is that my colleague is doing a story about the shortage of bellringers. [Oh dear, back to square one.]

R – Didn't he tell you about our conversation last week?

J – No. I just picked up the brief he was

given before I came out. But it's OK I'll take notes anyway. How long has there been a shortage of ringers?

R – That's a loaded question, and it doesn't have a simple answer. If you were doing a story on the shortage of cricketers what sort of answer would you expect?

J – Well, have they got enough players for the match?

R – OK, but that's talking about an individual team rather than country wide. It needs 11 players for each match, so how many members does it need for the season, allowing for holidays, illness, work and so on? And to field a good team each time the club needs more in reserve since some of them won't yet have reached peak form. I don't know much about cricket, but for ringing the rule of thumb is twice as many ringers as bells. So ideally a 6-bell tower would have at least 12 ringers, an 8-bell tower would have 16, and so on. You can manage with fewer than that but there's more risk of not being able to ring all the bells.

J – Is it one ringer for each bell?

R – Yes. When there are more ringers you take it in turns. The strongest band in this district's got two and a half ringers per bell and the weakest has about half. Most of them are somewhere in between. We've got two per bell

J – Does half a ringer per bell mean they can't ring? That definitely sounds like a shortage.

R – They rely on ringers from other towers helping out. It's quite common for people to ring for services at more than one tower, and to go to each other's practices.

J – But your rule of thumb still means a lot of churches round here don't have as many ringers as they ought to. When did the rot set in?

R – As it happens our chairman did some research last year and compared the figures now with 40 years ago.

J – I assume it was a lot better then.

R – The strongest band then had three ringers per bell and the weakest about half – so not a huge difference. The strongest band wasn't the same one though.

J – But it was better then if the strongest tower had 3 ringers per bell.

R – It was a bit better, but not a golden age – even then there were towers with fewer ringers than bells.

J – I assume the country as a whole has got a lot worse though.

R – The best information we have is from a survey in 1988, which produced a figure of 40,000 ringers. There's not been a proper survey since then but recent estimates suggest it's probably in the same ballpark – somewhere between 35,000 & 40,000.

J – But there are lots of churches without enough ringers.

R – Yes. And there are lots with enough ringers too. I suspect there always have been. People look back at when they were younger and remember things better than they were.

At that point the key holder arrived and we took the reporter up the tower.

Are there any questions about ringing that you find particularly difficult to answer? Do you have any examples of difficult encounters where you have successfully turned round misconceptions people have about ringing.

John Harrison ([john@jaharrison.me.uk](mailto:john@jaharrison.me.uk))

## A reporter called – 3



Cartoon by Yvonne Hall

Another story in which a ringer encounters a journalist and is confronted with misconceptions or misinformation about ringing.

The day after a reporter visited our practice I had a phone call from a different local paper, also wanting to talk to me about ringing. I'd been told that when the nationals run an unusual story local media all start scratching round to get in on the action, and this seemed to prove it. This woman seemed to have picked up a slightly different angle though. This was our conversation. (J = Journalist, R = Ringer).

J – We're doing a story about bellringing and I've been given your name.

R – [Getting into my stride] Well you've come to the right place, how can I help?

J – There's a report that bellringing's dying out because ringers are getting older, I understand you're a local bellringer, can you tell me how bad things are round here?

R – Well ... [playing for time] ... I don't know which report you've seen, but it sounds a bit over-simplified. Ringing isn't dying, and in some places it's really thriving.

J – But the report said that half of all bellringers are over 50.

R – That sounds about right – and the other half are under 50. The overall age range of ringers is more or less the same as it has been for ages – under 10 to over 90 – but the profile has changed with a bigger proportion of older ringers than there were 30, 40, 50 years ago.

J – So there are more older ringers.

R – Yes.

J – And why's that happened?

R – For a start we've had a couple of generations without a war, and people remain fit and active far longer than they used to. A lot of ringers like me who learnt as youngsters in the 50s and 60s are still going strong. And that's loading the statistics.

J – Haven't there always been old ringers? When you see cartoons of ringers they are always old men.

R – And scientists in cartoons are always old men with unkempt hair!

There've always been old ringers, but not so many. Life expectancy now is 10 - 15 years more than it was after the war. When I was a boy, people in their 60s were showing their age, but now they are rushing around doing lots of things and enjoying retirement.

J – But if ringers keep going longer then there should be more ringers. But there's a shortage, so what's missing?

R – There are fewer ringers under 50 than there used to be. But that's been masked by the increase in older ringers, which meant the total number of ringers didn't change a lot.

J – So in 20-30 more years the bulge will have fallen off the end. And if there aren't enough coming up behind them then you're still going to run out of ringers. Do any youngsters learn to ring at all now?

R – Yes they do – and there are more ringers

in their teens than in their 20s & 30s.

J – So you've lost a generation in the middle but you're hoping to hang on until today's teens get a bit older?

R – More likely it's career pressures and modern life in general that make ringers give up in their 20s, so they may come back later when the pressure eases.

A lot of ringers do come back after many years gap. A lot more people take up ringing in later life now as well – getting on for half of learners are over 40. They tend to be reliable and committed but they're less likely to become high performers and teachers. So the real concern is the changing mix of ringers, rather than running out of them. But it's too soon to know how things will play out in response to the changes in society.

J – How old are the ringers in your tower?

R – Youngest in her teens. Oldest in his 70s.

J – Could we get a picture of your ringers? I could send a photographer on Sunday when you are ringing.

R – It would be much better to come to one of our practices on a Friday evening. There's more time then and we could give you our attention. On Sunday we are focused on performing and it would be more difficult.

J – OK, let's say next week. I'll give your details to our photographer and he'll be in touch later to confirm.

Are there any questions about ringing that you find particularly difficult to answer? Do you have any examples of difficult encounters where you have successfully turned round misconceptions people have about ringing.

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Another story in which a ringer encounters a journalist and is confronted with misconceptions or misinformation about ringing.

The photographer from the second paper arrived part way through our practice. As well as taking pictures he asked lots of questions. (J = Journalist, R = Ringer).

J – I'd like to get some action pictures, and I'll take some notes to fill in the detail if that's OK.

[Using the model we showed him how a bell works, and we explained about safety. We said he could take pictures while we were ringing provided he kept clear of the rope circle. We rang some Rounds and he took pictures.]

J – It all seems very co-ordinated, how do you manage to get the timing right?

R – Like any skill it comes with practice. What we just rang was pretty basic – like singing scales to warm up. Mostly we ring 'methods' where the order keeps changing, so we all have to keep ringing a bit faster or a bit slower to fit in with the other bells. [We rang some hunting ring to demonstrate.]

J – That sounded nice but you didn't seem to be doing much. I was hoping to get a picture of you flying up on the ropes.

R – You've been watching too many spoof TV adverts! We don't fly up on the ropes. (And if we did we would have less control.)

J – But there was a report in the press last year about a ringer taken up 100 feet and having to be rescued.

R – Sorry to disillusion you but the press don't always get it right. That was an accident at Worcester – he was lifted about 5 feet off the

roof before he fell and injured himself. The room he was in was high in the tower so rather than try to get him along all the passageways and down the spiral stairs they lowered him 80 feet through a trapdoor, which is what the photographs were.

Anyway accidents are very rare. Bellringing is pretty safe compared with a lot of other activities – which is why we pay low insurance premiums. I've never seen anyone taken up by the rope in over 50 years.

J – I remember the picture of him being lowered – it looked pretty spectacular.

R – That's why it got published! But when you are ringing you aren't aware how high you are in the tower – you're just 'in a room' – like here, you don't feel 30 feet up do you.

J – Don't you have any sort of music? How do you all know when to do?

R – We don't need music because we learn the patterns – it's a bit like country dancing. What we just rang has a very simple pattern. [I draw a diagram on whiteboard and explain it.] Most things are more complicated. [Flip open the Diary at a Surprise method.] There are still patterns, when you learn how to recognise them.

J – Can you ring something hard for me?

R – OK [... What have we got a band for ... Catch hold for three leads of Bristol.] This is a fairly complex method but what we're going to ring is quite short. [We ring a well struck touch – obviously we are on form tonight.]

J – That didn't look very hard. I was hoping to get some good action shots.

R – That is action. What were you expecting?

J – But you all look so relaxed.

R – That's because we are good at it. [Slight smirk] You need to be sensitive to what the bell is doing so you don't want to be tense. Heavy handed ringers are normally the inexperienced ones. It's all about finesse.

J – But what do you do for a real workout?

R – How about ringing continuously for three hours? That's how long a peal lasts. [I point to the pealboards on the wall.]

J – But I thought tower bells were very heavy. Somebody told me they can weigh a ton.

R – They can. That one there weighs  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton.

J – But when you showed me the model you said the bells swing full circle. You didn't look like you were swinging  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton when you rang that bell.

R – That's because of the special way bells are hung. Once it's up and swinging full circle the bell will ring itself without any effort (give or take a bit of friction). All we need to do is change the speed when required, which we do by making it swing a bit higher to ring slower or not so high to ring quicker. The wheel gives you a lot of leverage, and bigger bells have bigger wheels. The wheel on that bell is about 7 feet diameter.

J – So you were really swinging a  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton bell like that? That's amazing. What's the heaviest bell that anybody's ever rung?

R – The Tenor at Liverpool Cathedral – over 4 tons. You need quite a bit of stamina to ring that, but the fact that a mere human can control it at all – to a precision of a few hundredths of a second – is all down to the way the bells are hung – and the skill of ringer of course.

J – I assume light bells are easy to control?

R – Yes and no. The easiest to ring are mid sized, say between  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  ton. Learners tend to prefer them. Very light bells are so responsive that you need a very delicate touch to ring them accurately. Ringing light and heavy bells are very different techniques, which you develop as you get more experience.

J – So if the bells are as easy to ring as they seem to be, are you saying ringers don't need to be strong? I thought they did.

R – Ringers don't need to be strong. And ... [by an amazing coincidence our youngest ringer walks in – a shorter than average 14 year old] ... there's the proof. Last month she rang a  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton bell in a striking competition – which we won.

J – I seem to remember a few years ago ringing was being promoted for fitness?

R – I think that was the YMCA. It's a while ago and as far as I know it focused on tone, skill and endurance rather than on brute force. The most strenuous thing most ringers do is climbing the belfry stairs. But that only lasts a minute or so whereas a peal goes on for hours.

J – Anyway, thanks for your time. It's been more of an education than I was expecting. Enjoy the rest of your practice.

Are there any questions about ringing that you find particularly difficult to answer? Do you have any examples of difficult encounters where you have successfully turned round misconceptions people have about ringing.

John Harrison ([john@jaharrison.me.uk](mailto:john@jaharrison.me.uk))

## A reporter called – 5



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Another story in which a ringer encounters a journalist and is confronted with misconceptions or misinformation about ringing.

Some months later I had another call from one of the reporters – following a completely different story. (J = Journalist, R = Ringer).

J – You might remember we spoke about bellringing last month. I wondered if you could help me again. There's a report showing that lots of churches are closing because not many people go to church these days. Obviously that's going to hit religious activities like bellringing since there will be no ringers and presumably bells. I assume it's inevitable, but it seems rather sad – I like the sound of ringing.

R – Was that the article in most of the papers last year saying under a million people go to church each week? That's still a lot of people. I think it's about half what it was after the war or something like that.

J – So that's half the number of potential bellringers, which sounds serious.

R – Not really. There are 50 million potential ringers – or whatever the population is now.

J – But don't you have to go to church to ring the bells?

R – Not really. A lot of ringers do go to church but it's not required. If you've already got a connection with the church it might make you more likely to volunteer. But plenty of ringers aren't church goers.

J – So why do they ring?

R – Why do you do anything – play the trumpet, sing in a choir, cycle, play cricket, ...? Because you enjoy it. Ringing is a fascinating activity, and once you get hooked you want to do more.

J – But even if they like ringing, surely someone who doesn't go to church won't turn up to ring on a Sunday morning when they could be having a lie in.

R – It's part of the deal. If you join a brass band you're expected to turn up for their performances. If you join a cricket team you turn up for the fixtures. If you join a band of ringers you turn up to ring for services. It's not a lot in return for the pleasure of ringing.

J – So do any ringers go to church?

R – A lot do and a lot don't. In Victorian times most ringers attended church – but so did most other people.

Before the Victorians ringing was nothing to do with church services anyway – it was just sport and public entertainment. Ringing's only been associated with church services for the last 150 years or so. Ringing itself isn't a 'religious activity' as such – it's an art form – but a lot of ringing goes on in churches. So does a lot of choral singing, organ playing and flower arranging. They're no more or less religious.

J – I never knew people outside the church rang bells. But even so, if the churches close there won't be any bells to ring.

R – That depends on what happens to the closed churches. Some of them turn into community buildings like arts centres, so the bells may be able to stay in use. Some civic buildings already have bells and a few rings are privately owned.

J – But if a church is demolished or turned into residential accommodation then the bells will be lost, right.

R – Not necessarily. There are organisations that work with the church authorities to try to avoid losing the bells when a church closes, and to find them new homes.

J – So do you reckon ringing would survive the collapse of the church?

R – I don't think the church is collapsing. It's shrinking, and it has a problem maintaining lots of historic buildings. But the church is still very active, and in a lot of places it's thriving. Even with continuing church closures we are a long way from 'running out of bells'. There's a lot of scope for the church and ringing to work together for the benefit of both.

J – So you think ringing will survive despite the decline of the church?

R – Well it thrived for a couple of centuries before the church took any serious interest in the art of ringing, and it thrived after the Victorian church decided it was important, and it has thrived during the secularisation of 20th century society. So I reckon it should be able to survive into the future, with or without the church. But no doubt it will change, as it has over the last 400 odd years.

R – That's a nice positive note to end on. Thanks again for your time.

Are there any questions about ringing that you find particularly difficult to answer? Do you have any examples of difficult encounters where you have successfully turned round misconceptions people have about ringing.

In the next article I will look at what we can learn from these stories.

John Harrison ([john@jaharrison.me.uk](mailto:john@jaharrison.me.uk))



## A reporter called – Postscript



Cartoon by Yvonne Hall

In this series of fictional journalistic encounters I have explored some of the preconceptions that reporters seeking a story might have, and ways in which a ringer might have turned the conversation round to a more balanced view. If you have dealt with the press you may recognise some of the situations.

We could probably criticise a few of the things said in them, but nobody is perfect and at least the ringer managed to end each conversation positively. In this final article I will reflect on some issues raised by the stories.

### Controlling the direction

The ringer in the stories always managed to bring the conversation back onto a positive track, so the reporter could take away a more positive and hopefully accurate story, but you might not always achieve that in real life.

Even if you do manage to keep the interview on track you still have no direct influence over the final version because the journalist then has the task of putting together an engaging story based on notes that are probably limited (it's quite hard to take accurate notes while holding a conversation), so preconceptions can reemerge to fill gaps. Some reporters may accept an offer to check a draft of the article for terminological and technical accuracy before it's published, but that might not be practical, especially if the reporter is working under tight constraints.

In the stories, the ringer was aware of the risk of lingering misconceptions, so actively brought them out and added extra explanations to give a wider, richer picture of ringing – as well as answering the questions asked. Developing a rapport with the reporter obviously helps that.

Had these interviews been live on air, there would of course have been no post-editing. Live interviews can be a bit scary but once you've put your point over there's no risk of it being lost in a way that gives the story a different twist.

I once did an interview on air, where the interviewer kept pressing me on the story he'd been set up to do, despite my best efforts to turn it round to positive things. After I went off air I heard him over the radio say to his colleague: 'you know what – I think I agree with him'.

It's easy to forget that we have a different mindset from most non-ringers, so their questions, and the way they interpret our

answers, may be conditioned by factors that we aren't aware of. We take for granted many things that non-ringers don't know.

### Being well informed

The ringer in the stories knew about most of the reports quoted by the journalists, and even managed, in the case where he/she didn't know, to relate it to other known information by asking for more detail. Misleading stories do get printed, and someone unfamiliar with ringing may misquote them, or quote them out of context, so it's always worth querying anything that doesn't sound credible.

If you get advance notice of an interview it's worth checking any relevant facts beforehand.

### Negative v positive

It's a sad truth that bad news attracts more attention than good news. A journalist's job is to produce something of interest to readers or listeners, so it's no surprise that they get asked to cover negative stories about ringing.

If we want positive stories to come out on top then we have to help journalists make the positive things sound more interesting and exciting than the negative things.

### Being open

A dilemma that we all face when dealing with non-ringers in general, not just the press, is the balance to strike between putting over a positive view of ringing and being honest about the fact ringing does face some problems. For example we know that there are places where it is difficult to recruit and retain ringers, and there's a lot of mediocre training and poor striking.

There are pros and cons of being open. We don't want to give out snippets that can be exaggerated to make things sound worse than they are, but neither do we want to peddle blatant untruths. If we want to be believed and respected then we should be prepared to be honest and not hide behind superficial spin.

So what is a sensible balance? We should definitely challenge any over-simplified 'gloom and doom' pictures of ringing (as the ringer in our stories did) because they aren't true – there is a huge amount that is positive. There are lots of thriving bands. The leading edge of ringing is advancing. There is a growing focus on training. There are lots of promising young ringers. Ringers live longer, more active lives.

If we can get people to engage with these positive aspects then it seems reasonable to help them understand the rest of the picture as well.

If a journalist can see ringing as a vibrant activity, whose practitioners are facing up to challenges and thinking about how to respond and adapt to them, then that is a much more interesting story than one about a community in stasis, where nothing changes.

### Facing uncertainty

When people ask us about the future of ringing there are many aspects where we can see symptoms but we only partially understand the causes, and we don't yet know how the effects will pan out. None of us knows how the future will unfold, or even the full implications of what

we know about the recent past.

We know the gloomy possibilities but there are optimistic ones as well, and it's worth being aware of both when talking to people. So consider some of the things we know, and what they might turn out to mean as an alternative to the gloom stories.

We know a lot of bands are short of ringers, and that the age profile has moved upwards. But how will this play out in the future? Old ringers will certainly die, as they always have done, but will ringers who gave up in their 20s come back in their 40s? Some do. Will we retain a bigger fraction of a smaller but more focused cohort of young recruits than we did when lots of youngsters learned and then gave up? Will better ways of training ringers mean that more of them achieve higher levels of performance? We don't yet know.

We know the church is changing. Overall attendance is reducing, but not everywhere, and some churches are reaching out to their communities with social and other activities. Could they come to see ringing as an asset to be developed? If closed churches become community assets could that boost the number of secular rings of bells, and could secular ringing grow alongside church ringing?

We know that society is changing and that people lead pressured lives which might squeeze out ringing. But we also know that many people are willing to invest time and money on activities that they find rewarding. What would happen if we could raise the status of ringing as a skilled, sociable activity? Many of us lead sedentary lives and the need for healthy activity is increasingly being recognised. Ringing used to be seen as a sport, so could 'the Exercise' perhaps see a resurgence among a health conscious population?

All of this is speculation because we can't know the future. But so too are the visions of ringing dying out. Ringing has survived centuries of upheaval and change so there's every reason to be optimistic. Perhaps the lesson from our stories is that quite apart from the words we use, we should project an image of optimism and confidence.

So when we talk to the media, can we help them to see ringing as a glass half full not a glass half empty. The media are influential but most journalists are non-ringers, prone to the same myths as the general public. With our help they can lift the shroud of public ignorance about ringing and show it as what we know it to be – a skilled art with a strong sense of community and history.

I hope these stories have given you food for thought. You can also find useful, practical advice about working with the media on the Central Council website at:

<https://cccbr.org.uk/services/pr/advice/media/>

Of course every situation is different so you will still need to think on your feet.

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