

Bellringing as sport and artistic performance - a Governing body

Ringers are not all the same. Although most ringers ring for church services, that is not the main motivation of every ringer. Ringers have widely different reasons for ringing. Some ring to support the church, some as a village activity, some for social contact, some because they like the sound, some for the intellectual challenge, some as a hobby, and some for the exercise. Some want to ring really well at a high technical standard, others are content to ring elementary ringing, often without much concern for striking accuracy. Although there are overlaps, some of these different sorts of bellringer are different from each other to the extent that they are really involved in quite different activities. ***This variety is not reflected, nor catered for, in the existing formal organisational structure of bellringing.***

Belfry Reform legacy. The Central Council and the territorial Associations were set up in the late C19 to make bellringing religious, and provide a service to the church. The primary objective was to provide service ringing at as many churches as possible. Method ringing was promoted as the only acceptable form of ringing, mainly to provide a reason to exclude the rougher sort of bellringer that clergy disapproved of. The promoters of belfry reform provided money to pay bellringers to ring and tutors to teach. At the time, this initiative, at a time of religious revival and in an era when there were few competing activities, and when being a bellringer could provide a working man with additional income, was remarkably successful in developing method ringing in a large number of towers.

Time has moved on. Religion has declined, recruitment has become difficult, fewer people want to commit the time needed to become a good method ringer, and the numbers of services to ring for has fallen. The Belfry Reform ideal that a ringer should commit himself to ring at his local church (ideally also a worshipper) has resulted in ringers becoming spread far too thinly, resulting in a decline in what can be rung, often eventually leading to the remaining bellringers giving up altogether.

The public image of bellringing, as a religious activity connected to Church of England worship, ***has become destructive,*** and puts many young people off bellringing.

Method ringing is becoming especially vulnerable, because it takes so long to learn. Starting method ringing young provides massive advantages, but the current structure and religion dominated image of bellringing is failing to attract ambitious young people.

It is time for reappraisal. The happiest towers are those where most ringers have similar competences and objectives. Mixing different types of bellringer in the same band or tower is a recipe for dissatisfaction, and often leads to ringers giving up, often for good. This wastes talent and the effort expended in training, and dissatisfied ex-ringers impair public perceptions of bellringing. Lower level ringers in a band often feel they cannot make a satisfactory contribution, feel intimidated by other people's competence and so are not really wanted. This can afflict competent ringers and not just learners. Better ringers can be frustrated by the weaknesses, lack of ambition and desire for quality of others. In other team activities - whether in sport or music - these problems are addressed by having different leagues or orchestras, and as someone improves they move to one of higher quality.

Method ringing is difficult, and beyond the abilities or level of commitment of many - especially older - people who would like to ring bells. Service ringing does not need to be method ringing. Rounds and call changes sound as good, if not better, to the man in the street

- it is easier to follow. It is easier to learn. Still easier to learn are chiming and swing chiming. This sort of ringing would provide a much easier "entry level" for bellringing that would appeal to far more people, because the commitment needed (by trainer as well as learner) is much smaller and time limited. Ringing can thereby broaden its base to encourage more public interest and involvement, and so *raise its public profile*. There is a parallel here with cycling "sportives", which have transformed cycling into a major participation sport, by providing an easy entry level, from which those who get the bug can progress.

With more local people available to ring at lower levels of performance, and the local population still liking what they hear, ringers who want more advanced ringing need feel no obligation to ring at the local tower. They can go somewhere with more advanced ringing.

Although rarely officially acknowledged by territorial associations (since it conflicts with their remit), a hierarchy of towers already exists in terms of what sort of ringing they offer (especially at practices, when tower visitors raise its standard above Sunday ringing). The highest level towers are those that compete in the National 12 bell competition or win Devon Association call change competitions. Top twelve bell towers are typically supported by a series of other towers at the levels below, which train and provide their recruits.

There are parallels with, for example, the various leagues in professional football, and below those leagues, the amateur game. Just as with footballers, there is a similar hierarchy of bellringers. Those at the top, or who seek to reach the top, are highly committed in terms of the time and effort they put into improving their performances. The people who do this put as much effort into their bellringing as the highest level performers in sport or music. Performance bellringers also typically spend much more money on their bellringing activities than other ringers, notably on travel, subsistence and ringing fees.

However it can be hard to make the transition from elementary method ringing (Plain Bob, Grandsire) to surprise major ringing and above because the necessary training steps are missing. Most current ringing organisations are not well placed to meet this need. Some top level ringers run special practices to train promising learners they know, but many who want to progress are overlooked. Striking standards at the high levels are much more exacting, and most higher level ringing is done as performances (peals and quarter peals), rather than through practices. However, the ringers (usually the conductors) who organise performances understandably prefer people whose ringing they trust. It can be hard to gain entry to a good band other than as an occasional replacement, and often a new entrant has to wait for an existing band member to retire. The quality of peal bands vary, which potentially provides progression to the top level, but this is not coordinated or understood by entrants. An effective system is needed to link newcomers to existing bands and promote coordination between bands to facilitate ringer development.

Doing things differently. *Bellringing has close parallels with the Olympic sport of gymnastics.* Both strive for technical excellence in an artistic manner, have well established "core patterns" but strongly encourage technical and artistic innovation. Both activities can be understood as art as well as sport - there is little difference between artistic dance and gymnastics - performers in both are equally athletic. Bellringers who regard their activity in terms of musical performance have very similar interests as those who see themselves as participating in a sport that pursues excellence.

Although ringing is as much a form of music as it is healthy sporting exercise, it is generally

difficult to persuade conventional musicians to acknowledge bellringing as “proper music”. It is much easier for people to understand bellringing as exercise and as a sport. Because of the health benefits arising from exercise, it is likely to be much easier to tap into public sport funding than the more limited funding available for music. Bellringing clearly meets the Sport England's requirements to be classified as a sport.

At present no single national organisation promotes the interests of performance focused bellringers. The nearest are the College Youths, the Cumberlands, university societies, and the Devon Association. A **secular** organisation for all performance bellringers is needed.

Young people are far more likely to be attracted to method ringing if it

- *is a nationally recognised sport,*
- *has recognised paths of progress recognised by the secular world, and*
- *has a governing body disconnected from religion.*

"Performance Bellringing" should be such a governing body. It should be a national, secular, individual direct membership organisation. Its purpose is to promote bellringing as an artistic performance sport, and health promoting exercise, and govern and represent performance orientated bellringers, and promote their interests, especially in so far as those interests are different from those of other bellringers.

Its objective would be to provide for bellringing, the same support as is provided by the organisations that support Olympic sports at national level. It would not be appropriate for this organisation to be affiliated to the Central Council, which has objectives that unhelpfully tie bellringing to religion. CC affiliation would also raise questions about the authority of "Performance Bellringing" to be the sport's governing body.

An important early aim would be to get Performance Bellringing recognised as a sport by Sport England, and so be able to tap into sport funding.

Sport funding could be used for example to

- 1) promote training of ringers to reach the standards required by elite ringers, using full time training staff,
- 2) develop electronically controlled low cost, low weight bell simulators of large bells (over 20cwt) that can be easily installed in gyms and sports centres to encourage recruitment,
- 3) develop secular ringing centres of excellence using redundant churches with heavy bells.

The organisation might seek to

- 1) establish a national network of existing towers in churches and ringing centres that provide regular training for learners seeking to reach high standards,
- 2) establish a similar network of quarter peal and peal bands,
- 3) provide training and assessment similar to ART but at a higher level.
- 4) provide an information network linking prospective bellringers to places most suited to train them
- 5) promote a secular performance view of bellringing to the general public.