

Regular practices - discussion paper

The pattern of practices run by the Branch has changed over the years, and we would like to review whether the current pattern is the best way to meet members' needs, and if not what changes would be beneficial. This document explains what we have now and asks some questions to stimulate discussion.

How we got here

The Branch was founded to encourage mutual support between ringers in the area and it soon established the custom of holding what were then called ringing meetings at different towers. In the 1970s & 80s these were three hour practices, held on the 3rd Saturday evening of each month and sometimes attended by over 30 ringers. As attendances fell the practices were shortened, first to two hours in 1984 and then to an hour and a half in 2012.

Since 2002 they have been held at different times of day, but no one time seemed to be a lot more popular than any other, as confirmed by a survey in 2011, and attendance can vary by as much as two to one.

In 2010 the Branch added a daytime midweek practice to cater for the growing number of ringers who are retired or work flexibly. It is mainly held in one place and focuses on six bell ringing. Attendance fluctuates, but the average has increased to become comparable with that at Saturday practices.

In 2014 the Branch added another practice focusing on Surprise Major. (A similar practice in the 1980s had been abandoned when attendance fell off.)

In 2019 (this month) the Branch introduced a regular elementary practice, focused on those in the early stages of rounds and change ringing. (Practices aimed at this group were also held in 2015-16.)

Summary of current practices

- General practice – Saturday
3rd Saturday at varying times of day (eg 10.00-12.30, 2.00-3.30, 4.30-6.00), at different towers
Some months replaced by another event (Feb - AGM, Apr - 6-bell competition, Nov - Business meeting)
- General practice – Midweek
Currently 1st Tuesday, 2.00-3.30pm (but proposed to move to 3rd Tuesday), at Binfield
Prior check to confirm enough ringers intend to be there
- Surprise Major practice
2nd Wednesday 8.00 - 9.30pm, at Wokingham All Saints
Prior check to confirm enough ringers intend to be there
- Elementary practice
1st Tuesday, 8.00-9.30pm, at Wokingham All Saints
Prior check to confirm enough ringers intend to be there

Purpose

The OED defines 'practice' as 'repetition of an activity to improve a skill'. To what extent does that describe what members do at Branch practices? Some do attend with the aim of trying to improve, but how much does the practice that they get enable them to do so? Some members attend not for personal improvement but to support others. To what extent does their effort pay off?

As well as the practice element, Branch practices also bring together ringers from different towers, which helps to create cohesion among members (though there are other potential ways to do that).

Focused or general

Traditional practices are unplanned in terms of what is rung. So while anyone may look up a method beforehand there might or might not be enough ringers present who can ring it. Occasionally a 'special method' is declared but whether it gets rung depends on how many of those present look it up. The Surprise Major practices are more specific, and more often declare a special method.

Unplanned practices are easier to organise, inclusive and flexible, but they don't encourage preparation, and can be disappointing for anyone with a particular objective.

- Would members prefer more structured practices, for example focusing on one or more 'special method'?
- Would enough members learn special methods to make them viable?
- Would more members attend if they knew what they would be ringing?

Timing and frequency

It may not be possible to find a pattern that suits everyone but it is sensible to ask some questions about alternatives:

- Fixed evenings may clash with some members' other commitments but variable days create uncertainty and confusion. Is it sensible to have a fixed pattern?
- Varying the time on Saturdays allows people with different constraints to attend at least some of them, but doing so could create uncertainty and confusion. Is it sensible to vary the time?
- Some people find evenings more difficult than days and vice versa. Do we have a sensible balance?
- It is proposed to move the weekday practice to spread practices more evenly across the month (1st Tuesday, 2nd Wednesday, 3rd Tuesday, 3rd Saturday). Although many ringers will not go to all some will, notably the ringing masters. Is this pattern sensible?
- All four regular practices are held monthly. Should any of them be held more or less often?
- Three Saturdays a year lose the practice to another event. Should there be a practice every month?

Participation

Practices can only benefit those who attend, which is currently a minority (typically under 10% of members attend any one practice (and some of them are experienced ringers not there for their own benefit but to help the less experienced participants). Notifications go to almost all members so they are aware of the practices (unlike 2011 where a quarter of those who responded to the survey were unaware).

- Is it reasonable to expect more than 10% of members to participate? (It was much higher in former years.)

In the 2011 survey a quarter of respondents gave being too busy or having conflicting activities as a reason for not attending, but that still leaves well over half of members not attending for some other reason.

Reasons mentioned in the 2011 survey included personal factors (like medical conditions, night driving, non-ringing partners or lethargy) and factors to do with the time (evenings difficult, mornings difficult, Saturdays difficult, times being movable). Those are largely outside the Branch's control. But some of the reasons given related to the practices themselves (not friendly, learners pushed outside their capabilities, too many learners in at once, not being able to ring a method more than once, poor attendance / lack of support from others, and a low standard compared with former years).

The survey is eight years old, so some of these comments may not apply now, but it is quite possible that some do.

- What aspects, if any, of practices need improving?

Alternative formats

The type of practices in the Branch are widespread, but in some other places societies have found different ways to give their members more/better practice. For example:

Augment a tower's normal practice rather than holding a separate one. Going to members at a time and place where they are used to ringing can be a way to involve more of them. However, in some places where this has been done the locals have been said to stay away on the grounds that they are not needed.

- Is this something that the Branch should consider.

In addition to regular practices, the Branch offers various occasional courses, typically focused on individual skills, though some are more holistic, for example those on striking. These are much less frequent than regular practices.

- Should the Branch consider running some of these sessions (for example on striking) on a more regular basis?

Discussion

Please ensure that the ringer who represents your band at the meeting has read this document and is ready to contribute to the discussion in the meeting.