

Recruitment drives – how effective are they?

Over the last few decades we have had several mass recruitment drives, each focused on the run up to a big event:

- Ringing in 2000 (up to 2000)
- Ringing Remembers (up to 2018)
- Ring for the King (up to 2023)

In each case large numbers of recruits were quoted as part of the back patting after the event. But did we recruit more than we might otherwise have done? And what happened afterwards? Did the extra recruits remain? Was the surge in recruitment followed by a lull? In short, was there a lasting impact?

To answer that question we need to know how the number of ringers varied over the years – something that is notoriously hard to find out.

One source is the number of members declared to the Central Council by affiliated societies. I only have figures back to 2002, and before 2018 it was only recorded every three years.

ODG membership figures were more readily available – I had them for almost all of the last 65 years – so I decided to use them as a proxy for the growth and decline of the number of ringers as a whole. It's not ideal since ODG might not be typical of other societies, but it is the biggest ringing society (approx 7% of UK ringers) and it does span areas ranging from the affluent Thames Valley to rural north Oxfordshire. And since it was all I had it seemed worth trying. Figure 1 shows the data.

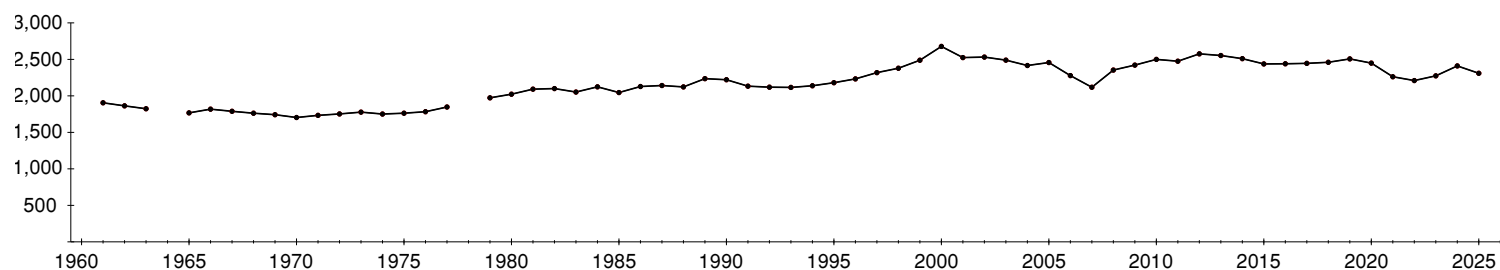


Figure 1: ODG membership from 1960 to 2024 (with a few missing years)

There was very little change through the 1960s and 1970s, with membership of 1750 to 1800. Membership rose gradually from the late 1970s to the end of the century. It peaked at 2,651 in the year 2000 and then dropped back below 2,500, remaining between 2,400 & 2,500 for the next twenty years. The final pre-Covid figure was 2,422. With Covid it went down to 2,183 but it had risen to 2,383 by 2024 before dropping back slightly to 2,282 in 2025.

In the early '80s there were some year to year fluctuations but I ignored them. The dip in the late '00s might be an artefact of how I obtained the figures. In years with no published figure I calculated it from subscription income. That might not be accurate if for example some subs from one year were paid in the next.

Figure 2 shows a more focused view of membership changes – the increase or decrease from one year to the next. The biggest increase single year increase was 11% and the biggest single year decrease was 8% (post Covid) but many years had a few percent up or down.

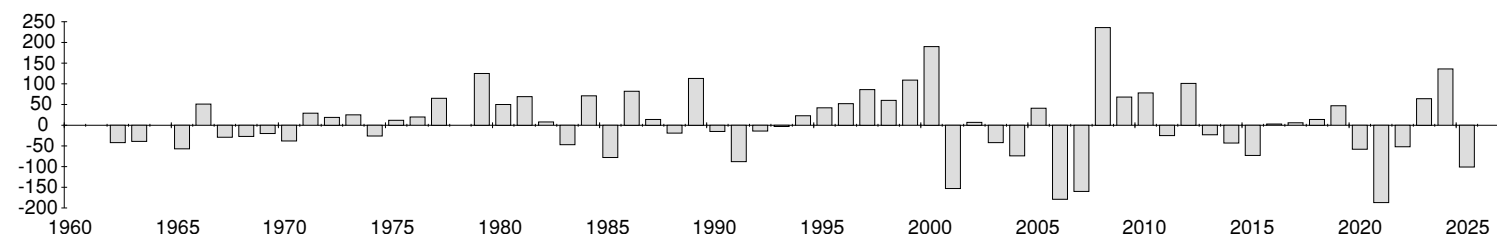


Figure 2: ODG membership year to year change from 1960 to 2025

Ring in 2000 began with the idea of recruiting enough ringers to ring all bells at the same time on 1 January 2000. It was mooted in summer 1996 (RW p605) and later that year a letter (RW p1215) put flesh on the idea, stating an estimated need for 10,000 new ringers. If there were still 40,000 ringers (as indicated by the 1988 survey) that would mean a 25% increase. To achieve that in just over three years would have been a miracle, even with some lapsed ringers returning.

The letter went on to say: ‘*Though the focus is a few minutes’ ringing on New Year’s Day, there must be good hope that a high proportion of the newcomers will stay on as regular ringers*’. So as well as envisaging a miracle the prospect of any lasting effect was merely ‘a hope’.

How did it go for ODG? In 1988, when the survey reported 40,000 ringers overall, ODG membership was around 2,100. So scaling down the national target of 10,000 would give ODG a target of 525 new members, taking the total to 2,625. ODG reached almost exactly that figure, with 2,651 members in 2000 but some of that increase had already happened by 1996 when there were 2,200 members, so the increase was 20% not 25%.

But the real question is what happened afterwards? Had there been a permanent uplift in membership or was it just a flash in the pan?

In 2001 the total dropped as sharply as it had risen the previous year, with a loss of 150. That was followed by a general downward drift over the next few years to 2,430 by 2005 (ignoring the even lower figure in 2006 (which was calculated from income and so might be erroneous). So five years on less than half the gain remained (and only 10% of the gain the following year if the 2006 figure is real).

There is another factor to consider. In the five years before the start of the initiative (1991 to 1996) membership rose by about 100. If that had continued to 2006 then the same total might have been reached without the extra push. But there’s no way of knowing one way or the other.

Ring in Remembrance was part of the activity to mark the centenary of the 1914-18 war. Once again the focus was on recruiting people to ring on a single day, in this case Armistice Day in November 2018. There was a token target of 1,400 new ringers (the same as the number of ringers killed in the war), and there was much more than a ‘hope’ that recruits would remain, since that was a formal part of the objective.

The initiative was announced at the end of 2017, little more than a year before the 2018 Armistice Day. Unlike *Ring in 2000*, this time there was central support for recruitment, including a system to help route anyone interested to someone who could teach them. The system recorded the number of recruits registered, which was over 3,000, of whom around 2,750 were believed to have rung rounds.

Those are impressive figures but again there is another factor to consider. Ringers were encouraged to register all their recruits, however they were recruited. That was intended to help them all feel part of the wider initiative but it was also to help justify the public funding that had been used to set up and run the system. Undoubtedly some of those registered would have been recruited anyway but again there is no way of knowing how many.

To relate the figures to ODG I needed a figure for the overall number of ringers in 2017. Most indications suggested it was significantly lower than the 1988 figure of 40,000 – possibly between 30,000 and 35,000. I used the membership figures reported to the Central Council by affiliated UK territorial societies, but since there was no figure for 2017 I used the 2014 figure of 33,000. ODG membership in 2017 was 2,419, so scaling down gives ODG’s share of the recruitment target as about 100 and its share of those who registered as about 200.

In January 2017 (the last figure before the scheme was announced) ODG had 2,419 members, and in January 2019 (just after the Armistice) it had 2,480. So the net effect across the campaign was a gain of about 60. But in the following year, January 2020 (before Covid could have an effect), membership had dropped to 2,422. That loss of about 60 eliminated the previous year’s gain.

It’s not possible to assess what the long term effect would have been because the Covid disruption means figures since Covid can’t be directly compared with those before.

Ring for the King was similar to *Ring in Remembrance* in attaching a recruitment campaign to the ringing for an event of national significance, the Coronation in May 2023. It was announced in late 2022, about six months before the event. Again there was central support for potential recruits but this time there was no numerical target, just a desire to recruit as many new ringers as possible.

In 2022 (before the Accession) ODG had 2,183 members and in 2024 (after the Coronation) it had 2,383, giving an increase of 200 (about 9%). But in the following year (2025) numbers went down to 2,282, losing half of that gain. We can’t yet know whether the residual gain will be sustained or will leak away. And even when we do have figures for 2026 and 2027 any trends might not be separable from the early effects of recruitment inspired by the *Ring in 2030* initiative.

Comparability – Is it reasonable to read across from ODG to ringers at large? To test that I looked back at my article on ringing society statistics (RW 2019 p863), where I compared the way different societies had grown and shrunk between 2002 and 2019 (also using the membership figures declared to the Central Council). As noted above, the limited span and coarser granularity of those figures were not suitable for this analysis but they do give a useful comparison between societies.

Between 2002 and 2019 the dozen societies with over 1000 members reported changes ranging from a 6% gain to a 27% loss. ODG reported a 6% loss, the same as the average of the others. That gives some support for believing that changes in ODG membership numbers might reflect the wider picture.

What can we learn from the evidence? For ODG, *Ring in 2000* did boost numbers at the time, but half of the gain was immediately lost and much of it had dissipated after a few years. *Ring in 2000* produced a smaller boost, which also dissipated within a year. *Ring for the King* produced a large gain, much of which was lost the following year, but we don't yet know the final effect.

Why should major recruitment campaigns produce such apparently short lived results? I can think of several possible factors that might contribute:

- Trainer fatigue – Training a large number over a relatively short period stretches resources beyond what is sustainable in the long term. People feel the need to recuperate and as a result when the pressure is off the number of new ringers drops below the normal replacement rate.
- Over full pipeline – Initial basic training has to be followed by an extended period of supporting the development of new ringers. Traditional development of ringers beyond basic bell handling (general practices) does not readily scale, so when the pipeline of part developed ringers is twice as full they each get half as much rope time. That slows their progress and increases the drop out rate. It may also draw effort away from recruitment and basic training.
- The nature of recruits – The campaign may persuade some people who might not otherwise have considered ringing to join up and 'support the cause', despite the fact that some of them will not have an underlying interest in, and/or aptitude for, ringing itself. As a result more of them give up sooner.
- Short term targets – Anyone who joined up mainly to ring 'on the day' might consider 'job done' and stop. With luck some of them will by that time have realised there is more to ringing, but quite likely they will not have actually 'caught the bug' before the day passes, and so more likely to give up if things don't go well.
- Reversion to the mean – A band's motivation to recruit will tend to reduce as its size increases. When numbers are low it will try harder but as numbers grow the pressure will reduce and its priorities will focus elsewhere. So any increase (whether by design or by chance) will tend to reduce the time and effort invested in seeking more recruits.

Whatever the reason or reasons, it seems clear that if we want to increase the size of the ringing community then we need more than the occasional recruitment drive of the type we have seen in recent decades. We need sustained action year in and year out. Quick fixes every decade or so don't seem to work. We also probably need to find different and better ways to do things

John Harrison