



The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers Education Committee

Network for Ringing Training (NRT) summary Aug 2002

Welcome to the 11th Summary of NRT postings, this month follows on closely with last month's threads about visitors and ringers attitudes.

AJ Barnfield tounge in cheek, kicked off the month with some **Sound Advice**,

How to be a ringer:

1 It is vital that you are absolutely manic, single minded and determined. Unless you are you will not get to the top. In fact, unless you are unusually gifted, you will struggle to make the first rung. Dump all those other hopelessly unfulfilling hobbies, give up on the TV, only sleep when you are utterly exhausted. Other tasks that are absolutely necessary need to be organised and contained.

2 Go ringing at every conceivable opportunity. Go to as many practice nights as you can, ring at as many different towers as you can with as many different ringers as you can.

3 Having done "2" for a while you will become aware that there are good and easy rings of bells and bad and difficult rings of bells. The same can be said of the ringers. Try and spend most of you time on the better rings of bells and with ringers who are keen, enthusiastic and willing to learn and progress. Try and spend some of your time with ringers who are better than you.

4 Read all you can about ringing. If there are things you do not understand ask someone to explain them. Spend time with pencil and paper, or the 'putter'.

5 Don't be put off by bad experiences. If you ring a quarter peal, book another one. If you fire up a quarter peal book two.

6 Set your self-targets. You must aim to ring peals or quarters. You can despise one or the other but not both.

7 Ringing is easy. Ringing is different but it is no harder that many of the tasks you normally carry out at work or at home. It is only a matter of putting in enough time and effort. OK so there are some difficult bells, difficult methods and difficult ringers.

You need to avoid those, and then it is easy.

... And to deal with some of the complaints...

I am a total wimp. I gave up on my local tower after about 10 years largely because I found the bells too difficult to ring. They are a light and flighty ground floor eight. Did I give up ringing? Dear me no. I just became more manic. I was made to ring at Merton. Did I give up ringing? No, just won't ring at Merton again. I've been shouted at. I've gone wrong and fired up quarters. I have missed my sally. I am still ringing though. Any more questions?

Striking Competition Leagues and Effect on Striking.

Richard Pargeter Continues from last month, The Cambridge District of the Ely Diocesan Association has now been running the "Gipson Trophy" - a league based striking competition much like that described by Michael Henshaw, since 1994. It has had the dual effect of gradually lifting standards of striking in the district (although I guess that has now levelled off) and improving interaction between towers. I can be sure of a good number of visitors on five or six practices a year, and possibly just as important, I get to take my ringers off to other towers on five or six occasions. (We've heard quite a bit about not daring to step outside one's home tower recently - taking 'supporters' is positively encouraged.) There is no doubt that the overriding attitude is that the purpose is to have a good (social as well as ringing) practice, with the competition element providing a good excuse, rather than the other way round. The judge's comments vary, but are often helpful. (I particularly liked the concept that every error is an opportunity for the rest of the band to shine. Any fool can fit in with a perfect band - it takes a good band to cope with the disruption of an errant striker.) If we have a problem, it is in spreading the net. It does tend to be the same group of towers who take part, but there have been changes over the years.

Attitude

John Harrison continued from last month saying that, no one has questioned how the attitudes arise. Bad impressions grow out of all proportion when fed on ignorance, with a dash of anecdote.

Surely on this list, we should be discussing how those of us who are teachers, tower captains or just wise heads in a tower should be teaching our less experienced members about how to relate to the rest of the ringing world, just as in a family or school, one seeks to prepare people for the wider world outside. If members of your band have a blinkered view of the world outside, how did they get it? How could it have been avoided? Is this a side of ringing education (in the broadest sense) that we are neglecting?

Bill Buckner replied, you have certainly hit upon a resonant chord with regards to the Atlanta band. Every day we fight the attitude battle. The two main problems for us are this: (1) Our tower was built in 2000. Our ringers are all rookies, basically (certainly myself included!). For the most part we have to deal with an all-beginner band and the problems therein. (2) Towers here are few and far between. We have one tower 20 miles to our north (Marietta). The next closest tower is four-hours drive away. So, we are learning in relative isolation. The Marietta band has been tireless in lending their time and expertise in getting us going. I have no idea where we would be without them. We have made great strides in a short amount of time with their help. There is, however, a small but vocal group in our band who only want to come, at their convenience, and clang the bells around on Sunday mornings. They never come to practices (there are ample opportunities between the two towers). They also like to rumble that the rest of the band has become "too serious." Some of us travel a good bit and ring elsewhere (including the UK) whenever we can. We even import ringers for workshops as often as possible. But, we still find it extremely difficult teaching some of our ringers the history, traditions, joys and challenges (even simple ringing room etiquette) of the ringing world around them.

Any sage advice would be most appreciated here.

Peter Humphrey disagreed, time's barely long enough to teach ringing, without trying to overcome personality defects in our ringers as well. If our parents can't teach us good manners, I don't think a mere ringing instructor stands much chance. People are not predictable, as we all know. It must remain each person's task to review each encounter dispassionately and draw the proper conclusions.

Frank Lewis adds, I'd like to think that we're not, but I really do wonder sometimes. There are two towers within a couple of miles of where I live (neither is my home tower). One of them has a band of about 17 ringers, most of whom have learnt within

the past 2 years. Their ringing is generally of a pretty fair standard, several have rung quarters (one a peal which included Cambridge, Kent and PB Minor) and most of them are fairly regular visitors at District meetings and other local towers' practices. The other tower has a band of 7/8 that has been ringing in the main for 7 or 8 years or so. The sounds that emerge from this tower are unbelievably awful, only one of the band has rung a quarter, and few of the band ever visit other towers (and even fewer attend District meetings). What is the reason for the huge disparity? Basically the "teaching" of the two bands. Nothing else. Guess which tower has subscribers to NRT?

Matt Nixon says, surely this is now a time to end this conversation around "Them and Us" (let alone e-mail etiquette). This is a debate that can run on and on and on and on etc. On the local level you can normally get a sense of which towers are more receptive to "novice" visitors than others. Yes there can be some apprehension about whether or not a visit to a neighbouring tower might be frowned upon by the current band, but in the UK (sorry to you folks in the US and other places like Australia etc., distances are a lot greater and it's a shame if there is an element of "snobbery"), there are normally quite a few choices of towers to visit and local knowledge always helps. The original question of "Demi-Gods" was somebody's perception of a more advanced tower or a possible "shyness" by a ringer, and one that I can relate to. However, if you are a member of an association and attend meetings etc. you can normally pick up the towers that are more receptive to visiting learners and worth a visit. This could point to the "blinkered view" when some towers/people think "Oh my God, they can ring Cambridge they don't want us there" I guess, but even these towers can be accommodating to the new ringer. In my tower of Elham, and of a neighbouring tower of Lyminge (in Kent), we have a good knowledge of towers, that are more "user friendly" than others, and we do band together in such a way that experience gained by an individual from one tower is passed onto the other. I've offered our help to a neighbouring tower to teach beginners, but unfortunately it hasn't been accepted, not because of "Them and Us/Demi Gods", but more because of logistical reasons. At Elham we do not ring "Cambridge" or any particularly advanced methods, hopefully one day will ring "Cambridge" but the band know that to do this we need to spread out a little. This is not an easy question to answer, I have my own personal feelings about some towers, but if we work together on every level then a solution can normally be found. I hope I haven't bored you with this ranting, but maybe the outcome of this conversation is for all towers to have a bit more communication with each other and for the more timid towers to just phone around and ask questions about how well they may be received.

Cancelled Practices

Fred Bone asks, these striking leagues generally operate on a "host tower's practice night" basis. In a league of any size, there will be more teams than nights in the week, so some fixtures will mean the away team is absent on its own practice night.

What do people do to notify potential casual visitors that the band is away visiting another tower for the striking league?

John Cater suggests looking at a web page set up for notifying cancelled practice nights. The address is;

<http://www.bellringinginfo.co.uk/>

Caroline Birdsell pointed out that when visiting a tower it is good practice to phone before hand to check that everything is ok.

Problem Bands/Ringing Badly

Frank Lewis writes, in reply to Bill Buckner above, I have a feeling that we have to realise that not all ringers are nutters like us! Many, certainly in the UK, see ringing as a sort of duty to their local church (or community even) and that's it. The truth of the matter is that we need ringers of all kinds, from those who ring rounds (badly, but always turn up on Sunday) through those who show quite a bit of enthusiasm and get to ring methods and, sometimes, quarters, through to folk who want to ring 36 spliced Max. We need 'em all. The real problem arises where some of the basically disinterested folk start complaining that they don't do as well as some of the others. If A complains that B gets an awful lot more ringing on a practice night, you may have to explain to A that B visits other practices, turns up at local meetings, and generally takes part in things. B is at the stage where he can help others, so of course he gets more of the action. Keep at it, Bill - I reckon you have a pretty average band!

John Harrison disagrees; I think there is a fallacy here. I agree with the spirit of embracing people with different levels of enthusiasm, time and ability, but there is a difference between what we ring and how we ring it. Complexity and quality should not be seen as part of the same continuum. No one should accept ringing rounds (or anything else) badly as an legitimate goal (other than on a temporary basis) however limited their commitment to ringing as a pastime. If they ring out of a sense of duty, then surely that duty should be to provide the best of whatever they give, whether it is rounds, Plain Bob or Surprise, and whether they ring for the glory of God, the reputation of the church or the preservation of the heritage.

Ringing badly lets everyone down - the band, the church and the listeners. What should be an inspiring sound becomes rough and jarring. Ringing badly should be like sinning - to be forgiven when it stems from weakness or error, not to be considered acceptable, and always to be accompanied by the intent to try to improve. I will probably get a lot of flak for saying this - along the lines that it is better to keep the bells ringing badly than not ringing at all. I contend that the best way to remove the threat of not ringing at all is to ring well, not badly. To take part in bad ringing must be one of the surest ways to demotivate people and increase the chance of them losing interest and then giving up. Once you pass the novelty stage with anything, unless you get satisfaction from what you are doing, then you are unlikely to want to keep doing it.

Jane Lambert replies, to that end, what about the quality of the training? I am a trainer by profession, in both IT and personal development. In both instances there are ways of trying to ensure that the training is of a certain standard such as training for trainers, peer reviews, supervision / mentoring, availability of professional qualifications etc, some of which are compulsory. Of course this does not mean that just because you are a trainer / teacher / group leader elsewhere you will be good at running a tower, or that if you are not a training professional you won't be a good tower captain or ringing master. But would some trainer development structure in ringing help to improve the quality of the training (participation being voluntary of course)? A while back you mentioned paying ringers as trainers, if you do this might it be a good idea to have more formal ways of learning and assessing trainer competence? Other organisations, in both the voluntary and non-voluntary sectors, do this.

Modernisation

Roger Booth sent in a long email raising quite a few points, the full version is available on request. He writes (in brief), in my day job, I work on a variety of projects, regenerating run-down urban areas and helping redevelop failing schools, with the emphasis nowadays very much on engaging with people, bringing out their aspirations and ideas and helping them put them into practice. It's quite rewarding to see how people react in such circumstances and what brilliant ideas they come up with. Working in such a positive environment, it is very difficult to switch off at night and weekends when it comes to ringing. Over the last 12 years in London's Docklands I have been able to bring skills from my work to my ringing, and we now have a very healthy group of ringers, where previously there were very few. I don't have anything against Associations per se. Since 1973 I have held various posts in four different Associations in various parts of the country. However, whilst some are good and serve the exercise well, in my experience others are inward looking and lack any vision. I would also agree with Bobby May that a lot of experienced ringers will help beginners make progress, but especially where this is done in a structured and professional way. I was hoping to see some new ideas from other people, and Linda Coles ideas, set out in her two letters, appeared excellent. They seemed to be in a different league to the tired old clichés and ideas often trotted out. I would not urge caution about modernising the exercise. We've already delayed a long time. Just look at the last Council meeting. We haven't modernised the election process that has led to too few nominations for some committees, Education in particular. It has also

taken two years to get an interim report on ringing trends, which basically recommends further work to develop some sketchy proposals. Far from being a centuries old tradition, I seem to recall that the Council and most of our Associations were formed a little over a hundred years ago. That was in response to a modernising influence in the Church of England at that time. So if it was right to modernise the exercise then, why not now? Here are a few more thoughts on how we could modernise the exercise: 1. We need to involve the new ringers and get their ideas. Their thoughts are not hampered by the way things have 'always' been done. 2) Make sure you engage 'hard to reach' groups. It's no good saying " You don't like it? Don't take part" The people who don't take part are perhaps more important to consult than the people who do take part. I know that some Districts have an annual Tower Captains evening, or something similar, where the annual programme is reviewed. This is a step in the right direction, but these are not a representative sample of the full membership. Ringers at other levels need to be consulted as well. Meetings can also be dominated by a few powerful personalities and not produce the result that the majority want. Experiment with different types of consultation and at times and venues which are convenient for those being consulted. 3. Letting Go. Another problem that happens is that people who have been in post a long time have difficulty letting go. This may be the Tower Captain or the District or Association officer. 4. Buy a portable mini-ring. 5. Set up a database. Over the past 12 years we have kept records of those who we have recruited and taught. We know that we have recruited 172 people, and of these 45 are still ringing. 6. Paid tuition. 7. Use hand bells with schools and the community. 8. Get some attractive, up to date publicity material. The free glossy leaflet distributed at this year's Council meeting was a vast improvement, although still contains some unexplained jargon and is a little of date. For example, who in the 21st century refers to young people as 'girls and boys'? This leaflet does not appear to be widely available, either.

Fixed Period for Tower Officers

Lynda Coles writes, on 'involving new ringers in competing for office'. I do think that it might be worth considering whether tower captains should automatically be expected to stand down after say 5 years. This does not originate from a sense of frustration, I would not at all want the job! However. In a particularly unhappy series of circumstances 3 years ago, our neighbouring TC made strenuous efforts to pass on the post after 35 years; in a sad twist of fate he died suddenly during the hand-over period. This was obviously distressing for the band, who supported the new TC as fully as they felt able. But it did set me thinking about the difficulty of achieving a seamless takeover. Simplifying complex problems enormously, a good TC becomes harder and harder to replace the longer he's in office, and a 'bad' one (not that I'm suggesting that such a mythical figure exists) would be difficult to oust without great trauma. It also reminds everyone who could conceivably replace them what a difficult job they do. If the retiring TC were still around to help them in the role (perhaps in the post of ringing master) maybe continuation could be helped. On a different tack, 13 of the 15 towers in my district have male captains who learned to ring as teenagers, and most are old enough to be grandparents. The two exceptions are my husband, with 5 years experience, and a grandma who learned as an adult, and trained up a complete band of novices for the millennium. I have mooted the idea of a new members rep with half a dozen of them, but none of them sees the value, their response being that they would hope to be a sufficiently good TC for there to be no need for such an officer. I cannot stress enough that I respect their ability, which in all cases is greater than mine will ever be. But who is best placed to know whether there is a need for a rep, them or me? With the best will in the world, the place they are coming from (and, indeed, going to) is so totally different to mine, that they have little or no comprehension of my position. For instance, they have their existing network of colleagues, built up over many years - as learners we need to establish our own place within those networks, and create new ones. I agree that the problem with training is that it tends to improve the already good - I'm sure that the vast majority of drivers who go in for the advanced motoring test are already at the top of the scale of motoring safety; and I have yet to hear anybody tell me that they are a bad driver! Don't know the answer to that one either.

Finally, referring back to my 'Mick and Nell' conundrum. I am not surprised that nobody has come up with an answer, although I am gratified that I was not overlooking a simple solution. My only further thought on it is that, although nothing can be done about this sort of situation, the best action to take is to ensure that good experiences are so enjoyable that they over-ride the bad ones - and if ever you are aware that a 'Nell' is feeling awful, stress that they were unlucky with that particular teacher, on that particular day, at that particular tower - it will not always be like that!

Joan Kemp replies, in Glasgow, we have a maximum period of 3 years' service for a tower captain, forcing a rotation. This is accepted by everyone & means that there is considerable expertise 'swilling around' the tower - to general benefit. The only disaster has been a few years back when a highly competent, but rather domineering, TC, attempted to stem some grass-roots anarchism by resigning & forcing a vote of confidence at the AGM. His bluff was called & he was replaced by a brilliant vet student. He stormed out, not to be seen in the tower again for many a month (though he rang elsewhere & has now moved out of the district & is still ringing). Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, the tower became a happier place once more & several ringers who had found the previous regime intolerable returned from the styx. I'm not sure what the moral of this is, but having a rotating tower captaincy does mean that several people develop the expertise required for the role; there is a bank of back-up support & no one who takes on the role feels that they are sentenced for life. Different TC's also have different styles & methods of organisation & there is great benefit in changing ringing patterns periodically.

Heather Peachey writes, I have often thought about the whole issue of a fixed term of office for every officer, not just tower captains, but always end up feeling the disadvantages are too great. Rotating a post simply because a time period is up, can for example, result in a very good and active officer being replaced by a reluctant 'volunteer' who makes a poor job of things. Fixed terms do exist in some places for some roles, but I don't think it's very common. It would be very interesting to hear of the experiences both good and bad, that people have had with such schemes, especially where it has resulted in relative novices taking roles perhaps under some guidance. Some towers that I know have 2 posts - Tower Captain as a figurehead and additionally a Ringing Master who actually runs the ringing and training. The TC tends to stay in post for a very long time, but the RM post rotates more frequently.

What worries me on the ringing training front is that there seems to be reluctance on the part of some TCs to allow their members to develop the skills they need to become TCs themselves, perhaps because they're scared of takeover bids, or don't want to risk their members developing beyond their own level. I'm sure we all know the practice at Saint Elsewhere's. The TC does every last bit of conducting, regardless of who is there and never teaches anyone to do it. Even when standing beside a learner, this TC ALWAYS conducts everything even if there are competent conductors ringing too. (Of course there may sometimes be a good reason to conduct from beside a learner). TC is the only person permitted to instruct learners. This TC also always trebles up and down even if there's a confident band when someone else could usefully be taught to lead up/down. Absolutely nothing is rung on practice night that the TC can't personally ring. TC doesn't approve of members attending other practice nights, declaring it to be unnecessary and seeing it as an act of disloyalty. Personally, I feel that a post shouldn't be seen as 'for life', but neither do I feel that rotation on a rigid timescale is right. I believe TCs should encourage all members to develop a wide range of skills, including those skills necessary for running a tower, even if that takes some time with a novice band.

Peter Humphrey replies, I can only think of two factors in choosing a particular person for a given post: who will do the job best, and what are the personal development needs of the various candidates. The latter is a secondary factor. "Fairness", "democracy" and "taking turns" are, in my opinion, red herrings. I admit that balancing all the good and bad characteristics of

each candidate and then weighing the results to find the best person may well involve a good deal of head scratching and compromise, but once it's done there shouldn't be any real need to change it unless someone leaves (or arrives) or something develops to change the balance of factors. The secondary factor, namely personal development, can arise when an improving ringer aspires to, say, District office and wishes to experience leadership at practices or in organising. Then it seems best to me that such a person is made a deputy to the real officer, who in practice routes most, then all decisions to him or her. In time it may be that the newer officer is able and willing to take on the whole task, in which case the responsible team members have to consider whether to make the switch, again considering just the two relevant factors. A considerate leader can also find other ways of developing the broader skills of the ringers, such as getting someone to organise the outing or Christmas dinner, or assigning one person to arrange all the wedding bands this year. These are all quite slow processes that may not satisfy a younger improver's impatience to feel progress. That's another personal management issue for the leader to handle. Appointing a ringer to a post just because it's their turn, or something, is a recipe for disaster. In any case where it's worked, I think it was just luck.

Joan Kemp replies, I think that on the whole our system works very well; we've had a mixture of competent & outstanding TC's (who also double as Ringing Master in Glasgow) The tower where I learnt to ring in Berkshire had a quasi-permanent TC who is still TC 15 years later. Much though I respect & like him, I'm not sure that this situation is healthy & certainly, others weren't encouraged to develop leadership skills. The advantage in Glasgow is that there are now several ex-TC's who can all be called upon to run snippets of ringing if the TC or deputy are unavailable. I think that fixed term should mean just that. (Our fixed term is 3 years, which seems a very reasonable length of time. The association ringing master also has a fixed term for a similar set of reasons) If you say 'Ah, this is just an expectation', then the TC who has reached the end of their allotted term will be under pressure to stay on because of the inherent loyalty of ringers. I think it is far better for a fixed term to be just that - even if a previous TC is re-elected a year or so later. The one comment I would add to this debate is that when I became Deputy TC (mainly because no-one else wanted the job...) I decided I would have to try & learn to call a simple touch in each of our commonest methods - ie Plain Bob, Grandsire and Stedman in different flavours. Ardent reading of Steve Coleman's 'Bob Caller's Companion' & a sympathetically critical band ('Hey, you called that round 2 blows too late!') means that I can now call an increasing range of touches - though I'm certainly not a conductor. Without the incentive of having to run the ringing periodically & hence a desire not to be permanently dependent on others to call touches, as opposed to plain courses, I doubt I would have had the confidence to take this step.

Lynda Coles adds, Peter describes TCs failing to develop their band's skills as a common problem. a) Not everybody has the option to attend alternative towers, b) 'having a word' might or might not work, and in the case of a strong minded TC who is going to be the one to bell the cat? And c) eviction almost inevitably causes trauma, whereas if the reign was known to be for a fixed period band members might be more prepared to put up with the status quo.

Surely very few people excel at every aspect of leadership (as Peter said elsewhere a decision sometimes has to be made between different contenders involving head-scratching and compromise), and for myself I can see advantages in giving each of them successive periods in office. 3. My suggestion about a five-year or whatever reign would not necessarily mean the existing holder was forced to step down, merely that that should be an expectation to be achieved where at all possible - the organist at our church stepped down over five years ago, but he's the one at the keyboard every week!

John Preston adds, a similar issue has been around for a long time with churchwardens, and recently the rules have been changed to (I believe) a five year maximum, but with the option for this to be overruled by the PCC if they think it right. While overbearing churchwardens do exist, the real problem has tended to be that when someone has been churchwarden for 30, 40 or even in a few cases 50 years, nobody feels they can stand against the existing warden for fear of creating offence. Yet frequently such wardens are heard to say that they don't really want to continue in office but only stay on because nobody else will stand. Not infrequently it takes ill health to force the issue, and of course more often than not someone else rises to the occasion rather than see the post vacant. It seems to me that this is exactly similar to the tower captain/ringing master situation, except that in the case of ringing there is often a real case of the incumbent TC being of significantly greater ringing skill than the rest of the band. While the TC/Ringing master doesn't have to be the most skilled ringer, there is no doubt that the rest of the band are most likely to respect his/her skills and take note of his advice if he is. Perhaps there is a strong case for all office bearers to formally vacate their office at intervals and formally submit to re-election, implying being proposed and seconded by other tower members. (That reminds me, I must call a tower meeting one day..!)

Catherine Lewis writes, am sure that it is not wise to allow the possibility of anyone staying in a Captain or Ringing Master type post for years and years and years..... We must all know many towers where Old Fred (or Freda) has been Captain for decades, the ringing if any is pretty dire (that's assuming it's even safe, but that's another issue) and no one ever goes ringing anywhere else because they're effectively discouraged. Learners probably come and go, but soon loose interest, thus potentially good recruits to the exercise are lost. The band is quietly dying. The local association can keep contact and make sure the band are aware of training events, meetings etc and hope that some may come out, but it's hard to make much impact. This kind of situation must be avoided at almost any price. In most cases like this there isn't even an AGM. It seems to me that one of the most important things one can do for any tower where one has any influence is to make sure AGMs are set up and continue to happen. Even democracy stands no chance without that. The new bands we've set up recently all have constitutions that say that "officers retire at each AGM, may be re-elected, but a term of office should not normally be more than three years" or something of the kind. (The Tower Handbook is really useful on all this.) The very fact that this is how it is seems to mean that several people in the bands are taking interest in how things should be done - so I have little doubt that succession will work. Of course there will be (comparatively rare) situations where one person is clearly the obvious Ringing Master and his/her keeping the job means the band receives the best instruction. Our constitution above does include the word "normally". In most cases the good instruction will mean that someone else can take over without stretching the term of office too far. Our obvious RM can still conduct/stand behind/offer advice if that's what people want. He could also start another three-year term after one year's gap. (If he has any time to spare he could always divert some more energy into the local association.)

Karl Grave adds, being a captain for years is almost the rule rather than the exception! It's so sad. When I see someone being celebrated in the Ringing World for being TC for 20, 30 or 40 years I groan!! I can imagine the totally stifled atmosphere at that tower where Old Fred last had an original thought in 1954. Even where there is an AGM, Old Fred is unanimously elected each year. Too much ill-feeling would be caused if there was a direct challenge and OF probably deludes himself that he is still the best man for the job. AGMs are worthless in this respect unless there is a constitution to say the TC's term of office is a strict 3 years. You don't have to be the best ringer to be a good TC! You just need a set of fresh ideas & the ability to delegate. By all means ask OF to call a touch for you. But it's your strategy for the band that is unrolled over the three years.

Joy Fitzpatrick writes, about 8 years ago we needed to get rid of our tower captain or all the members would have resigned. Our then Vicar set up a constitution that said that all officers must be re-elected every year at our AGM at which the Vicar and a Church Warden should be present. The meeting should be open to the public. At the first meeting there was a shouting match when a new tower captain was proposed, seconded and elected. Very unpleasant and the old tower captain has never spoken to us since. However, since then we have had very quick and friendly AGM each year, with the Vicar and Church Warden present, (if they remember) and no members of the public have turned up, even those who complain about the ringing. We pride ourselves on having a very friendly tower.

Derek Estell adds, the band at my tower is a relatively new one. We started just over 4 years ago. Having had experience with a number of organisations, I could not see how we could operate without a constitution of some kind. With help and advice willingly given, we set up some simple rules, which require an annual meeting, which our Rector is always asked to chair and at which the officers are elected for a year: they are TC, Vice TC, secretary/treasurer (that is me), Steeple-keeper and Assistant Steeple-keeper. There is nothing to say that these officers cannot be re-elected but the machinery is there for a change each year. This seems to be a simple way of running things and ensuring that there is the chance to change when necessary. It brings a little discipline into the organisation and that is always necessary, if things are to run well.

Richard Pargeter writes, oh help! I seem to be heading for the title "Old Fogey".

Please can we have some recognition in this debate that a large number of towers just don't have enough ringers to allow any fixed terms or rotation? I have been TC at Balsam, a village 6, since the bells were re-hung in 1988. Each year we have an AGM, and elect TC, Secretary, Treasurer and Tower Keeper. I have been regularly teaching people of ages from 10 to 75, but have failed to generate anyone who would be prepared to take on the role of TC. Without boring everyone with a CV for everyone in the present band (5 adults and 3 children), believe me that those who are willing and able to serve are in their best slots. More candidates would be wonderful! I do hope, however, that, I don't have many of the characteristics of old Fred that have been touted. In particular I should like to add my weight the importance of giving everyone the chance to take some responsibility. I had a visiting helper last week, really there just to be another competent plain hunter, but certainly competent in at least plain method. She nearly fell off her perch when I invited her to call some plain bob (bob every lead end, to give 1,2,3 some slightly more interesting plain hunt). Clearly in her home tower she didn't consider herself to be advanced enough to call, and no one had encouraged her to do so. (She did very well.) I have, in the past, got others to run the practice, but put my foot in it on one occasion when some members of the band took umbrage at taking orders from a young teenager! Getting youngsters to call changes works better in that regard.

Stuart Palin replies, in general I am in agreement with the view that it is healthy to have a change of hand at the helm, but feel that in many cases there are practical issues that mitigate against it. It is also the case that not everyone wants to take on roles of responsibility. Heck, some people are not actually that interested in furthering their ringing ability - they attend regularly and enjoy the ringing that they do but do not want to trouble themselves with ever more learning (which to be successful needs people to spend considerable amounts of time outside the practice session reading, revising and reciting). This may not do much for the "furtherance of the ringing exercise" (whatever that might mean), but it may mean the difference between a parish having its bells rung on a Sunday or not.

Matt Nixon writes, I'm sure that people are forgetting about why bell ringing takes place, i.e. the bells are rung for Sunday (or at least Church occasions), and how advanced the ringing can be is second fiddle. Yup, I can't deny that practice night gets boring, but not everyone wants to learn Cambridge Surprise Treble Superlative Blob London Caters Major?!?!

But trust me, I get bored with practice nights but I can only work with the tools I have. As long as "Old Fred" can still train novices I'm sure he (or she if it's Freda) can be convinced that if the members of the band need to progress further then he/she can rely on more experienced members of the band to take over and train, as part of practice night, enthusiastic members to learn more. Obviously you need to have more experienced ringers to do that, but snuffing out the old flame just for the sake of it is not necessarily the best move. Try to remember that Old Fred maybe the one person that has kept the bells ringing for as long as they have. Again the argument about visiting other towers comes into the debate, but deposing someone just for the sake of "un advanced ringing" is not really the correct way of doing things? Of course, if "Old Fred" is unable to train novice ringers then there will be a problem. As a captain of 12 years I look forward to being deposed very quickly!!!!

Lynda Coles replies, does she exist? I've never met her. I guess the following scenarios for her and her sisters 25 years ago. a) She was never appointed TC in the first place if there was a man within 10 miles who would be half as good - she was too verecund to question this, but if she did she was a women's libber and to be squashed at all costs. Either way she continued to support the tower. b) Where she was appointed, if she was good, she was on the lookout for her successor and invited him to take over from her as soon as possible; if she didn't invite him he usurped her position as soon as he could muster the ranks. He felt no need to worry about her feelings as he could clearly see how much more of a success he would make of the job, and after all, that's the only thing that really mattered. She continued to support the tower. c) if she was no good the men in her tower deserted her within weeks, and the women lost no time biting her in the back until she could stand it no longer. The same happened to the next one down the line. The tower folded because there was still no man within 10 miles who could take over.

S Porter asks, is this for real or tongue-in-cheek? My experience is (at least here in the States) that women are frequently TCs and uniformly do a terrific job.

Mike Till writes, I've just read several emails regarding the assumed total inadequacy of Tower Captains / Ringing Masters who remain in office for longer than an arbitrarily defined length of time. May I just put in a word on behalf of the many incumbents of such posts who have not only occupied them for a long time, but have also led their band into the forefront of the exercise. I can think of at least a dozen examples within 30 miles of here, where the leader has occupied the top position for more than 10 years with a lot of success.

I also know that most of those operate a democratic system, although one or two were actually appointed by the Vicar and Churchwardens so operate under a slightly different regime. There is also the issue of having enough local recruits to have the luxury of regular changes of leader. Many of the rural parishes round here have village populations of well under 200, with congregations of less than 2 dozen. The field is not terribly broad in these cases. Many of these people also hold Branch, Guild and National posts and give a huge amount of time, effort and sheer dedication to the exercise. Their skill is in such leadership and in teaching others their art. Should we chuck them out of office simply to achieve a politically correct system? I think we have seen people getting over-enthusiastic because a few have had bad experiences and we do know of towers where the ringing / organisation is less than perfect. There is a need for a modicum of common sense here. Don't disaffect the people who are actually doing some good - it might help further the cause of the exercise if they stay in post! If somebody is not achieving what the rest of the band feels is the required standard, it is necessary for some open discussion to take place. Most leaders are not mind readers and if they feel their contribution is OK they are likely to carry on that way. Many of us find it difficult to be self-critical and assessing one's own performance can be the hardest thing among all the other leadership things a TC has to do. It appears from one email that the ousted TC has been lost to the exercise - in my opinion rather a waste of XX years' training and experience. It's a shame people were unable to persuade him/her to take up a different role that would be more beneficial to the tower and allow them not to lose face in the change. Just a few thoughts looking from the other angle!!

Putting Old Fred (OF) to Bed!

Paul Martin asks, when it is blindingly obvious to everyone except "Old Fred" that he should have handed over the reins donkeys' years ago, how does one persuade him to go. Hints don't work, he's too thick skinned, and effectively saying to his face that he is no longer wanted would probably kill him. His striking is atrocious because he doesn't listen. He hasn't taught anyone for ages and probably couldn't be trusted to. He can't ring any methods and won't make an attempt to learn any. He has disagreements with the vicar, and views it as "His Tower" because he was given the keys 50 years ago by the previous

O.F. I apologise for going on a bit, but this thread has hit a raw nerve and I would welcome any intelligent and considered suggestions as to how to get rid of an O.F. without upsetting his feelings, or should one just bight the bullet and upset him? *Alec Humphrey* replies, you haven't mentioned any good points in Old Fred's favour in which case there would seem be little to be gained by worrying too much about his feelings.

However if he has regularly rung for services most Sundays for 50 years or more and can be relied upon to turn out come rain or shine then he is a valuable resource, so why isn't it possible to mention to him over a pint, or failing that through the minister at your church, the possibility of sharing some areas of responsibility. He can still have the position with the fancy title and some semblance of authority, but someone else could be given another title and be in a position to influence O.F. in a positive manner. If such an arrangement could be reached amicably then it should also be possible to produce job descriptions for each post so that O.F. knows that jobs for which he might previously have been held responsible even if he's not actually carried them out are being looked after. It will be necessary to ensure that if O.F. remains the official key holder, a second key is held by the new man (woman?). Ultimately an easy transition ought to be possible, but if not then get the Reverend Pronger to appoint a new Ringing Master or Tower Captain or whatever title you use.

Karl Grave also adds, the way to get rid is to make him irrelevant in the nicest possible way!

If you decide to do it you need to make sure your own personal achievements are far ahead of his (say to Surprise Major and an ability to Bob call) Then encourage groups of fellow ringers to visit other towers' practice nights until you can ring a variety of methods which are over OF's head. Encourage your new friends to visit your practice night. On a night when OF is away, show the remaining OF supporters how a fun practice should be run! Arrange some quarters which OF isn't capable of. Nasty aren't I? :-) But then dream up some 'important' post for OF like weddings organiser, social secretary so he won't complain too much when he looses executive power! Set up an AGM where OF is heartily confirmed as 'Tower Captain' but a raft of additional posts are created (such as the above) and one called 'Ringing Master' (that's you by the way!) OF continues to deal with the Association and the church, everyone politely defers to him as a presidential role but as RM, YOU decide what's rung from now on!

Good luck!

NRT Conference.

There are a few places remaining. If you wish to attend please Ring Catherine Lewis **A.S.A.P**

This is a brief summary of August's postings. If you would like any greater details on any of the points raised, please contact me.

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