

Helping the right things to happen – everywhere

This note was written when I joined the CC PR Committee in 2008. Note that the Committee Terms of Reference, which formed my starting point, have since been amended to make them clearer.

1 What is our objective?

Our terms of reference are so all encompassing that within the overall wood it is easy to miss what I believe is a rather important species of tree. Let me highlight the bit that I mean:

‘To establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding of church bell ringing between the Central Council, its officers, committees and members, bell ringers, associations/guilds/societies in the British Isles and overseas, church authorities, the media, and the general public.’

I could have highlighted any pair of the dozen or so groups listed, but I pick out ringers and the public because I see that relationship as the ‘end’, whereas the others are (some of) the ‘means’ to that end. I don’t wish to downplay the importance of relations with the media, the church, etc, nor to deny that the relationship between the Council and other ringers needs attention, but I believe we should also try to think about what I see as ultimately the most important relationship for ringing as a whole.

2 Unpacking the words

‘Goodwill’ and mutual understanding sounds good, but what exactly do the words mean our context?

- Goodwill of the public towards ringers seems fairly clear. It implies an interest in what we do, a desire for us to continue doing it, and tolerance in any situation where relationships might be stretched. It also implies a degree of respect for ringers in recognition of both their contribution to the community and their inherent skills.
- What about goodwill of ringers towards the public? It implies consideration for those who might be adversely affected by our activity, but it also implies a commitment to engage with the public – being welcoming and friendly at an individual level, and seeking ways to make a contribution (by ringing or otherwise) at the community level.

‘Understanding’ is a more slippery word. It is often used simply as an extension of goodwill (for example by ‘being understanding about’ something, rather than being intolerant). I don’t know what was in the minds of those who drafted our terms of reference, but it seems more helpful to interpret understanding in the sense of ‘having knowledge’, and ‘being well informed’.

- So public understanding should encompass knowledge about ringing (how ringing works and how bells work), and about ringers (the skills involved, the number of people involved, and the existence of a ringing community). Of course this need not be detailed

knowledge, just enough to foster understanding rather than ignorance, and to support goodwill.

- What should ringers understand about the public? Specifically, I think they should try to understand how non-ringers perceive ringing, and they should understand aspects of public or community life where links to ringing might be fruitful.

I have identified four separate aspects, but they are not all independent. Although public goodwill and public understanding are distinct, they are undoubtedly linked. There may be a few who know all about ringing but still hate the sound and those who make it, and there will be some feel positive about it all despite minimal understanding, but for most people, better knowledge will foster goodwill and vice versa. For example, people who understand the skill involved are more likely to respect ringers than those who think that we just swing on ropes.

Being explicit about the ringer side of the equation should also help to focus on the fact that the relationship between ringers and the public is not all one way. It is not just about broadcasting good messages to the right places. As ringers, we should (all) try to develop attitudes and awareness that will help to foster and strengthen good relations with non-ringers, and not just ‘leave it to the PR people’.

3 Achieving public awareness

Public awareness can be tackled at many levels from national (or international?) to local. We should exploit opportunities at all levels, so let’s consider four: national, regional, local and personal.

3.1 Nationally

At national level, the public is mainly influenced by the media. Ringing-related exposure may happen automatically as a result of newsworthy events (vandalism, noise complaints, accidents, etc), or it may be generated by conscious effort (programmes or articles about ringing, or those that strongly feature ringing).

News will happen anyway, so we should focus on trying to manage it so as to minimise disinformation and distortion. Ideally that means well informed media people, which in turn means they must know where to get information about ringing, and that those providing it (CC, RW, others) come over as helpful and responsive. Of course, if ringing loses its quirky image, then things like minor injuries might become less newsworthy!

Non-news media coverage of ringing is more open,

with a lot more choice about what is shown and how. There is scope for documentaries about ringing. We have seen several examples (eg the national 12 bell competition two years running) but there must be scope for more, given the right angle to fit an appropriate niche. In fiction, ringing has featured as a primary story line (eg in *Midsomer Murders: Ring Out Your Dead*) and as a thread (eg in *The Archers* currently). There is scope for more of both, though the targets for influence are harder to identify.

[As an aside, these two examples of ringing in broadcast fiction are interesting. Both generated some negative comment by ringers, because they showed less than saint-like ringers, but both should be positive. The feedback I had from non-ringers about *Ring Out Your Dead* was all positive – I assume that the complexity and dedication came through in a fully developed story and richened the slightly warped characters. The recent thread in *The Archers* started oddly, and included an awful example of leadership in the first ringing scene to last more than a sentence (in character for the role, but not an image we would like to portray) and then gave a much more positive image of the culminating competition. In both cases, ringers had some input, but not of course full control.]

Does the ‘no bad publicity’ argument run to shows where the subject is sent up and made to look ridiculous? That is less clear, and as long as ringing is not widely understood, and seen as cranky, such things will be a threat. Better public awareness ought to make ringing a less attractive target for such things though (except for pure comedy, where anything is fair game, but recipients know the rules, and take things in the right spirit).

Being more ambitious, could we turn ringing into a followable sport? It is easy to see reasons against it – it doesn’t have the characteristics that make cricket, racing, or snooker so popular – but someone once said, a medium that can get the public hooked on sheepdog trials, can do anything. We need our own Phil Drabble.

3.2 Regionally

‘Regional’ probably doesn’t have clear boundaries. I include it to cover the mid ground between national and local in terms of available influences, and also because the Exercise has a prominent regional layer in the form of territorial ringing societies. Some regions will have clearer identity than others. It seems likely that actions useful at regional level won’t be unique, and will have parallels at either national or local level. The main influence is again likely to be through the media, but on a smaller scale, and with more diversity of opportunities.

3.3 Locally

By local, I mean within a community – a town, a village, a parish, an estate, a suburb – somewhere small enough to have an identity. In a community, many people will know each other, and awareness will spread from person to person as well as by other means. Within a community, members of the public can have more opportunities to become aware of ringing through personal experience, for example by attending events and by meeting people.

Compared with the previous two levels, the number and variability of communities is vast, but in terms of the Exercise, most will contain no more than one, or maybe a few towers. Local initiatives can only really come from local people, and this dependence on local people is a critical factor. It means that one or two of the right people in the right place can make a big difference, but it also means that in many places nothing significant is likely to happen. Seeking widespread activity at the local level is a major challenge as well as a major opportunity.

There are many ways to spread awareness within a community. Local media include the press, parish magazines and community newsletters. Direct contact can include community groups, schools and other church groups, as well as individuals. Events can include tower tours, talks, demonstrations. Engagement can extend to participation by ringers in wider activities within the village, neighbourhood or parish.

3.4 Personally

I included this final level to focus on the role of the individual ringer. The other levels can all be seen as ‘corporate’, with the CC, ringing society, local band or whatever developing a public presence, but this final layer is not about corporate image, it is about individual relationships, attitudes and behaviour. Every ringer (and ex ringer) can potentially portray ringing positively, negatively or not at all (by not admitting to being a ringer). There are tens of thousands of active ringers (and goodness knows how many inactive, or ‘ex’ ringers), each of whom knows dozens of people. Individual ringers have far more contact with non ringers in the course of their daily lives than ringing organisations, however pro-active, can ever do. So personal contact is potentially a very valuable route for developing public understanding.

Three factors determine how effective this level is:

- Individual ringers must be comfortable with ringing as an activity, and with its place within society. Otherwise they will hide their involvement (other than immediate family and friends).
- They must feel positive about ringing as something of

interest outsiders. Otherwise they will be passive rather than pro-active, answering when asked, but not seeking opportunities to reveal ringing to others.

- They must be able to put over an adequate picture of ringing.

Taking the last one first, all ringers don't need to be experts. The knowledge needed to increase the average layman's awareness is quite modest (see appendix). Nor do they need to be good presenters. Just chatting to people about ringing can help to demystify it, and make a positive contribution. Obviously the picture of ringing life experienced by many will be less exiting than the image we might like to present, but it is reality, and it is a starting point. If 'grass roots ringers' could be educated more widely about ringing it could enrich them, as well as giving them a better story to tell.

The first two points are about motivation rather than delivery. I suspect that many ringers don't feel positive enough about ringing and its relationship with the public to want to project that image onto the many people they meet in everyday life¹, so anything that could enhance their own perspective would be likely to have considerable benefits.

4 Barriers

Resources may be an issue (including skills and quality information, as well as tangible resources), but if the needs can be identified, then it should be possible to consider how best to meet them.

Perception is another, and perhaps more important issue, especially at the lower levels. For example, many ringers seem to equate PR solely with recruitment. Mention an open day, and you are asked whether you got any recruits. Many seem to give up on PR because 'We've tried, but we didn't get any recruits'. Some consider 'We don't need PR because we have enough ringers'. All this implies an inward looking perception of ringing, with no desire to foster a wider public understanding. Apart from stifling any proactive relationship with the community, such an attitude is unlikely to make much use of opportunistic exposure either. In fact even from a recruiting perspective, a more widely informed public may lead to longer term recruitment and retention.

5 Related issues

The underlying assumption of this paper is that ringing is a rich, multi-faceted activity, with a strong heritage and vibrant present, and that the main bar to a stronger relationship with the public is ignorance and invisibility. We would like to expose this picture to the wider public. But the picture is not all perfect. The

Exercise has some hang-ups and blind spots, which could affect the public's perception, and hence the relationship between ringers and the wider public. It is beyond the remit of PR Committee to solve these, but we need to recognise the effect they have on ringers, and the effect they could have on the perception of ringers.

- Money – Our (expensive) equipment is provided free. Most other services associated with ringing are free (or grossly subsidised, like books whose price only covers the cost of printing, not the creation, intellectual property or management of the process). Ringers tend to start with an assumption that everything will be free, whereas in most other activities, people expect to pay their way. On the flip side of the coin, many ringers are very generous with their time and talents, so the two effects generally balance out. But the residual effect on the mindset of ringers is something that non-ringers can find difficult to understand. To quote a couple of examples. A few years ago there was a heated debate at a society AGM about an 'above inflation' subscription increase from £4 to £4-50 per annum. How can a non-ringer understand quibbling over such a tiny amount, when the annual subscription to say a choral society would be £100 or more per annum? At the 2007 CC meeting, a society representative made an impassioned plea, supported by detailed figures, that the society would cease to be financially viable if it had to pay 10p rather than 7p per annum per member to the CC. How can a non-ringer take such people seriously when the regional bodies of other organisation with a similar multi-level structure pay precepts of several pounds per member to their national organisations?
- Amateurism – This is related to, but distinct from, the first point, and again it sets ringers apart from most other activities, including those with whom we compete for members' time and interest. Ringers range in competence from expert to marginal (and even unsafe) but there are no recognised standards of performance. Likewise, ringing teaching ranges from excellent to grossly inadequate, but there are no schemes of accreditation or recognition of competence. Worse still, whenever such things are proposed, there are always strong arguments that they would be the death knell of ringing as we know it². How can we expect non-ringers to understand such a situation? They might possibly accept that we are behind the times, but would find it hard to understand why we are not in the process of changing things. And even if they 'understand', will it not influence a parent's choice of activities to encourage for its child?
- Fear of silent bells – We are probably unique among performance based activities in also having an expectation that we will preserve in use a large collection of inherited artefacts. There are bodies whose goal is to preserve historic artefacts (museums, English Heritage, National Trust, ...) but they operate on a completely different basis.

¹ I might be wrong, but if most ringers are already informing a wide circle of acquaintances about ringing, how is it that so many of the public are still uninformed?

² There are also supporters of such ideas, but they are not in the majority, and often less vocal.

In itself, the heritage of our bells, and an interest in their preservation, are good things that can add richness to the Exercise, but having two separate goals risks one diluting the focus on the other. To survive we must recruit ringers, and train them to a level where they can perform well enough, and remain motivated, to teach the next generation to the same or higher level. But the desire to 'keep all bells ringing for service' (and an expectation by their owners of that we will do so) distorts our ability to focus on the main objective. Indeed, many believe that 'bad ringing is better than no ringing³ in order to keep bells ringing'. Laudable though that may as a tactic for getting through a lean Sunday morning, it is no strategy for medium term survival and growth of a band. Bad ringing is a sure way to lose ringers, and especially to lose good ringers.

- Inequality – There are huge differences in both achievement and opportunity across the Exercise – I suspect the differences in ringing may be larger than in other activities (sport or music). They are compounded by the above factors. While those at the favoured end of the spectrum have a good experience to share with non-ringers, things must be very different at the other end. It is hard for most of us (at the favoured end) to understand how things appear to the less favoured. How will a more fully informed public perceive all of this?

These issues are deep problems that the Exercise needs to face. They are far wider than PR, but they are at the core of the way we currently think and operate, so we need to understand how they could affect our relationship with the public. If we want the public to understand us, we should first try to understand ourselves.

6 CCCPR role

The CC cannot (and should not) do everything. It's role should be to complement what is done at more local levels. It can help to inspire what is done at lower levels, it can support things that are done at lower levels, and it should do things that cannot be done at lower levels. On that basis, CC PR Committee could be doing some or all of the following. The list is probably incomplete, and of course some things we are already doing.

National

- Provide a readily accessible source of information for the media (news, culture and entertainment) and ensure that potential users are aware of it.
- Seek relationships with key media channels, and actively promote information about ringing.
- Seek opportunities to expose ringing through drama, features or other prime types of programme.
- Provide other support services relevant to the relationship between ringers and non-ringers that are not covered by other CC committees⁴.

Regional (support)

- Encourage affiliated societies to develop effective PR functions, and develop a relationship with them.
- Understand their needs, and provide support, advice and resources where appropriate.
- Encourage sharing of good practice, ideas and resources between societies.

Local (support)

- Seek to raise awareness of the value of a pro-active relationship with the local community (using any appropriate Exercise-wide channels and in conjunction with affiliated societies).
- Where appropriate, provide resources and guidance to help local bands and individuals to develop effective community relations.

Personal (support)

- Raise the profile of the relationship between ringers and non-ringers.
- Seek to stimulate a positive, outward-looking attitude on the part of all ringers.

There is one other opportunity that does not fit into this convenient structure – ex-ringers. There are far more of them than there are ringers. Many of them gave up because of external influences, and probably still feel positive about ringing. Is there any way to harness their collective knowledge and experience to help promote wider public awareness of ringing?

³ Quote from a former CC member

⁴ The advent of the Tower Stewardship Committee has shifted the boundary, so that things previously handled by PR, like child protection guidance, now fall more naturally under TSC. Things like noise complaints advice fall between the two; short term management of an incident is undoubtedly PR, but managing to avoid the risk is more TSC.

Appendix – How much knowledge?

How much would we like the public to understand about ringing? It isn't realistic to expect non ringers to know everything about ringing (indeed many ringers don't), nor to expect to reach everyone. As an exercise, I tried to use analogies – to think about public knowledge of some other activities, and then to consider what they would need to know about ringing to be similarly aware. I exclude participants or those who actively follow an activity. I am concerned with the general awareness of people with no special interest. For example most of the public could give a better account cricket than they could of bellringing, even those who never watch cricket, couldn't name any cricketers, don't know when there is a test match on and couldn't care who wins.

The table lists some things about ringing, and some comparable things about other activities, that non-participants and non-afficionados could be expected to know.

Ringling	Cricket	Ten pin bowling	Golf	Organ playing
Most bells weigh several cwt (but some can weigh tons). They are typically hung in sets of 6-8 (but can be more or fewer). They swing full circle, are fitted with wheels, and controlled from below by a rope. Rope has a fluffy bit (sally) since on alternate strokes the rope rises to different height.	Smallish leather ball hit with a wooden bat. Larger grass pitch with a flat strip in the middle. Wickets at both ends of the strip, made of 3 sticks with bails on top. Batsmen wear leg protection.	Large, heavy ball with finger holes. Long lane with pins at the end. Pins automatically cleared and set up by a machine. Scores displayed automatically. Multiple lanes alongside each other.	Small dimpled ball, long clubs of varying weight, some with wooden ends, some iron. Ball hit a long way swinging club through large arc. Grassy course extends over several acres. 'Greens' (flat bits) a good walk apart. Each has a hole in it that the ball must be got in).	Most are pipe organs, but some generate sound electronically. Sound made by air blown through pipes of different shape, length and material. Lots of pipes. Playing console has more than one keyboard and (usually) a pedal board. 'Stops' can be used to produce and mix different sounds
One performer per bell. Bells ring in sequence. Rhythm should be even. In change ringing sequence continually changes according to predetermined rules. 'Methods' (corresponding to musical tunes) have interesting names. Performances take from a few minutes to several hours (peals).	11 players in a team. Batsman at either end. Balls bowled alternately to one of them. Both run together to make scores. Extra score for hitting a ball to the boundary. Batsmen are got out by the ball being caught, or by knocking off stumps. Games last from a few hours to several days.	People play against each other, either individually or in teams. They have three balls for each go. The aim is to knock down as many pins as possible with each ball. Balls are set up again if they all go down before using the last ball.	18 holes in a course. Score based on total number of strokes to get ball into all holes. Players have a handicap (added to score) to compensate for differences in individual ability. Game takes a few hours	One person plays, using both hands and feet. Music varies widely. Can be used to accompany singing or to give solo performances. Organists normally play from music, but some can perform from memory.
Ringers are very varied: male and female, all ages (from teens until well past retirement) and from all walks of life. They don't need to be very strong but do need co-ordination and a sense of rhythm.	Mainly played by young men. Played at all levels: village, county, national. Amateur and professional players. Traditionally they wear white flannel.	Often played as a social activity by groups (eg work colleagues). Others play regularly in clubs and leagues.	Played by all classes, men and women, but some clubs have elite status, compared with 'pay as you play'. Amateurs and pros.	Organists can be any age or sex. They need to be musical and have considerable dexterity – more so than playing a piano.