

Thinking the unthinkable – 6

Relationship with the Church

Historically, the relationship between ringers and the Church was at best tenuous and at worst downright hostile. Change ringing evolved as a sport rather than a form of worship, and only since the Victorian Belfry Reform movement have ringers had a much closer, and more positive, relationship with the Church.

The Exercise still has a very good relationship with the Church, but the two are distinct, with each having its own identity. Many ringers are churchgoers, but many are not. Some churchgoers ring, but most don't. Churches with a tradition of ringing would miss it were it to cease, but many churches manage quite well without any ringing.

Could ringing manage without the Church? In the short term, ringing is heavily dependent on the Church, which owns nearly all the bells. In return for service ringing, ringers get virtually free access to expensive capital equipment for as much other ringing as they wish, in more or less any tower. Not all ringers make full use of that opportunity, but without it ringing as we know it would be much impoverished.

The Church doesn't have a complete bell monopoly – there are some secular rings, and the number of private rings is increasing. Ringers can teach, practise and perform on non-church bells as easily as on church bells. In a secular tower there are likely to be more ringer-focused performances, with fewer performances at the behest of the building owners, but not necessarily so. For example, an hour and a half of public ringing on four afternoons a week at the Swan Bell Tower is more than the service ringing for a typical church.

In the future there might be far more bells in buildings not used for worship – in redundant churches converted to other uses, in civic buildings, or in privately owned buildings. The owner might impose constraints on how much they are rung, but even a couple of hours a week would match the use that many church bells currently get. And anyone investing in a new ring of bells might reasonably expect them to be used a lot more than a couple of hours a week, in order to justify making the investment.

The number of bells in places of worship might also be far fewer in the future. A few dozen churches close every year, and the trend might accelerate. Even where churches manage to remain open, with dwindling congregations, they might not be able to afford the luxury of keeping their bells in a ringable state. Ringers have historically done a lot to help restore bells, but mostly as a catalyst, where the church (and other sources) can provide much of the money.

Provision and need

With so many bells provided by organisations whose primary purpose is not ringing, the link between bell provision and the underlying needs of the ringing community is very weak. The number of tennis courts, gyms, cinemas, and other activity-specific facilities broadly reflects the demand for their use. When demography or social trends change the need, the owners of the facilities alter the provision to match the demand. When cinema going reduced, cinemas were converted to other uses. When gym membership became fashionable,

new gyms sprang up to meet the demand. But that is rarely so with bells. Strong bands may stimulate a few new rings and augmentations, but the majority of the bell stock is there, not because of a demand for it, but because it was inherited from a former generation.

How many bells does the ringing community really need? Let us conduct a thought experiment and suppose that all the church bell towers were destroyed overnight in a disaster of biblical proportions, and that the Church could provide no funding for their replacement. If the ringing community had to invest in new rings of bells, how many would there be, and where?

The first to take the initiative in such a drastic scenario would undoubtedly be the strong bands in centres of ringing excellence. Blessed with the drive, talents and resources to make things happen, they would just get on and do it. If the church authorities were willing, they would restore and re-equip the tower. If it was not, they would find alternative locations.

Next to act would be groups of active bands working together for mutual support. They might act under the auspices of a local ringing society, or as an ad hoc group. They would realise that the quickest way to get some bells ringing would be to pool their resources in one location. They would choose whichever location would bring the most overall benefit, as well as one which was feasible to do.

They might plan eventually to replace all of the lost rings, though if the timescale to do that seemed unrealistic, they would probably opt for a smaller number, again choosing the best locations for their overall benefit. If rebuilding church towers was not an option, and they had to consider a secular building, they would undoubtedly begin to think in terms of some sort of ringing centre for the area, rather than individual towers.

Many bands would have neither the will nor the resources to replace their bells, which would thus slip into history, as would all the bells in towers where there was no current band.

When the dust finally settled on this cataclysmic episode, there would be many new bells, but far fewer in total than there are now. But they would all be there because the ringing community needed them, and needed them enough to get them installed.

The ringing community

What effect would this dramatic turn of events have on the ringers themselves. Ringing would obviously suffer, but the effects would vary enormously.

At the active end of the spectrum the ringers' frustration at the loss of their bells would be accompanied by a surge in the use of handbells, dumbbells, and any remaining bells not in churches, while they all pitched into the massive effort to provide replacement bells. At the other end of the spectrum, many ringers would simply give up, on the grounds that if there are no bells, then they don't need ringing. Between these extremes, there will be a range of responses. Some will give up, albeit reluctantly, because there are no longer any bells near them, but others will adapt, probably travelling further to ring, and joining one of the surviving bands. Individual decisions will be influenced by many things, including geography, mobility and personal circumstance.

Overall, we can expect the Exercise to contain fewer, but keener, more active and more motivated ringers than before disaster struck. They will all be associated with active centres of ringing, some of which may not be connected to a church, and they will all be very conscious that the survival of ringing depends on them.

What about our heritage?

Most ringers value the rich heritage of church bells that we have inherited. We like outings where we can ring in village after village. We enjoy the good bells, and we relish the challenge of the less good. But this enjoyment comes at a cost. The bells were provided by former generations, and represent far more capital than the modern ringing community would be prepared to provide, and their existence creates an expectation that ringers should be found to ring them all, in order to avoid 'silent bells'.

Ringing is probably unique among performance based activities in carrying an expectation to preserve in use a vast collection of inherited artefacts. Many bodies preserve historic artefacts – museums, English Heritage, National Trust – but they operate on a completely different basis, and are not primarily concerned with performance. Other bodies foster and promote performance – in music, dance, sport, drama, and so on – but need not concern themselves with the conservation of instruments, concert halls or cricket bats. They certainly have no in-built expectation to 'keep all pianos played regularly', or 'keep every tennis court in regular use'.

Concern for bell heritage, and an interest in bell preservation, are positive things that can add richness to ringers' lives, in much the same way that a love of old instruments can add richness to the experience of musicians. But a violinist focuses first on the quality of his or her performance, and only secondly on the preservation and use of old violins. In ringing, our objectives are blurred. Trying to keep all churches' bells in use competes with the need to focus on developing and replenishing the skills and human capital of the ringing community.

Priorities

Is bad ringing really better than no ringing? A church may be content that its bells are 'kept ringing', but for how long will they keep ringing if the acceptance of bad ringing saps the strength of the ringing community as a whole?

Is it better to struggle on in separate towers until eventual extinction? Or would it be better to band together in one place, with better training, more effective support, and more motivation? Should we not be striving first to develop high quality ringers with the skills to perform well and pass their skills to the next generation, and only then to deploy our resources on keeping surplus bells in use?

The relationship between ringing and the Church is strong, and most (but not all) ringers would like to retain it. But a church won't keep its band of ringers alive, and the Church at large won't keep the Exercise alive. Ringers must do that for themselves, or no one will.

Would the community of ringers become more robust, and better able to sustain and develop ringing, if it had to stand on its own feet rather than being parasitic on the Church?

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