

The future of ringing - sacred or secular? Questions and Answers.

Q1. Why is football abundantly financed, but not bellringing, when it was once the other way round?

A1. Professional football is well funded, not because people want to play football, but because a large number of the public wants to watch football, either at the ground (where it provides a large crowd bonding experience), or on TV (often at the pub). Amateur football, which people play, rather than watch, is not well funded. In the C15, bellringing was so popular with the general public as a means of community expression that huge sums were spent on building towers and installing large bells – at that time football was a crude mob game. Curiously, in the C19 clergy encouraged football for working men, just as they did bellringing, as being morally improving.

The past

Q2. Why do churches have towers and bells? What were bells intended for?

A2. Although a few churches had towers and bells before 1066, and they were then intended for religious uses – mainly during rather than before the services. Bells soon became used for all sorts of alarm, civic and personal uses and for community celebrations which were only partly religious. By the C15 when there was a huge expansion in the numbers of towers and increases in the number of bells, the reasons for this expansion had very little to do with religion, but were rooted in the expression of the communal identity of the parish, and the expression of emotion (see Q3).

Q3. What do music, dancing, beer, church bells, bonfires, and cannons have in common?

A3. These were all used in communal, outdoor celebrations, which might be religious – such as the celebration of a saints' day before the Reformation – but equally might be civic, or national or personal. After the Reformation most celebrations were what would now be called secular. The modern equivalent might be an open air rock concert. All cultures seem to like celebrating by making a lot of noise, light and heat, with mind altering drugs and dancing to loosen moral inhibitions.

Q4. How did cultural elites, prevailing social norms and general public attitudes affect the creation and preservation of churches and bells through centuries of profound social change?

A4. For any activity to survive it needs a) the approval or at least the tolerance of the elites b) contribute positively to the cultures self-identity and c) be embraced and supported by the general public, from whom practitioners are drawn. That means when these things change, the activity has to change to suit. Before the Reformation towers and bells were installed for religious and community reasons, the sound of bells was heard all day long and bellringers were minor clergy. After the Reformation, apart from a single bell sounded before services, all ringing became secular, and most bellringers were still paid. Young gentlemen took up bellringing as exercise, which not only ensured elite support but ensured that bell installations were improved and more bells were added as this group developed ringing as we know it, and they would ring for hours at a time. They introduced competition and gambling, and, ringing then being very heavy work often requiring two or more men per bell, heavy beer consumption. Public support for hearing bells for celebration remained strong. Gentry

support declined after 1750 as this class retreated from popular celebrations which they came to regard as vulgar, and complaints about noise began. Paid ringing and method ringing advances still continued into the mid-C19, together with the associated culture of competitions, beer drinking and gambling. None of this was any great concern because churches (apart from the chancel) were then general purpose financed by the parishioners by donations and church rates. The Oxford Movement sought to make churches purely religious and to improve the morals of the lower classes, and their clergy did not like these traditional, essentially secular, uses of churches. They sought to take charge of full circle bellringing and the Belfry Reformers converted it to support the work of the church, by restricting the ringing to before church services. They got rid of the rougher ringers by making church attendance compulsory, bellringers into paid church officials and insisting on method ringing. These reformers were so successful that by 1914 they had obliterated the previous culture almost everywhere, and method ringing focused on “the local tower” for services was the norm. That legacy started to fail after WW1 when there was a revulsion against the church’s support for the war. Although there was some recovery after the WW2 ringing ban, and ringing’s leadership was strengthened by ringers becoming increasingly university educated, the Belfry Reform focus on ringing for services became increasingly disconnected from the values of wider society, and in the last 40 years it has become more and more difficult to recruit young people. So ringing now faces a crisis (see Q6).

Q5. Was full-circle bellringing always mainly about ringing for services?

A5. Not at all. Edward VI forbade the ringing of more than one bell, and until Belfry Reform the norm was to chime a single bell before the service. Very little full-circle bellringing was done before church services, and even that was often accidental, in that Sunday was then the only day men had off from work. So Sunday was the day most ringers typically rang the bells, before moving on to the pub to slake their thirst. Some reforming clergy therefore went so far as to ban all Sunday full circle bellringing, comparing it to a Sunday concert.

The future

Q6. Given the uncertainties facing the Church – church closures, and reduced demand for service ringing - is the current social and cultural context fundamentally different?

A6. The main difference from the past is that bellringing has become divorced from general culture, a dangerous situation for any activity to get itself into, as it is usually the beginning of the end. Although older people often still like hearing bells, most young people have little or no interest in hearing them, still less in ringing them. The church is irrelevant to most people, and the political elite is culturally hostile to organised religion and especially Christianity. Because bellringing is currently so close to the church, that makes bellringing vulnerable, both to church closures and to being tarred with the same sense of irrelevance and hostility. In the short run most ringing will continue to be closely linked to the church and its services. Elementary ringing (rounds, call changes) can survive on older recruits looking for a hobby. However, if method ringing (in particular) is to survive it needs young ringer recruits. It is hard to see how they can be attracted to ensure survival without playing down the religious dimension, and securing a new public enthusiasm for the sound of bells as a means of celebration (as it once was) and/or as a healthy sporting exercise. Method ringing’s survival also needs an end to the widespread concept that every ringer should ring at his own parish church, rather than ringing with a band where he can be most useful. Ringers will need to be much more mobile, and not simply give up if their own band gets too small..

Q7. How can churches and bells be funded? Are villages different from towns and cities?

A7. In the short run, the easiest way is to keep existing churches open, which means they do have to maintain some level of congregation, as well as being able to pay the diocesan quota and upkeep of the church building. In some villages, where a church has been threatened with closure, local people have stepped in with funding and voluntary labour to prevent closure. At Cadbury, Devon this resulted in a completely new band of bellringers being formed. At another tower, the church was only kept open because of funding from the ringing centre based there. In villages non-religious villagers will often pay substantially for the upkeep of the building and its fittings, but actually be opposed to the religious work of the church. This sense of communal ownership of the church is less likely to occur in cities, and there engagement with civic institutions is more likely to work, as at Worcester. In the longer term, ringers are going to have to assume control of some redundant churches where there are good rings of bells, and find ways to use those bells all the time on a commercial basis. This implies a completely different – and fully professional – model of ringing training. Getting ringing recognised as a sport is likely to be the most effective way to tap into funding for such conversions. This will not be easy, and will need visionary leadership comparable with that of Laith Reynolds at Swan Bells at Perth Western Australia.

Q8. Can bellringing become, once more, culturally relevant to the general public? What are the barriers?

A8. Unless bellringing can become more culturally relevant, it will slowly die. So there is no option – ways have to be found. One barrier is ignorance – many of the public think bellringing is done by machines – and the better ringing striking gets the more that is a problem. There is a need for more engagement with the general public (see Q9). Historically public support for ringing was precisely because it was extremely noisy, but fears about the minority who hate the noise have made ringers try to reduce the sound of bells – which in the long run is counterproductive in terms of public support. Sound amplification has stripped bells of their uniqueness in providing loud percussive tonal sounds. Nevertheless effective marketing could make a difference.

Q9. Are bellringers afraid of, and disengaged from, the general public?

A9. Fears of hostility from a minority of the public to the sound of bells has discouraged ringers from being proactive and properly engaged with the public. The fact that ringers are using church property and are effectively the church's servants has made most contact with the public via church officials, whose main interests are religious and who in many cases regard ringing as peripheral or unimportant. Ringers need to set up "friends of the bells" organisations to create links between the ringers and the public, a group that can promote ringing to the public and provide a support base that enables the voice of those who favour ringing to be heard above those who would silence it.

Q10. Should entry level bellringing be easier, embracing more ways of ringing bells?

A10. A very large number of people start to learn to ring bells but sooner or later give up, almost always because they are finding it too difficult or that to get anywhere will consume more time and effort than they are prepared to give. This is especially true in method ringing towers, where the learner sees what happens there and just how far away they are from being

able to achieve it. One solution to this is for towers in an area to operate in a hierarchy, with learners starting simple, and moving on to successively more advanced towers as they progress – if they wish to. The levels could reflect the way bellringing developed historically. The start level could be chiming and swing chiming, which can be learned very quickly and which can be perfectly adequate for service ringing. The next level is rounds ringing below balance, then rounds at top and call changes, then elementary method ringing etc. The advantage of doing this in separate towers is that learners get much more rope time, and are not discouraged by seeing much more advanced ringing, and they have the choice at stopping at any level they choose.

Q11. Should bellringing become, like football, professionalised and primarily to serve public aspirations - if so, for what purposes and in what way? - or a voluntary private recreation for practitioners?

A11. Not all football is professional, though the best is, and professional football produces beneficial trickle down to the amateur game. Top level ringers already often give as much time to ringing as if they were doing it for a living, but training in particular could be improved by becoming professional, as it generally is in music and sport. What is missing is the public paying to hear bellringing. This was common before Belfry Reform, but apart from weddings is now rare. Establishing a market for paid ringing would be difficult, but might be possible on a small scale. Ringing as a voluntary private recreation suffers from a lack of the public exposure needed to gain recruits.

Q12. Which futures are sustainable?

A12. The current situation as regards service ringing is sustainable where churches and bells continue to exist, but the standard of ringing is likely generally to fall to rounds and call changes, rung, for the most part by mature learners. High quality method ringing for services is likely to become restricted to fewer and fewer – usually urban – locations as time passes, unless the problem of youth recruitment can be solved. Solving youth recruitment is only possible if ringing is seen as either a sport or musical activity in its own right, and existing ringing structures and organisations are unsuitable for such promotion. Detailed analysis and careful comparison with other activities is needed before this question can be answered satisfactorily.

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