

Thinking the unthinkable – 4

Organisational structures

Non ringers are often amazed to discover that there is such a comprehensive organisation within the ringing community. They might guess that ringers belong to tower bands, but they are impressed to discover that there is a wider community of ringing societies, and the Central Council, to provide an overlay of local, regional, national and international support to ringers. Paradoxically many ringers have little interest in their local ringing society and are either unaware of the Central Council, or consider it irrelevant. In this article and the next, I will take a look at these organisations that we inherited from the Victorians.

How we got here

Ringing societies were few and far between in the mid 19th century. Those that existed were either very local in scope, like the Cambridge Youths or the Sherwood Youths, or for the elite, like the College Youths and the Cumberlands. For the vast mass of ringers, over much of the country, ringing was disorganised, and indeed many ringers were also disorderly.

On the surface, Belfry Reform was just a tidying up exercise in the wake of the Oxford Movement that had reformed most aspects of church life but missed the ringers, who to a considerable extent operated independently. But Belfry Reform did far more than tame the unruly ringers. The reformers explicitly promoted change ringing, and they also set up societies to bind together and provide mutual support for all ringers, not just the elite. These two initiatives had a major beneficial impact on the state of ringing itself, quite apart from improving the relationship with the Church. As we saw in the first article, peal ringing has grown steadily since around the 1870s, apart from dips during the two world wars.

Ringing societies

When they were formed, the societies clearly met a need, but how well have they adapted to modern needs? We recently saw one long-standing ringing society fold, and there were fears that another might follow suit. Most societies organise training, support bell restoration, and run ringing events, centrally and/or through their constituent branches. This all seems very positive, until we step back and view it from the perspective of their members. There probably isn't such a thing as a 'typical' member, so let's think about several types of member.

- **Pro-active ringers** – These are the ones who have progressed in their ringing, are the sort of people who volunteer to do things, and generally make the Exercise (or any other area of human activity) tick. Most society, and many branch, officers will be from this group, so they will have a biased 'insider' view of the society. This group will also include many tower captains, people who organise peals and quarter peals, people who write articles for newsletters, and so on. They grew up with local societies, and many of them accept them as part of the fabric of ringing. They don't all share this view though. Some ringers who have made things happen for themselves, or who ring with strong bands, see little extra value in what to them is an ineffective, and largely irrelevant, external

organisation. They might simply ignore it, or they might actively argue against it.

- **New enthusiasts** – These people share personal traits with the pro-active ringers, but not ringing experience. Having learnt to ring, they want to progress, and they seek out means of doing so. How well they progress depends on the opportunities they find (though their progress is often limited by poor initial training). They are likely to go on courses and to feel positive about them (but they don't care whether the courses are run by ringing societies or by anyone else). They may go to branch practices, but if the experience seems less stimulating (because they compare it with a course, or because they come from a strong band) they might lose interest.

- **Passive ringers** – These are all the ringers who after taking the initial step of learning to ring, are not motivated to take any more positive steps. They just 'go with the flow' by turning up at their local tower (regularly or not, depending on their enthusiasm). They don't join in any society events, even when held at their tower, though they may help with the tea if asked.

How does the ringing society serve these different groups of its members? The minority of pro-active ringers probably benefit as much by giving as by receiving. The new enthusiasts may benefit from courses, but they often want more than one a year, and complain when they can't get in. The passive ringers would say that the society does nothing for them.

Disengagement

So despite the good work done by ringing societies, and the efforts of their officers, they have failed to maintain the engagement of the mass of ringers, as a few examples will illustrate.

My branch, in a highly populated, affluent high-tech area, has about 180 members, but fewer than thirty attend the AGM. Attendance at practices is often well under ten and around half of the members have never taken part in any event. My Guild has around 2500 members, and about 80 attend its AGM – only twice as many as there are on its General Committee.

Compare that with Victorian times, taking just one example that I discovered while researching my book on the history of local ringing. In 1886, two hundred people attended the Guild Festival at Abingdon, over a quarter of the Guild's ringing membership at the time, and thirteen of them came from Wokingham, which between the two towers had just 19 ringing members. Today Wokingham has more Guild members, but hardly any of them (other than Guild officers who happen to live there) have ever been to a Guild Festival.

For many modern day ringers their local ringing society means nothing. If there is a newsletter in the tower they will browse it, but that is about all. They pay their subscription out of habit because the tower collects it, and it is peanuts anyway.

Higher things

In the next article I will look at the Central Council, and then think about how it and the ringing societies might change.

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