

Thinking the unthinkable – 10

So what?

In this final article I will draw on ideas from earlier articles to think about the bigger picture of where ringing might go in the future. The big question is whether things will get better or get worse, with some variations in terms of how rapidly they might change, and what we might do to influence the outcome. Let's start by listing some possible scenarios.

Business as usual, slow decline – We carry on as we are. We do nothing to initiate change, but we can't avoid it because some changes happen anyway. We keep doing things more or less as we do now but there are fewer people to do them – fewer people willing to run things, fewer ringers wanting to take part, fewer people capable of teaching. More bands struggle. More towers become silent. More societies fold. But it all happens slowly, so no one gets alarmed. Centres of excellence fare much better than the average, but they become more isolated – like islands in an increasingly empty ocean rather than like market towns in a thriving countryside.

Business as usual, things keep going – The pessimists are proved wrong – there really was no need to panic. The 'lost generation' of ringers turns out not to be lost after all when most of them return in later life to take over from the elderly high flyers who are dying off. Recruitment manages to keep up with losses. Many towers continue to struggle, but most keep ringing. Ringing societies hang on, thanks to the dedicated few who run them. The centres of excellence continue to be active, much as they do now.

Implosion – Downward trends accelerate to the point where they start to feed on each other. Struggling bands fold and fewer ringers are trained. As active bands become more thinly spread, more ringers are lost when they move home. Recruitment can't keep up, so even more bands fold. Most ringing societies follow suit, and towers become ever more isolated as a result. Bands in difficulty are less likely to recover. Ringing doesn't completely die out, because some centres of excellence survive, but ringing becomes a rare activity, and most bells are silent.

Survival of the fittest – There is widespread decline, but it is not uniform. While many weak bands fail, other stronger bands not only survive but thrive. They attract the best ringers – keen refugees from nearby failing bands. Seeing failure all around them galvanises their resolve. They focus on quality and become stronger. The average standard of ringing is higher than now, but there is far less of it. Many bells are silent, but in towers still ringing there is a good standard of performance.

Resurgence – Faced with decline, the Exercise finally changes the way it does things. High quality training in well resourced centres replaces marginal training in isolated towers. Ringers enjoy more intensive development and coaching. They expect to pay a reasonable price for training and use of equipment, and in return they are rewarded with a high standard of teaching and support. Most recruits progress rapidly to become competent performers. The quality of ringing improves as more ringers are

motivated by the desire to perform, rather than simply to keep bells ringing, and are inspired by the good ringing around them. Paradoxically the social side becomes stronger in performance-oriented bands than in bands that rate performance below the social aspect. Public awareness of ringing improves as ringers become more pro-active in relating to their communities. The social status of ringing improves, and more people want to learn to ring. Popular centres select trainees on the basis of aptitude. Ringing societies reinvent themselves, and the Central Council becomes more focused and properly funded. Freed from the need to operate on a shoestring, our institutions become more effective at delivering services that all ringers value.

Disruptive events

These scenarios take some account of the choices that the Exercise might make, but they take little account of how the world might change around us. Regardless of any initiatives taken (or squandered) by the Exercise, our future could be drastically influenced by external factors that are largely beyond our control. History often turns on so-called 'disruptive events', which drastically alter underlying assumptions and constraints, and force major changes.

Energy crisis – Energy is likely to become more expensive over coming decades. Humanity might adapt to a gradual change in supply by consuming less of it and using it more efficiently, but the outlook is not good. There could be severe shortages before society manages to adapt, in which case travel would become a luxury. It would be far more costly, and possibly be rationed.

Ringing has become heavily dependent on car travel in recent decades, far more so than it was in former times. As a nation we have become less willing to walk or cycle many miles on a regular basis, and many ringers no longer live near the churches where they ring.

If travel were severely restricted, how many ringers would still find it possible to get to ringing? And how many of those who could travel to ringing would be willing to give up other travel opportunities if cost or rationing forced them to make a choice?

How would ringing adapt in a travel-starved society? How much of current ringing would be able to continue? And would the reduction undermine the Exercise's ability to maintain and replenish itself?

Church collapse – Church attendance has been declining since around 1890. Coincidentally, that was the era of Belfry Reform, but let's hope that bringing ringers into the fold wasn't the cause of the Church's decline.

One study showed attendance halving between 1968 and 1999. Another predicted even more drastic decline over coming decades, though its conclusions were disputed. We don't need statistics to see that many congregations are dwindling, and many of them are also aging. How many congregations will be able to afford to maintain a ring of bells in the future? How many will be able to provide any ringing recruits to maintain their bands?

Of course it is possible to recruit ringers who are not connected with the Church, which not all

are now, but how would things change if this became the norm and most ringers had no connection with the Church? Would they be keen to turn up at inconvenient times for a short ring to fit in with services? Would they still feel the need to struggle on in small numbers to keep each church's bells ringing, or would they abandon many towers and band together in larger numbers at just a few more convenient locations?

The Church is not in complete decline, and some congregations are holding up better than others, but they are the exception, and it is notable that some of the most vigorous congregations are in churches without bells, where ringing plays no significant role.

Nearly 1800 churches have been declared redundant in the last 40 years – a loss of around 10%. That might not sound a lot, but the decline could become more rapid if many congregations continue to shrink. If the Church sinks, do we want ringing to sink with it? If not, how will we keep ringing afloat?

Economic collapse – The economic system on which we rely to preserve our way of life is predicated on continual growth. In a finite world, that is obviously impossible to sustain, but few politicians, bankers or economists seem aware of the fact. In any case, humanity is already extracting more from the earth than it can sustainably provide, with western societies consuming far more than their share. So at some point there will be a correction. Ideally humanity will adapt soon enough for a gradual transition, but the omens are not good.

We recently faced economic disaster when the banking bubble burst, but most of the 'real economy' carried on. When the world starts to run out of resources, and when people start fighting over them, many of the assumptions about how we live in society will be torn up.

Ringing could have a lot to offer in a resource-poor, energy-poor world. It is a communal activity providing both mental and physical recreation with negligible consumption of resources, and no need for power other than lighting. But in times of economic strife, how many bands would stay together in order to enjoy those benefits? And would a strife-torn community tolerate ringing in the same way that our affluent society does?

Facing the future

My aim in these articles has been not to predict what will happen, or to prescribe solutions to particular problems, but to encourage us to think about how things might change in ringing – not just next week or next year, and not just about whether we can get a few more recruits – but about the bigger picture. I have tried to take a historical perspective, and to look at ringing 'from the outside' as well as the inside, in order to get past the mental blocks that so often limit our thinking about things that have 'always been done that way'.

You will have to judge whether I have succeeded. But if nothing else, I hope I have encouraged you to see that nothing should be 'unthinkable' in our efforts to explore what might happen to the Exercise, and to think about how we might respond in order to find ways of securing the future survival and health of ringing.

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