

Helping people find places to learn to ring

These notes are based on my recollections of a paper I write some time in the last 15 years. They have been updated in the light of recent developments, notably the existence of ART and the experience of handling enquiries from bellringing.org.

The need

If someone is attracted by the idea of learning to ring while looking at a website, there ought to be a way to provide a link to a web resource that would enable them with minimum hassle on their part to be directed to somewhere suitable to learn to ring.

Geographical constraints

Location is an obvious constraint, so the inquirer should be able to enter a location (post code and/or town name).

The nature of the constraint will vary with the individual. Some people may be able or willing to travel farther than others. Some people may be more willing to trade distance with other factors (eg day of the week). On that basis, the inquirer should in general be presented with options, possibly listed in order, or with relevant attributes).

Since location is a spatial constraint, options should be presented geographically, ie overlaid on some sort of map (perhaps rudimentary) in order to see how towers relate to the position of other things.

This presentation should ideally be linked to, rather than a replacement for, lists with other attributes. Maps are good, but people shouldn't be forced to interrogate each item on the map in order to compare them on criteria other than location.

Teaching constraints

There is no teaching at some towers, and for various reasons it might be sensible not to steer an inquirer towards some others. In the past, this has caused the idea of links to towers to be dropped.

The alternative is to route all enquiries to a district secretary, who it is assumed would know the merits of learning at individual towers, and be able to direct people accordingly. Many would have such knowledge, but not all would, and some might not feel it their place to act as gatekeepers. As a result, this idea is usually dropped too.

The 'ideal' solution is to direct inquirers to a ringing centre. That would be ideal if ringing centres were much more closely spaced, if ringers accepted it as normal to learn in a ringing centre before joining a home band. But there aren't enough ringing centres yet, and that culture is not yet established, so directing inquirers only to ringing centres would be both impractical and unpopular. Guess what, it too was dropped.

Balancing the constraints

None of the above single solutions is adequate. There is some merit in all of them, and in varying contexts, each will best suit different inquirers. Two principles should therefore underlie the solution:

- The inquirer should be given information on the basis of which to make informed choices from the options available. The system should not be designed to force a particular 'approved' solution. (Approved by whom?)
- There should be some 'fair' mechanism to allow the information in the system to adapt to what is available, rather than expecting it to be created top-down.

Suggested outline of a web resource

It should include an explanation that includes:

- Some tower bands regularly teach to a high standard, but some do no teaching. Many fall somewhere in between.
- As well as bands associated with individual towers, all areas are covered by ringing societies whose officers have a broad view of the teaching opportunities within their area, and are happy to give advice.
- Some areas may include a ringing centre, which specialises in teaching.

It should include a means of listing, and displaying on a map:

- Towers, and the teaching status of their bands (see below)
- Society and district identities and boundaries

It should make it easy for an inquirer to select the relevant society/district and/or tower of interest. For example:

- On a map, clicking anywhere in a district not on a tower shown as actively teaching would show information about the society/district (possibly with a list of its towers, and possibly highlighting its area).
- Clicking on a tower shown as actively teaching would show information about the tower, AND supplementary information about the society/district.
- Clicking in a corresponding list (of towers, or possibly adjacent districts).

The logic of this is:

- The inquirer is always given some line of progress (even in an empty area between towers).
- On towers that have declared their teaching status, the inquirer gets direct information about the tower.
- Even when given tower information, the inquirer still gets the society/district information as a backup.

The teaching status of a tower cannot be exact, but it needs to be simple. I suggest the following:

- Unknown (the default)
- No teaching
- Regular teaching
- Ringing centre
- Regular teaching with ART certified instructor
- Ringing centre with ART certified instructor

Apart from the last two, this set doesn't include any half way houses between regular (assumed competent) teaching and no teaching. Much as we would like to, it is not realistic to try to include any categories like 'teaches after a fashion'. Likewise, including something like 'teaches occasionally' is unlikely to help someone decide whether to approach the tower as opposed to the society/district for advice.

The assumption is that only bands keen to receive direct contacts will take the trouble to register their details, and that registering as a 'regular teaching' band will present a higher threshold than something like 'we would like some recruits'. Self reporting is not perfect, but it avoids many problems associated with 'approving' some towers but not others. There is no guarantee of never pointing an inquirer at a less than ideal tower (or district secretary) but the only way to do that would be not pointing anyone at anything.

The category 'No teaching' may not be heavily used. After all, why bother. But it allows bands that don't teach, perhaps for quite good reasons, to be explicit about it, rather than appearing not to be providing information.

Populating the data

Societies

- Boundaries of all territorial societies (and districts where appropriate) should be included, based on existing sources of information.
- All districts (and societies without districts) should have a contact link included, with the following order of priority: website, e-mail, phone. (A website should provide the other details anyway, and also gives extra information. E-mail can be acted on immediately.)
- By default the contact should be the secretary, unless the society/district supplies an alternative, such as a training officer.
- Any society/district may ask for its contact details to be changed.
- Any society/district may ask for its contact details to be removed (but not its existence).

Towers

- Tower locations, number of bells and weight should be drawn from Dove.
- Should unringable towers (suitably marked, and non-responsive) be included? They would add to the picture of ubiquitous bells across the country, even though they would be no use as a learning tower.

- By default, the teaching status of each tower is 'Unknown'.
- By default no tower website or contact details are given.
- Any tower may request its teaching status to be changed.
- Any tower may ask for its web link and/or contact details to be included.
- Any society/district may ask for towers shown in its area to provide links to its 'Towers' page, but a tower's own website will always take precedence over a link to a society/district towers page.

Ringling centres

- Ringling centres are towers, and are thus included above.
- Where a ringling centre already advertises ab-initio teaching, its status, website and contact details will already be public, and should be included by default without requiring a request.

Launching the service

There should be a two stage launch.

Within the ringling Exercise:

- Site goes live, but without external feeder links
- Site has default data as above (ie '~all' society/district links and '~no' tower links)
- Widespread publicity of the service via ringling channels (RW, Campanophile, ChangeRingings, NRT, ART, Society newsletters, etc), and ...
- Regular teaching towers encouraged to submit contact details and/or websites
- ART checks that listed as having certified teachers match with ART records of teachers

Period of consolidation

- Implement submitted information (status changes and links).
- Handle all queries, suggestions or complaints arising.
- Undertake test use with pseudo inquirers.
- Iron out any bugs.

Public launch

- Solicit external links from all relevant sources - ringling and non-ringling (church, community, sports, etc)
- Monitor initial activity and use

Handling enquiries from bellringing.org

As chairman of the ODG Education Committee, I have receive several enquiries from bellringing.org. Given the postcode, I check nearby towers. I make local enquiries to find out which currently teach beginners, and any advice about the relative suitability of those that do. I then send a reply to the enquirer, giving general advice about finding a tower, a short list of nearby ones (in order if appropriate), contact details, a link to the district website to show the wider context. Some example responses are shown below, and they illustrate the fact that sending people direct to towers would not be the most helpful thing to do in many cases. Sending direct to a tower with an ART certified instructor would be better than to a random tower, but they are unlikely to be thick enough on the ground to rely on that alone for quite some while. Even when they are more common (for example if there was one in every tower), just directing people to a single tower will not always be the best thing to do, because of other factors like practice night or ability to get to towers by public transport.

Examples responses:

<name>
 This message was forwarded to me from BellRingling.org
 > <name> would like to know more about how to get involved in starting to learn Bell Ringling in their local area of <postcode>
 The choice of where to learn to ring depends on several factors, including geography, the night of the week when they regularly practise, whether they have the capacity to teach a new recruit at the time you want to learn, how well you get on with the ringers,

and so on.

Your postcode is ,<place>, which has a band of ringers, but I'm not sure whether they are able to teach beginners.

I know they teach beginners at <tower1> and <tower2>.

Contact details for these towers are:

<tower1>, practice <day> <name>, <e-mail> <phone>

<tower2>, practice <day> <name>, <e-mail> <phone>

You can find information on all local towers on these websites¹: <URL> <URL>

The two sites is because <place> is near the edge of the xxx branch of the Oxford Diocesan Guild of Church Bellringers, close to the and the yyy branch.

Please let me know how you get on, and if you need any further help, let me know.

Regards

<name>

This message was forwarded to me from BellRinging.org

> <name> would like to know more about how to get involved in starting to learn Bell Ringing in their local area of <postcode>

Your postcode is ,<place>, which doesn't have a band of ringers (or bells suitable for ringing) but there are nearby ringing towers at <tower1>, <tower2>, <tower3>, <tower4>.

The <tower1> / <tower2> band practices at <tower2> on <day>, and

the <tower3> / <tower4> band practices at <tower4> on <day>.

You can find out more about the towers at: <website>

I may have more information about teaching opportunities in a few days, and I will be in touch again.

Regards

<name>

This message was forwarded to me from BellRinging.org

> <name> would like to know more about how to get involved in starting to learn Bell Ringing in their local area of <postcode>

The choice of where to learn to ring depends on several factors, including geography, the night of the week when they regularly practise, whether they have the capacity to teach a new recruit at the time you want to learn, how well you get on with the ringers, and so on.

Your postcode is <place>, which doesn't have a band of ringers (or bells suitable for ringing) but there are nearby towers with ringers at <tower1>, <tower2> and <tower3>.

<tower1> is an easy going, modern installation, with some teaching expertise.

<tower2> has teaching experience, but the bells are not so easy.

<tower3> bells are a little easier than <tower2>, but I am not sure of the current teaching situation there.

<tower1> and <tower3> practise on <day>, and <tower2> practises on <day>.

You will find more information, and contact details for these three towers at: <URL>

Let me know how you get on. If I can be of further help, please ask.

Regards

¹ This enquiry was near a district boundary
Web based ringing teaching finder