

Competitions and related issues, notably the health of the Branch

So far our discussion of competitions being less well supported than they used to be has led to two strands of thought:

- How we could make them more attractive events, see: odg.org.uk/sdb/documents//minutes_reports/Results4.pdf
- How we could encourage the development of bands and members (which may encourage participation).

Despite differing views pro or anti competitions I suspect we could agree that reduced participation in competitions is likely to be a symptom of deeper changes within the Branch.

We need to understand what those changes are, and what we can do to improve things.

I've gathered together some relevant information and ideas that may help us.

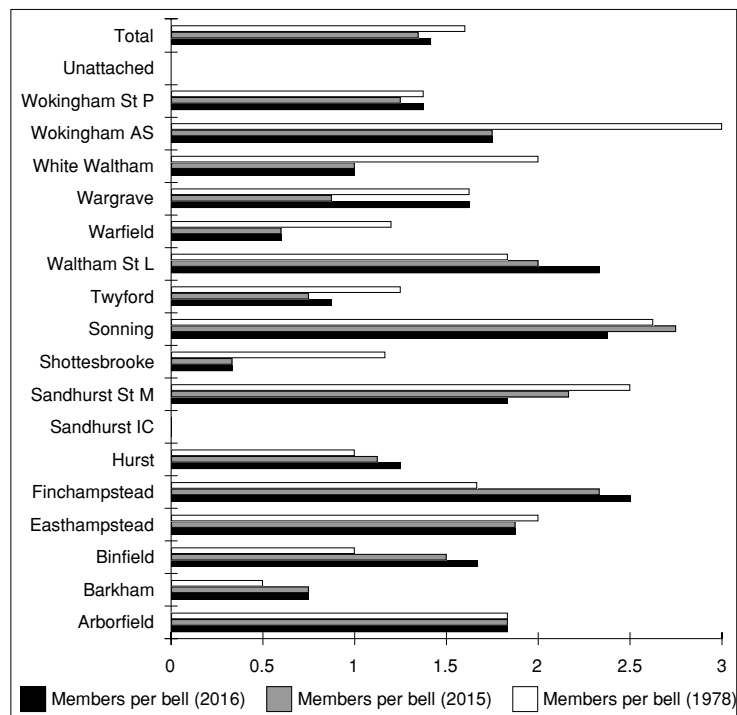
Background

It may be helpful to see what has and has not changed between now and (say) 40 years ago when the Branch appeared to be healthier, with better attendance at practices and more entries in competitions.

Membership

A couple of years ago, in response to what seemed a big membership drop between 2014 & 2015 (though the real drop turned out to be less) I did a comparison of current membership numbers with 40 years ago, when both competitions and practices were far better supported.

The 1978 report said we had 191 members and in 2016 it said 166¹ – a 15% drop. In 1978 we had 1.6 ringers per bell compared with 1.4 in 2016. Analysis by tower of 2015/6 against 1978 shows some gains (5) and some losses (6) with the others being broadly similar.



We know current membership numbers are inflated by people who don't ring. The 2015 survey reported 13% as never, or

¹ Counting names gave 194 and 167, respectively.

hardly ever ringing. Excluding inactive members reduces 2015 from 1.3 to 1.2 ringers per bell and 2016 from 1.4 to 1.3 ringers per bell (assuming the same proportions). We don't know about dormant ringers in 1978, so we can't make a comparison. However 1978 seems to have been a high point. In following years the membership was: 194, 169, 178, 167, 178, 166, but from other indicators (see below) was still healthy. The volatility was probably due to new members joining and giving up quickly but I haven't checked.

It does not seem that reduction in numbers alone is enough to explain how we came from a healthy situation to:

*"the majority of our towers are struggling to keep their heads above water, many have no bands at all or have a minimal band"*²

Practice attendance

Around 1980 the average number of members at Branch practices was much higher than now. In 1982 the Ringing Master reported it as 22 and in 1982 as 26.5. In recent years, attendance has been around 11³ and in the last 12 months was just under 10⁴.

So despite the number of members being similar in the early '80s to what they are now, practice attendance is less than half what it was then.

Also during the last 12 months 48 members (just under 30%) attended at least one practice (Saturday, weekday, Surprise) or the AGM.

I excluded young ringers practices since my aim was to focus on members who attend of their own volition rather than those who are brought. Some young ringers did attend another practices, and so are included in the figure above.

We don't know how many individual members attended practices 40 years ago, but with more than double the number present it seems fair to assume it was substantially more.

If three quarters of our members did not attend any event in the last year, that does not seem a good indicator of health.

Competition entries

The 1982 Ringing Master's report complained about the 'low entry' of 'only five teams', implying that significantly more was normal at the time, whereas five has been the norm in recent years. Since 2010 there have been five teams every year except 6 in 2011 and 3 in 2016 and 2017.

So although recent participation is somewhat lower than 40 years ago it has been stable apart from the last two years.

Quarter peals

In the last 12 months 84 quarters were rung in Branch towers, compared with 41 in 1980, 51 in 1981 and 34 in 1982. They were rung in more towers than in 1980 (11 compared with 9).

By this measure Branch bands are more active than 40 years ago, though it is likely that the number of ringers 'borrowed' from other towers is significantly higher than it was then.

² Quote from SCW

³ Up to 2013.

⁴ 296 attendances at Saturday, Tuesday & Surprise practices

Motivation, skill & performance

A healthy band depends on motivation as well as numbers. Motivation is hard to measure directly, but lower levels of participation indirectly suggest lower levels of motivation. Motivation is partly down to the individual but strongly influenced by leadership and the band's collective culture.

Motivation can be linked to skill, positively or negatively. Keen ringers with low skill will want to improve, but ringers who perceive they are unlikely to improve their skills may give up trying.

In ringing, lack of individual skill can pull down a band's collective ability and lack of collective ability can make it hard for an individual to progress. This can be a vicious circle, and is a reason the Branch to offer opportunities that are not available within individual bands. Of course ringers have to avail themselves of those opportunities, which requires motivation.

The degree to which ringers and tower captains are committed to their ringing is an obvious factor linking the number of ringers to what they do or don't achieve. It has many facets:

- Do ringers like ringing?
- Do they take pride in their ringing?
- Do they feel a sense of loyalty to their band?
- Do they value their membership of the Guild?
- How high in their priorities does ringing come?

We don't have objective measures of the skills of our members (nor how they compare with former times). A lot of them ring very basic things, but scanning the membership list suggests that about a quarter could be classified as 'advanced' in terms of method ringing. That doesn't seem abnormally low.

It's even harder to form an objective view about the quality of striking across the Branch. Anecdotally there is a lot of 'poor striking', but that is a subjective view.

Summary of points from discussions, etc

Relevant to competitions:

- Competition dates – The 8-bell date has been a problem since we joined with Reading. The 6-bell date can clash with Easter holidays or Holy Week. Uncertainty over dates can cause people to book other things. The ringing calendar is fairly full for more active members and those involved at Guild level. [The date is probably not the primary problem, but an extra irritant.]
- Numbers – If bands are short of numbers then fewer of them can enter a team(s) in competitions. [Over half of the bands have more than 6 members.]
- Ability – If the average ability of a band is below a certain level then its members may assume they have no chance and/or be less willing to expose their ringing to an informed audience. [Some comments from the survey support this view.]
- Repertoire – A Rounds & Call Changes band may believe that it is excluded. [It isn't – both are allowed.]

- Familiarity – Members never attend Branch practices will not know officers or ringers from other towers, and not feel 'part of' the Branch, which may be a deterrent to taking part. [Fewer members attend practices now.]
- Habit – Fewer bands entering fewer teams reduces the number of members for whom taking part is 'normal'.
- Leadership – Tower captains' attitude and planning (or not) have far more influence over team entry than individuals.
- Aspiration – Willingness to enter competitions is influenced by whether or not ringers aspire to better ringing or aspire to represent their tower. [This seems to have changed significantly.]
- Purpose – Competitions can bring members together and can provide an incentive but they do not directly help ringers to ring better. That requires training and/or other forms of support. [If more training or support is needed then we should try to provide it.]

More generally:

- The Branch seems less healthy than 40 years ago. [But objective comparisons don't seem to explain why.]
- Many bands seem to be under populated. [But comparing numbers with healthier times suggests this should not be a major factor – assuming the numbers are real.]
- A significant fraction of the members are only token ringers. [Is the real fraction more? Are our membership numbers delusional?]
- Ringers seem to be under-skilled. [But a healthy proportion would be counted as 'advanced', and bands are ringing more quarters (in more towers) than they did 40 years ago.]
- Members seem more detached from the Branch, with far fewer participating in practices and competitions. [Do they perceive it won't benefit them? Do they not want to benefit? If so, why?] Some leaders seem to have little aspiration (other than to hang on).
- We should try to improve things.

Some questions about how we could help

- How can we increase the engagement of members? Do we need to increase their motivation? Can we make events more attractive?
- Is leadership a problem?
- Would more training courses help? [We will find out what members think they need, as soon as a technical problem holding up the survey is fixed.]
- Would helping bands with recruitment be useful? If so, how? [The offer of help in 2016 had no take up.]
- Would help with ab-initio training be useful? If so could we realistically deliver it? [Other than current agreements between individuals.]