

# NRT Conference - 9th November 2002

Nearly 60 NRT members took part in the conference, and its main outputs are the ideas and inspirations they took away with them. These notes have been prepared for the benefit of those members who were not present, but it is impossible in them to capture either all the things that were discussed or the sense of involvement of the participants. The notes are based on contributions supplied by those who led the topic groups, combined where appropriate.

## Summary

Most of the day was spent working in small groups on different topics. There were ten topics, with the popular ones repeated to give a total of fourteen groups. They were spread over three sessions, so each person could take part in groups on three different topics. The final plenary session discussed topic K. There was one group per topic except those marked (2).

- A Tips and techniques for teaching bellhandling (2)
- B Teaching aids for developing listening skills
- C Introduction to simulators as training aids
- D Using a simulator as a training aid
- E Using handbells as part of a structured approach to teaching
- F Teaching a whole new band
- G Better ways to develop ringers (2)
- H Developing ringers with limited resources (2)
- I Practical ways to achieve good striking in a band (2)
- J Raising and lowering in peal
- K Better ways to support trainers

Many general ideas appeared in the contributions from a lot of the groups. Rather than repeat them in each section, they have been drawn out here. They related mainly to teaching, but were also about the experience of what we were doing at the conference.

### **Diversity and commonality**

Many groups found they included participants with a few who had never taught anyone and some who had been teaching for over 50 years. Participants came from widely differing situations, yet many groups found that they faced the same sort of problems. This helped stimulate some wide-ranging discussion

### **Learning from each other**

For many participants, taking part in a session where people learn from each other was novel, even though many had been on courses as students or tutors. Some groups discussed this and recognised that they could learn from each other, but that they needed to remain flexible to take on board each others' ideas.

Much discussion revolved around what worked and what didn't. Partly this depended on varying circumstance, but some common threads kept emerging

## **Making teaching fun**

Many groups mentioned the need to build fun into teaching, to take a light hearted approach, and to maintain a sense of humour. They also felt that this can make it easier for learners (and tutors) to question how things are taught, and possibly suggest improvement..

## **Tutors working together**

One of the motivations behind NRT is that tutors often work alone. One participant had experienced tutors working together, and others agreed it was an ideal, even if not always attainable. Some groups discussed needing access to pools of experience.

## **Follow up ideas**

Several groups commented on the abundance of ideas emerging from the sessions, and that many were worthy of further development, as well as benefitting those taking part.

Those that might form the basis of follow-up action include:

- A resource for tower captains - things to do and ways to do them that could add variety to practices
- Some sort of directory to topics that have been discussed by NRT
- Masterclasses
- Encouraging more people to join NRT to help build critical mass, and therefore make more local contact between members possible
- A future NRT conference

## **Acknowledgements**

Those who helped to make the day successful included:

### **Leaders and supporters of the topic groups**

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### **Food and accommodation:**

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### **Organisation and planning**

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### **Other Participants :**

Jonathan Adkins, Mark Banner, Jenny Beech, Frank Beech, Bob Blanden, Wynford Carter, Gail Cater, Lynda Coles, Victor Coles, Cyril Crouch, Lucy Dawson, Tony Evans, Martin Garside, Nigel Harrison, Michael Henshaw, Paul Johnson, Kathleen Johnson, Raymond Kefford, Jim Mitchell, Edward Mould, Harry Nicholls, Margaret Perrott, Graham Redman, Hilary Rose, Michael Rose, Jean Sanderson, Penny Thorley, Stuart Weston.

## **Topic group summaries**

Summaries of the key aspects of each of the topic groups are attached as an appendix to this report.

This report was prepared by John Harrison, from contributions by topic group leaders and supporters.

## **Appendix - Summaries of topic groups**

### **Topic A - Tips and techniques for teaching bellhandling**

These sessions combined discussion of practical problems with hands-on demonstration of techniques and exercises that can be used to enrich the teaching of bellhandling, or to solve particular problems. It was not intended as a lesson on teaching, but an opportunity to look more broadly at the process, and to exchange experience and ideas.

The practical focus of the sessions did not lead to lengthy notes

#### **Not alone**

Realising that participants all cared about teaching and faced similar problems on a day to day basis was a great confidence booster.

#### **People who ought to be here aren't**

Participants thought that many people who could have benefited from the day were not actually there. This was not just about 'absent friends' but a feeling that there is a lot of poor teaching done by people who would not attend events to help them improve. The best response seems to be:

- Set a good example.
- Listen to criticism and comment.
- Try to spread the message by getting others involved in (good) teaching.
- Keep on talking.

#### **No single solution**

Participants recognised the need to try different approaches with different people, since no single method can be guaranteed to be foolproof in every case.

### **B - Teaching aids for developing listening skills**

This session combined hands-on experience of some available teaching aids, with discussion of when and how to use them, and the barriers to developing effective listening.

#### **Barriers**

These include:

- We are visual animals, and so vision tends to dominate.
- We set higher expectations for method ringing and safe bellhandling than for accurate striking.
- Traditionally you 'picked up' listening, though you were 'taught' bellhandling.
- Many ringers never hear good striking. They too don't strike well, so others in the band never hear good striking either, which tends to be self perpetuating.
- Novices sense that listening skill is not linked to experience.

#### **Tools and techniques**

Some useful techniques are quite basic and require no special equipment:

- Standing behind other ringers and being required to comment on the striking encourages active listening and shows that people care about it.
- Covering fairly early encourages the novice to listen, in a situation where ringing by rhythm and listening is most effective.
- Ringing rounds facing out of the circle (with all the band taking part) forces people to listen, and also demonstrates to them that they can.

Other techniques use a teaching aid:

- A simulator forces reliance on listening, since there are no other ringers, and no ropes to watch. It also provides an ideal rhythm since the other bells ring perfectly, and enables lengthy practice without needing a band of ringers.
- A software listening tutor provides the ideal environment for diagnosing and trying to correct striking errors, with the best chance of succeeding, and immediate feedback of what is really happening. It can be set at any level of difficulty and provides an ideal tool for group sessions as well as individual practice. (We used !Strike.)
- Tapes or CDs with listening exercises using real bells help to bridge the gap between artificial training settings and real life, where things are less predictable, and where the sound can be hard to listen to, provides exercises of any level of difficulty to match the ringers' current ability an interactive environment (We used *Listen to Ringing - Live.*)

### **Integration into training**

- Listening should be introduced as early as possible in a learner's development.
- Experienced ringers might see training in a basic skill like listening as moving backwards.
- Ringing simulators can be used at all stages of development.
- Anyone who doesn't want to improve probably won't.

### **C - Introduction to simulators as training aids**

This was a small group intended for anyone who had never seen or used a simulator. It provided hands-on experience, explanation and introduction to the use of a simulator as a teaching aid. It included what a simulator can do, how it can be used and how to set about obtaining and installing one.

### **D - Using a simulator as a training aid**

This was a much larger group that allowed those familiar with simulators to share ideas on the ways in which they can be used.

- Simulators are becoming more common, but are often under used in the towers that have them. Traditional attitudes to training might be one factor, but failure to appreciate what can be done is another.

- The growing trend for sensors to be fitted to all bells, allowing the simulator to provide electronic sound control, can eclipse the original purpose of the simulator, ie to enable one person to ring a bell by a combination of rhythm and listening, with all other bells striking perfectly.
- It is clear that at present the potential of simulators is not being fully exploited, with the small number in use being used at a very basic level.
- Good teaching with a simulator is a skill that has to be acquired, either by trial and error or by training, in the same way as other teaching skills.

To realise the potential benefits, simulator use should be an integral part of the teaching process, rather than something to be played with occasionally.

- At the very beginning, the simulator can add sound to a tied bell, to get the learner accustomed to the sound of the bell and when to expect it.
- When the learner can ring fairly steadily, the simulator can provide an external target speed to match, initially with one other bell, building up to rounds.
- Ringing the cover bell with the simulator ringing a method gives further practice at ringing steadily, with the added dimension of a different tune.
- As an aid to acquiring speed variation skills necessary for method ringing, it can be useful for the learner to shadow the teacher who rings the method with the simulator - i.e. the teacher rings the live bell, and the learner rings another bell which makes no sound, shadowing the teacher.
- The student can practise identifying striking errors if the teacher rings with the simulator but rings in the wrong place (to either rounds or a method).
- Finally (but at an early stage in the teaching programme) a simulator can be used to demonstrate what good ringing sounds like.

## **E - Using handbells as part of a structured approach to teaching**

This group explored how handbells can be used to contribute to learning changeringing. The session combined discussed with hands-on experience.

This use of handbells (singly, not double handed) is described in *The Tutor's Handbook*, but does not seem to be widely practised. Using handbells can provide another thread of activity during early learning that does not need a large resource. It enables rounds to be practised while bell handling is still being developed, and the principles of method ringing to be developed before pupils have adequate bell control to do it on tower bells. The following practical ideas emerged (in addition to the guidance in *The Tutor's Handbook*).

- Start by ringing 3 or 4 handbells.
- Expect some initial handling problems.
- Use call changes to help with striking and 'ropesight'.
- Coach individuals for plain hunt on 6.
- Count places and encourage feeling the rhythm.
- Try to eliminate hesitation and emphasise open handstroke leads.
- Become familiar with the ringing compass (circle).

Some problems and how to overcome them

- It can be difficult to find the time to practise but handbells could be used for a fixed time during the initial period of learning to ring on tower bells.
- Walk through plain hunt - you can see how the bells move through each other.
- The CC once had a Teach Yourself Handbell Ringing tape - could it be available again?
- These days many bands don't have handbells in the tower, but handchimes are just as good and less expensive than handbells.
- Handbells in poor condition can put people off - Whitechapel (and others) offer refurbishment for about £30 per bell. Kits can be purchased (eg from George Francis)

## **F - Teaching a whole new band**

Many people have done this in recent years, and many more may need to. This session was about passing on experience.

### **Clergy expectations**

An incumbent with no prior experience of ringing might have unreasonable expectations. Initial discussion could include:

- All the band will not stay to each service they ring for.
- Some may go to other denominations.
- Ringing can help bring people into the church, provided there is not pressure.
- New bands can enliven congregations.
- Congregation members are often already too busy with other church functions to become ringers as well.

### **Recruiting and expectations**

- Newcomers to the community may be keen to 'get involved' with something quickly.
- Explain realistically what is involved (timescales to learn, time involved and limits) but don't expect too much commitment right from the beginning.
- Accept that not all ringers will be very regular (though they must be at the start)
- Some Millennium bands just wanted to ring as part of Millennium celebrations and then were not concerned with much else.
- There can be Child Protection difficulties with bands nearly all under 18 .

### **Setting up sensible traditions**

- Institute an annual tower meeting.
- Choose a practice night at the very beginning.
- Get the band involved with local association - a two-way process of feeling a part of local ringing community and also a source of varying resources to tap into.
- Make sure there's liaison with neighbouring towers.

### **Getting from bell handling to rounds**

- A visiting 'hit squad' can be very helpful at this stage.
- It is possible to begin with rounds on small numbers.

- Simulators can be a key aid particularly during early stages of ringing. Individual practice with a simulator provides a good basis for ringing stable rounds and can drastically reduce time spent ringing rounds badly on open bells.
- Central Council Listening Skills tapes or CDs (*Listen to Ringing* and *Listen to Ringing - Live*) are very valuable. So are the older recordings of Good Striking, which the group would like to see re-published.

### **Raising and lowering in peal**

- Start with small numbers (2 bells, one following the other) then build up to more.
- Once people can raise and lower properly singly don't waste the opportunity to raise and lower at least two in peal.
- Always raise and lower the bells each session, unless there is a good reason not to.

### **Timing and handover**

- The aim is to get the band self sufficient, but ...
- An expert will need to be with the band for all ringing for about 2 years.
- Plan from an early stage for one of the band to take over leadership.

## **G - Better ways to develop ringers**

This group looked at ways to get more capable ringers in return for the effort that is invested in training - to reduce the large numbers of ringers either lost to the exercise, or whose progress is hampered by poor bellhandling, lack of confidence and inability to ring other than a very limited repertoire.

### **Get the basics right**

- You can't build on poor foundations. Teachning bellhandling correctly from stage one delivers a much better ringing experience right through an individual ringer's career.
- Continually re-visiting handling issues in the early stages will pay huge dividends by avoiding habits that undermine later progress.
- Invest effort in training those who teach.

### **The learning environment**

Developing ringers is about much more than just the ringing. It means creating an environment in which:

- Ringers want to be be actively involved in the ringing.
- Ringers have realistic expectations of what they can achieve.
- Individual needs and aims are catered for.
- Structured training continues through bell control and method learning.
- Ringers feel valued and respected members of the team.
- Ringers are more likely to stay and repay the time invested in their training.
- The right types of opportunity to meet individual needs are available.
- There is good communication, not only for the tutor but also within the team, and ideally extending to other towers.

### **The tutor**

- Ringing experience, willingness and timing often determine who teaches, but might not produce someone able to teach well.
- Even tutors of limited ability can produce better results by exploiting many sources of simple hints and tips, if only they were aware of, and willing to access, the knowledge.

### **Simple things**

- A whiteboard or blackboard is a must for every tower.
- Making ringing fun helps to motivate people.
- Simple but very effective ideas like these we feel must not be lost.
- People thrive on achievement, even those who are happy not to progress rapidly.
- Exposure to good striking gives ringers an insight into what is possible.

## **H - Developing ringers with limited resources**

The main focus of this group was the shortage of human resources, and especially experienced ringers, that many towers have to contend with, making it difficult to provide a really stable, error free setting in which novices can practise.

Most group participants had to face this problem in their own towers, but two were interested in how to provide support for other towers, which may not know they need help, and/or where there might be some resistance to outside help.

There are two complementary ways to tackle the problem:

- Recruiting more helpers
- Finding ways of doing useful things with small numbers of ringers

Ideas for bolstering numbers by encouraging help from other towers included:

- A league based striking competition (eg Cambridge district of the EDA - two towers can join forces if they are not strong enough on their own).
- A scheme run by a District Education Officer, whereby two helpers from a pool of about 40 were detailed to assist at each of about four practices, every week.
- Direct begging requests in case of need!
- Very simple quarter peals - e.g. Plain Bob Minimus with two covers - can make good use of small numbers, and provide something specific to enlist help for.

Useful things to do with small numbers of ringers included:

- Using call changes to develop ropesight. (Who are you following? Who is that person following? Who's following you?)
- Calling changes, to develop ropesight and understanding of swapping pairs of bells.
- Call change game (each person calls in turn, but mustn't reverse the previous call).

- Silent call changes (signals or number cards behind the student's head) to develop ropesight.
- Place making and dodging exercises (some crossing over can be mixed in with this - e.g 1 & 4 make places in 12 and 34, 2 & 3 hunt between lead & 4th place).
- Covering.
- Methods on small numbers (singles or Minimus) with more than one cover to keep the change in speed within bounds.
- Bayles' method - alias Thingummybob (allows repeated leads of Plain Bob Doubles, which are more likely to succeed than the whole course in one go).

Some such exercises can be found in existing sources, including the CC Management, Teaching and Maintenance course notes, and books like *Teaching from Rounds to Bob Doubles*, but the group felt that a single compilation of learning exercises, with an emphasis on ones which don't need many experienced ringers, would be very valuable.

## **I - Practical ways to achieve good striking in a band**

The groups discussed practical ways to overcome the problems and make real improvements.

### **Why do people strike badly?**

Individuals

- Might not know they are striking badly.
- Might not care about striking well.
- Might know they are but don't know what to do about it.
- Might not be able to do anything about it because their bell handling is poor.

Members of a band

- Might be too polite about poor striking.
- Might not tell people often enough when they are wrong.
- Might hold up around others who are striking late.
- Might not give constructive criticism.
- Might not concentrate when ringing (to them) simple things.

### **Resources are available**

- CC Listening tapes and CDs.
- Listening seminars.
- Simulators (best used in conjunction with real ringing).
- Tape recordings of good ringing.
- Striking contests – especially when organised in a relaxed atmosphere.

### **Problems to overcome:**

- Learning on a tied bell for extended periods could be considered to be detrimental to good striking – learners need to learn to hear their bell.
- Make sure learners know where the strike occurs (if you teach on silent tied bells).
- Make it easier to hear by ringing only 2, 3 or 4 bells at first.

### **Exercises to help improve bell control**

- Handling practice.
- Dodging practice.
- Leading practice – e.g. Treble to Bastow.
- Ring whole pull and stand – get learners to judge how well it is struck.
- Practise raising and lowering in peal.

### **Things to develop critical listening**

- Get learners to “judge” ringing when sitting out (it is often easier for a learner to hear his/her mistakes when not actually ringing) and identify what is wrong with striking.
- Use the “gap” in a simulator for learners to follow in a method – the gaps are easier to hear.
- Take a group outside the tower on practice night and discuss what is heard.
- Record the ringing, then play it back and discuss it openly.
- Prime an experienced ringer to make striking errors. Have another experienced ringer stand with a novice who corrects the other ringer, first with and later without guidance.
- Use clapping exercises to introduce ideas of rhythm.

### **Exercises to help improve striking**

- Provide the opportunity to ring with good bands, eg visiting other towers.
- Provide novices with a model of what to aim for. Use simulators, visit other towers, ring quarter peals of a method the learner is very comfortable with.
- Arrange periodic ‘special striking practices’ (as an alternative to a ‘special method’) where the whole emphasis is on striking as well as possible, ringing methods well within capability, with criticism expected by everyone!
- Practise going from rounds into changes to maintain constant speed.
- Practise half-muffled – it tends to be slower and so easier to pick out individual bells.
- Each take it in turn to be in charge of a piece of ringing and “nag” about the striking.
- Take part in striking competitions or striking leagues. and practise for them. - Leagues can be better because they are more regular, relaxed affairs, often on each others' practice nights.

### **General observations**

- Having the right culture in a band is very important – the atmosphere should be friendly, but with high expectations. No one should expect poor striking to be tolerated without good cause - but there should be reasonable allowance for tackling new methods, etc.
- A happy band is more likely to strike well [but it isn't guaranteed!]
- Ringers should strike well because they personally enjoy the end result, not just to please someone else.
- If you want to be a better ringer then ring with better ringers!

## **J - Raising and lowering in peal**

This group discussed the problems faced by bands that cannot raise and lower in peal, and how they could develop their ability to do so.

Participants agreed that whenever possible, bells should be lowered after each session of ringing, but some bands experience difficulty. Causes included:

- Poor individual technique.
- Lack of expertise to control back bells.
- Lack of expertise to lead up & down.
- Poor understanding of the role of each ringer in a successful raise or lower in peal.

Several suggestions were put forward to help overcome these obstacles:

- Draft in experienced ringers to assist, if possible.
- Spend time checking and developing individual technique.
- Provide full explanation of the process of raising & lowering in peal, how it works and what to avoid.
- Let several inexperienced ringers follow one experienced ringer on silenced bells to become familiar with the gradual change of speed.
- Make sure each ringer understands what is required of him or her.
- Start with small numbers (3 or 4 bells) until you become more experienced.
- Encourage listening, with learners standing behind experienced ringers & vice-versa.
- Go up and down in stages to give less experienced ringers a chance to 'catch-up'
- Raise and lower small groups of bells if there aren't enough manage them all, eg ring the front 3 or 4 bells and then the back 3 or 4 bells (or odds then evens).
- Practise chiming to ensure a good finish.

In summary, successful raising & lowering in peal is based on correct individual technique and practising together. To achieve this, break the process down into small stages, easily achievable by everyone.

## **K - Better ways to develop trainers**

Everyone discussed this final topic, fundamental to the purpose and development of NRT. Training can be a thankless task, but tutors actually like training, and more attention would make them feel appreciated. Someone suggested that they deserved treats.

### **When to teach**

- Teach ringers to train early. This will enable them to give back more years of benefit.
- Relatively inexperienced ringers can help to teach other people, eg in a new band, the brighter ones can help to teach the others.
- Experience of training probably helps people to be better ringers.

### **Ringling centres**

- Ringling centres can provide a focus for training trainers.

- They can cascade experience. If the centre draws in tutors and helpers for ringing centre training, the experience gained can then be taken back to the tower.

### **Local support**

- The best way to learn is from someone more experienced.
- Occasional teaching courses backed up by publications are useful, but ideally we need tower to tower support as well.
- Some associations (or branches) hold meetings for tower captains to exchange ideas.
- More local branches are appointing training officers whose role can include supporting training in towers, as well as organising training courses.
- The ability to contact people through NRT for local support is valuable, but members are very thinly scattered.
- We should encourage more people to join NRT and build up critical mass.

### **NRT discussion list**

- The list is useful for current discussion.
- People would like also to be able to refer back to previous discussions.
- Some sort of index of topics would be useful.

[Note 1: Since the conference, the plan to distribute the summaries by e-mail has been implemented. Members who do not take part in the live discussion will receive e-mail notification of each summary. It will give them the option to request it, or any previous month's summary to be sent.]

[Note 2: The possibility of an index had already been considered but has not yet been implemented.]

### **What and how**

- Masterclass could be useful, especially for the more physical aspects like bell control.
- Tower captains need to be able to conduct as well as teach.
- One person thought that conducting knowledge tended only to be passed on between a small elite 'like a secret society'.
- The CC MTM (Management, Teaching and Maintenance) courses should be more widely exploited (see CC website for details).
- A resource with ideas for tower captains looking to provide constructive variety in their practices would be useful.

Note: This idea had been made before the conference. Nothing has been done yet, but watch this space.