

Thinking the unthinkable – 1

I was lying in bed. The radio turned itself on and the news was about demonstrations after the Iranian election. Somehow that led to the idea of writing these articles. My initial thoughts were about mismatches between the perceptions of those in authority and the perceptions of the mass of people they are there to serve, but the ideas grew and evolved into something much broader about the need for change in the Exercise, and how we might bring it about.

The ideas were nourished in the fertile soil of a string of experiences that resonated with my emerging thoughts. There were the attempts to reform Central Council rules over the last few years. There was the time that a highly competent, pro-active, and well-informed ringer and teacher told me in all seriousness that the Central Council 'doesn't do anything useful'. There was the off-hand way that a former Council officer said 'you can't possibly do that' almost before I had finished suggesting something that has already been done. There was the announcement that the Dorset County Association, which seemed vibrant when I first met it twenty years ago, might be in danger of extinction, hard on the heels of the London County Association. There was the scorn of non-ringers who discovered ringers' niggardly attitudes to money. And there were many more.

Young Turks

In e-mail debates about democracy in CC elections (too little or too much, depending on your point of view) both the Council and our ringing societies are repeatedly described as Victorian relics unfitted to the modern age. One person said that they fossilise because whenever the Young Turks propose reform, the Old Guard squashes it.

I have seen many good ideas squashed in my time, and I despair to see how closed some minds can be, but I'm not sure that age is the main culprit. Grey hair doesn't close minds, as much as does being locked into a collective mindset. I would even suggest that if (when) we do open our minds to new ways of doing things, then having a few grey heads around will help us to change in a controlled way, with fewer unintended side effects.

Over the years, I have proposed (and had ignored or rejected) several of the things that I hear the Young Turks of today suggesting. It is a measure of our corporate inertia that so little has changed while my hair has turned grey. Perhaps I now qualify as an 'Old Turk'.

Changing times

The Exercise is changing, and the world is changing round us. On the ground, there are conflicting signals.

At the frontiers, the state of ringing has never been so good, with some bands pushing forward by ringing more complex and more challenging methods to a very high standard. The growth of the National 12-bell Competition is one indicator of this. Five teams entered the first competition 35 years ago, and 21 teams entered this year.

The leading edge may be advancing, but the gap behind it seems to be widening. Recent surveys have shown that although the number of peals steadily rises, they are being rung by fewer ringers.

In everyday ringing too, some bands are pushing ahead, with methods like Bristol Maximus (first rung in 1950 with only a dozen peals of it in the next 20 years) now being in the regular repertoire of many bands. This is a world removed from the experience of other bands, which struggle to survive, and even when they do survive have little aspiration to ring anything ambitious, or even to produce high quality ringing.

The alarm bells are ringing on demographics too. A worrying number of us are now in our later years, but we seem to have lost most of the generation that should be replacing us. We don't fully understand why, so we don't know how worried we should be, but many of the signs point towards major change, which might need radical responses. Are we prepared to make them? Are we even prepared to think of the possibilities?

In this series of ten articles I will try to think about possibilities, including thoughts that some might consider unthinkable. As an Old Turk, I will try to combine a sense of history – how we got here – with a view of where we are and what might happen next. History won't repeat itself, but we still might be able to learn something useful from the perspective that it gives us.

How we got here

The Exercise is several hundred years old, but modern ringers have only experienced a relatively small part of ringing's history, and many have little idea of its origins. Even the grey heads who moan that 'things were different in my day' are recent arrivals in terms of the historical timescale.

Although bells were originally introduced into churches to signal religious observances, by the middle ages they had other uses within the community as well, so that when English style ringing evolved, it was a community activity, not mainly a religious one, and the installation of many more bells in churches was a symbol of community wealth rather than liturgical need. Change ringing wasn't developed by the Church, but by young gentry seeking sport. Indeed by the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it was common for ringers to be barred from ringing for services, which were marked instead by the sexton tolling a single bell. The Church tolerated ringing by the ringers at other times (not to mention their less savoury antics) providing they were out of sight up the tower. One might wonder why the Church should have accepted such a situation, but no doubt the authorities were resigned to the fact that it had 'always been like that'.

Only with the advent of the Belfry Reform movement in late Victorian times did the Church start to draw ringers into the fold instead of leaving them to fend for themselves. The idea of ringers as part of the Church family was novel, but it was the flip side of the reform agenda.

Somewhat incongruously, the reforming clerics chose to promote change ringing as the primary vehicle for reform. Why they should have encouraged an entirely secular art, which had no connection to church liturgy or music, is not immediately obvious, but no doubt they believed that adding an intellectual dimension to an otherwise purely craft activity would help to raise the moral tone of those performing it.

Maybe it was just that many of the reformers had learnt to ring while at university, and acquired a taste for change ringing.

Belfry Reform left an enduring legacy, as did many other things the Victorians did. It provided the foundation for modern ringing as we know it. The ringing societies that the reformers set up provided the infrastructure for growth in every aspect of ringing, by connecting ringers more effectively together. One indicator of this influence is the number of peals rung. After fumbling along for nearly two centuries at no more than a few dozen peals per year, peal ringing took off around 1880 and has been growing more or less steadily ever since, give or take the dips in two world wars.

The societies, and the Central Council which was set up to address wider issues, are still with us, though they have evolved quite a bit. For example, my own branch when founded had an elected chairman, secretary and treasurer (mostly clergy) but no ringing master. The ringing was organised collectively by the tower captains of the member towers. It took many years before first a committee, and then an officer, became responsible for organising and running the ringing. Likewise for most of its first hundred years, my Guild was led by Masters, who were all clerics, whereas for the last 35 years none have been, and they have all served far shorter terms of office.

Where next?

Although I was initially motivated to think about organisational structures, there are many other aspects of ringing where some radical thought seems needed, so in future articles I will look at performance and quality, motivation and training, teaching standards, organisational structures, our relationship with the Church, our relationship with the public, our attitudes to money and ringing demographics. Then in the final article, I will look at some possible future scenarios for ringing.

My aim is not to offer ready made solutions, but to stir up some serious discussion. No doubt I will ruffle a few feathers in the process, but if that prompts a change of mindset, then so be it. I will also make a few sweeping generalisations. I know that there are always exceptions to any generalisation, so they should be taken in the round and not literally.

If you find yourself saying 'that couldn't happen' (or the thinking Old Guard's version – 'that couldn't happen because ...') do think again. Many things are possible. Some we might not expect and some we might not like. Some might seem unlikely and some might carry risks. But none of that makes them 'impossible', and they certainly should not be 'unthinkable'.

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