

Why do ringers lapse?

A piece of Action Research for the Association of Ringing Teachers



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Introduction

This piece of research was carried out as part of a BA course in Charity & Social Enterprise Management with Anglia Ruskin University, a part time distance learning course. The course required a piece of action research to be carried out in a third sector organisation where the student was not employed or otherwise engaged with through volunteering.

As well as identifying a third sector organisation to work with, a potential problem or issue requiring some research and consequent actions needed to be identified. One general issue facing many third sector organisations is that of engagement and subsequent retention of volunteers, service users or participants in an activity, particularly one which requires a lot of investment in terms of training (either financially or through the time required to learn). A voluntary activity which seemed to have a particular problem with retention of its participants is that of bellringing.

Learning to ring bells hung for change ringing is a time consuming process, both for the learner and for the trainer doing the teaching, with usually weekly sessions of an hour or two over several months to learn to handle a bell, before the learner can start to learn the most basic “methods” and join in with the rest of the team (usually referred to as a “band”). The Association of Ringing Teachers (ART) estimates that it will take most people an average of 2½ years to become a competent change ringer (defined as Learning the Ropes Level 5 which requires them to ring at least six quarter peals including Plain Bob Minor inside) (ART, 2019). People giving up, at any stage (whether soon after learning or after a number of years advancing into method ringing), represents an overall loss to the Exercise.

Bellringing has two main third sector organisations associated with it at a national (and international) level – the long established Central Council of Church Bell Ringers and the much younger Association of Ringing Teachers. The latter seemed the most appropriate organisation to approach with a proposal for a piece of action research. Existing research into other aspects of bellringing is published on their website, and their members (ringing teachers) seemed to have the most to gain from the knowledge and proposed actions arising out of the research.

Methodology

In agreement with the Chairman and some of the Trustees of ART, a set of questions was agreed for an online survey. This was launched 12th March 2019 through social media posts and ran until 11th April 2019. It featured in ART’s newsletter and an article appeared in the Ringing World of 29th March promoting the survey. The survey was aimed at lapsed or returned ringers and received 316 responses.

The survey was promoted further on social media during this time, with a rush of comments towards the end when posts warned that there was only a day left to take part. The average time taken to complete the survey was 4 minutes.

Research questions

The questions asked in the online survey were:

1. How old were you when you first learnt to ring? How old were you when you gave up? What age were you when you started again (if applicable) (*age brackets – under 18, 18-21, 22 to 40, 41-59, 60+*)
2. Have you lapsed and then returned to ringing? (*No, not currently ringing/Yes, lapsed in the past but ringing again*)
3. How many years did you ring for (excluding any lapsed years)? *Number of years from learning to when you lapsed? Number of years since you re-started (if lapsed and returned)*
4. Whereabouts did you ring? Was the tower where you learnt to ring in a village, town or city? Were you ringing in a village, town or city when you lapsed? Which county/counties were you ringing in?
5. Did you know any ringers at your tower (or who rang elsewhere) before you started ringing? (*No/Yes - family/Yes – friends*)
6. Are you male/female/prefer not to say?
7. What stage did you get to? (when you first lapsed) (*handling a bell, rounds & call changes, Plain Hunt, Plain Bob and/or Grandsire (inside), Surprise Methods*)
8. What was it about ringing that you enjoyed the most? (*service to church, social enjoyment and making friends, mental exercise, peal/quarter ringing, being part of a team, other – please specify*)
9. Why did you stop ringing? Please give as many reasons as you can think of. (*moved away, work, illness, started a family, problems with teacher or band, lack of progress, got bored, other – please specify*)
10. If you haven't already taken up ringing again, what would encourage you or assist you to start again? (*text box for individual responses*)

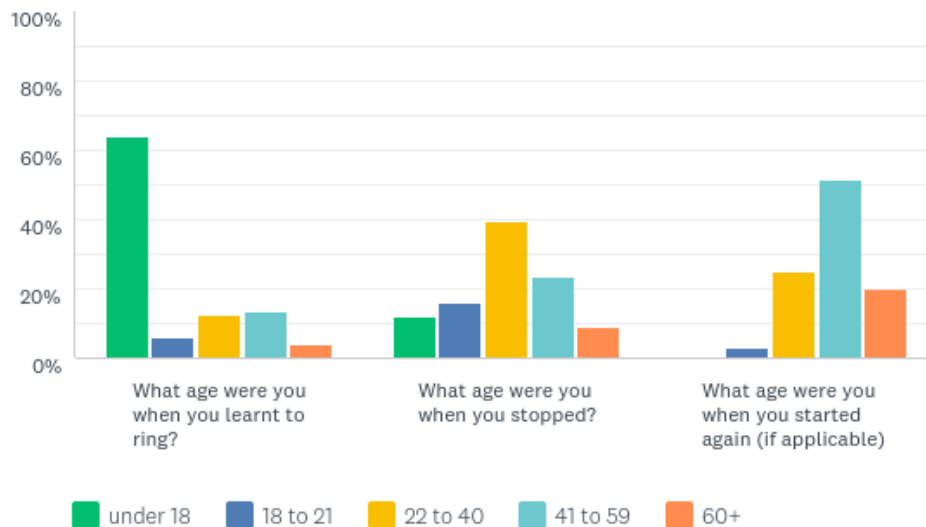
Data collection, analysis and interpretation

Question 1. How old were you when you learnt to ring?

Answered: 316 Skipped: 0

This first question was broken down into 3 sections: What age were you when you: learnt to ring, when you gave up and (if applicable) when you started again. All survey respondents (316) answered this question.

	UNDER 18	18 TO 21	22 TO 40	41 TO 59	60+	TOTAL
What age were you when you learnt to ring?	63.81% 201	6.03% 19	12.70% 40	13.33% 42	4.13% 13	315
What age were you when you stopped?	12.13% 37	16.07% 49	39.34% 120	23.61% 72	8.85% 27	305
What age were you when you started again (if applicable)	0.56% 1	2.79% 5	25.14% 45	51.40% 92	20.11% 36	179



A significant majority of respondents first learnt to ring when they were under 18 (64%). Only 12% were still under 18 when they gave up. Most respondents (39%) gave up between the ages of 22 and 40. Over half (51%) of those respondents who have returned to ringing started again between 41 and 59, with another 20% starting again after the age of 60, suggesting that this is something that people do come back to later in life after the time constraints of careers and family life have been alleviated. This is an important findings for the actions identified later.

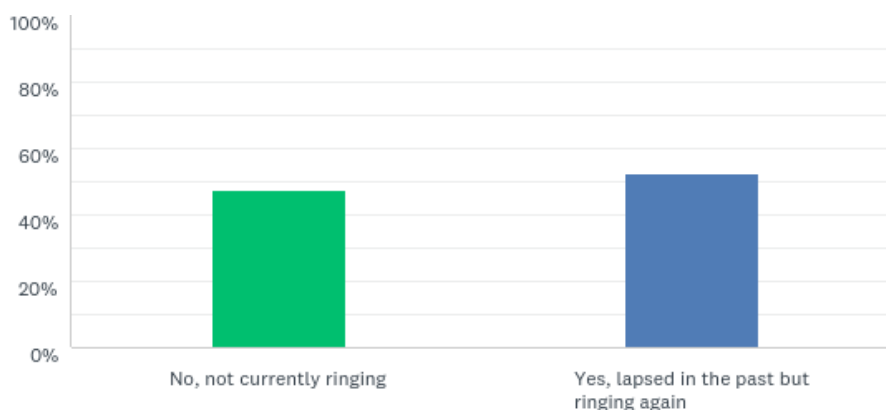
Question 2. Have you lapsed and then returned to ringing?

Answered: 308 Skipped: 8

This was a yes/no question about whether or not the respondent was currently a ringer, bearing in mind that all respondents should have lapsed at some point even if they had restarted again.

It is not clear why some people skipped this question, but it could be that they had lapsed several times, or were currently undecided about whether to lapse or start again.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No, not currently ringing	47.40%	146
Yes, lapsed in the past but ringing again	52.60%	162
TOTAL		308



During the promotion of the survey on social media, someone (an existing ringer) posted a comment suggesting that it would be difficult to reach lapsed ringers by circulating the survey to existing ringers. The results of this question demonstrate that nearly 50% of the respondents are currently lapsed ringers (with rest having lapsed and subsequently returned) indicating that the sharing on social media reached a good number of currently lapsed ringers (146 individuals). This demonstrates the sociable-ness of ringers in keeping in touch with lapsed ringers, which again is important for the actions identified later.

Question 3. How many years did you ring for?

Answered: 309 Skipped: 7

This question about how many years the respondent rang for (excluding any lapsed years) was a free text box in order to allow respondents to enter numerical answers – some answers also included some text.

<i>Number of years from learning to when you lapsed first?</i>	Several answers were from people who only rang for a few months with 30 respondents (10%) ringing for 1 year or less, and at the other end of the scale 5 respondents who rang for over 50 years before giving up.
<i>Number of years since you re-started (if lapsed and returned)</i>	31 respondents (10%) had been ringing again for 1 year or less, with just 1 person having been ringing again for over 50 years.

With hindsight the answers would have been more useful if the question had been about how many years returning ringers had lapsed for, rather than the number of years they had spent ringing. However, it did produce one significant piece of information which leads to the first recommended action for ART to follow up.

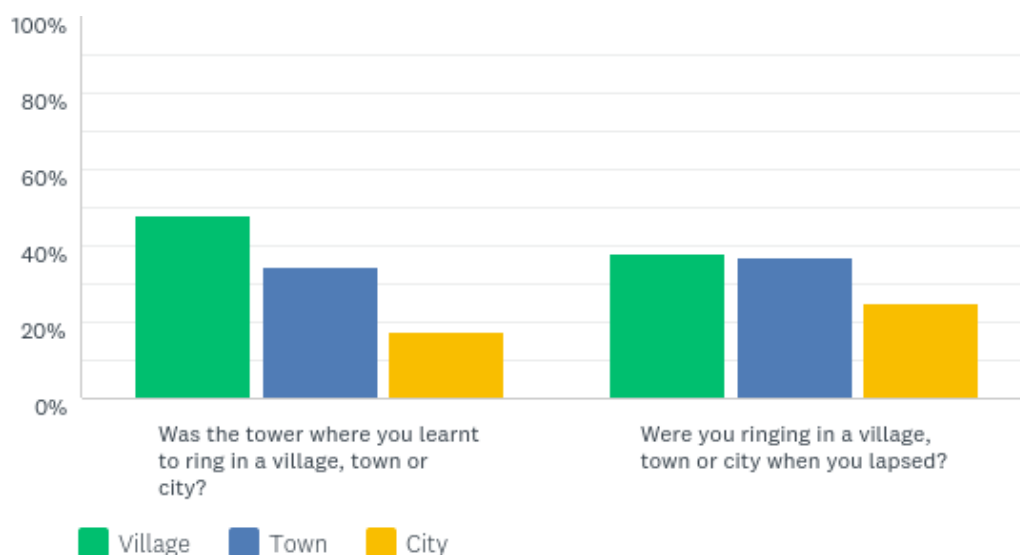
As identified in Question 2, 162 of the respondents have returned to ringing. 133 people (of the 146 respondents who are currently not ringing) answered the question about how many years they had spent as ringers. Collectively they represent over 1600 years of ringing between them – an average of over 12 years per person of ringing experience. More significantly, 75 of these 133 respondents have over 5 years' experience, with 35 individual lapsed ringers each having over 30 years' experience. This represents a significant loss to the Exercise, and is a potential source of instant ringers if just some of them (and others like them who didn't respond to this survey) can be persuaded to return. (See Action 1 below).

Question 4. Whereabouts did you ring?

Answered: 311 Skipped: 5

This question was in 3 parts – two asked whether respondents were ringing at a tower in a village, town or city when learning to ring and at the point at which they lapsed, and the third (with a free text box) asked for some geographical information about where they rang.

	VILLAGE	TOWN	CITY	TOTAL
Was the tower where you learnt to ring in a village, town or city?	48.23% 150	34.41% 107	17.36% 54	311
Were you ringing in a village, town or city when you lapsed?	37.87% 114	37.21% 112	24.92% 75	301



Nearly half (48%) of the respondents learn to ring at a village tower, with 35% learning in a town and 17% in a city. By the time they lapsed, the results were more even, with villages and towns receiving 38% and 37% of the responses, and 25% ringing in cities. This does demonstrate that people are more likely to give up ringing if they live in a town or a city – the reasons for this could be many but may include the work pressures of town and city life.

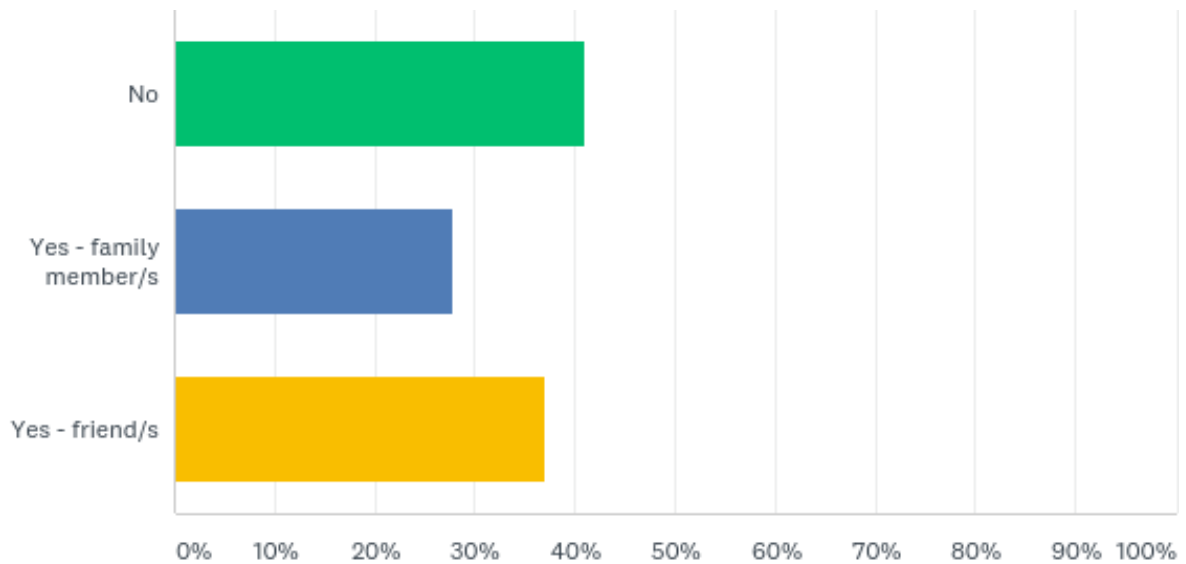
The question about which county/counties people rang in was asked to ensure that there was a geographic spread of responses, while complying with the intention for the survey to be essentially anonymous so that individual towers or people couldn't be identified. 289 respondents entered a geographical location, of which 7 were overseas, 5 Wales, 6 Scotland and 2 Ireland, which along with responses from all 48 English counties confirms a good geographical spread of responses.

Question 5. Did you know any ringers at your tower before you started ringing?

Answered: 310 Skipped: 6

This question aimed to identify whether the respondent came to ringing because of family or friends who were already ringers.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No	40.97%	127
Yes - family member/s	27.74%	86
Yes - friend/s	37.10%	115
Total Respondents: 310		



Adding family and friends together demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of ringers (65%) knew another ringer well before they started to learn.

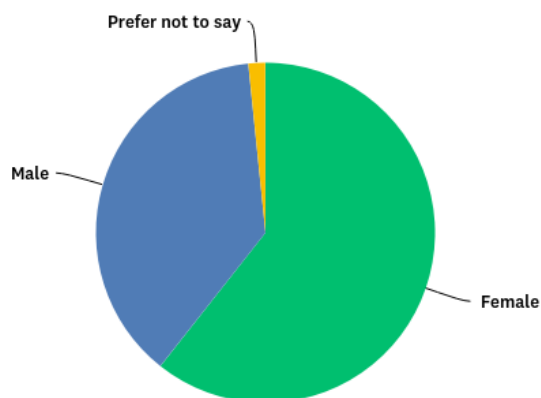
This question backs up the findings later on about the social nature of ringing, and in particular the suggestion that a number of people would return to ringing if they had friends and family who were already ringing (see also question 10).

Question 6. Are you male or female?

Answered: 310 Skipped: 6

This question aimed to identify the split between male and female respondents to ensure a balance of responses.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Female	60.65%	188
Male	37.74%	117
Prefer not to say	1.61%	5
TOTAL		310



The responses to this question identified that just over 60% of the respondents were female. This compares to a split of 50.66% women to 49.33% men across the UK population (Statista, 2018).

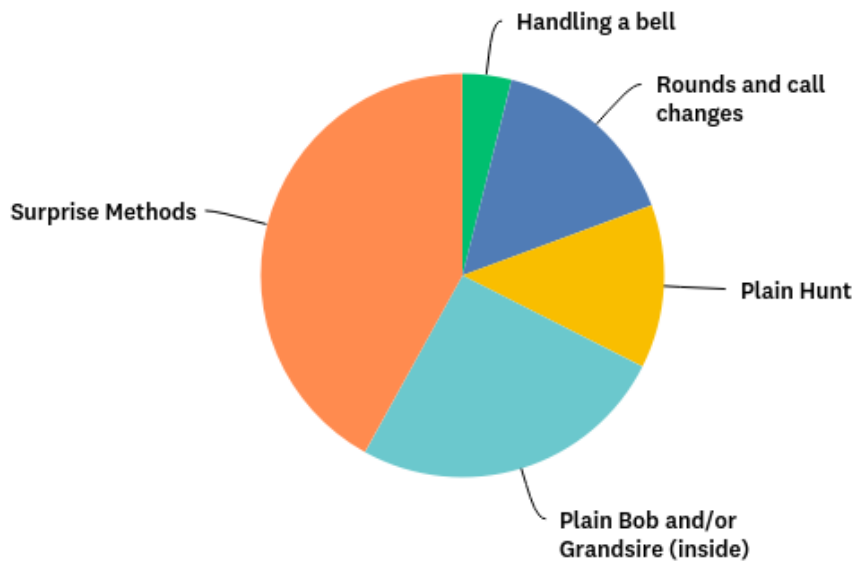
Whether this reflects more female ringers willing to take part in the survey compared to men, more interaction on social media by female ringers or whether there are in fact more female ringers than male is an interesting question that could be considered as part of future cycles of research.

Question 7. What stage did you get to?

Answered: 305 Skipped: 11

Respondents were asked what stage of ringing they had reached when they first lapsed, and were able to tick one choice only.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Handling a bell	3.93%	12
Rounds and call changes	15.41%	47
Plain Hunt	13.11%	40
Plain Bob and/or Grandsire (inside)	25.57%	78
Surprise Methods	41.97%	128
TOTAL		305



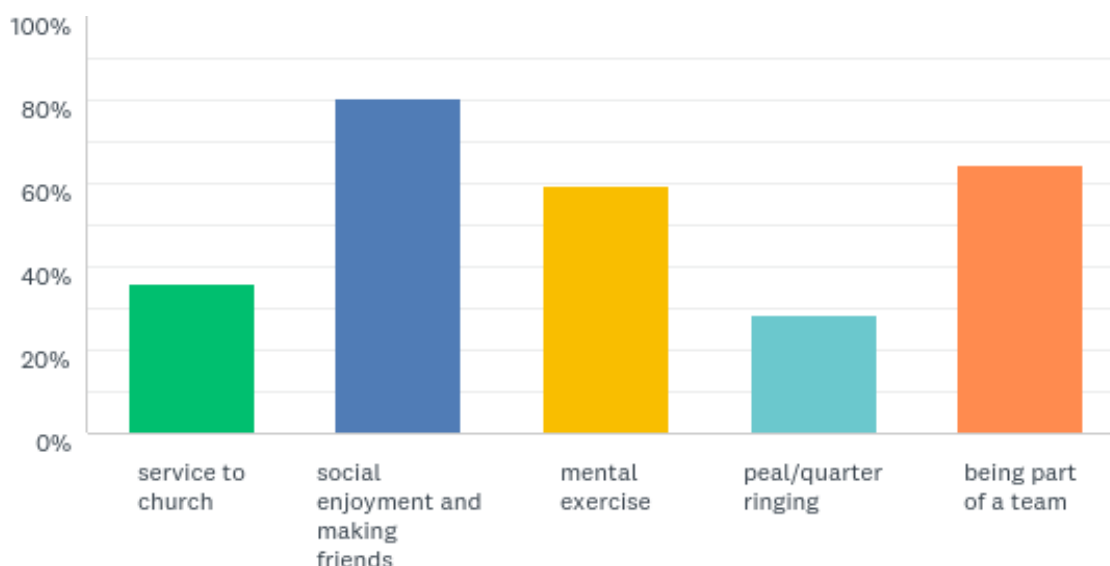
Less than 4% of respondents gave up while still learning to handle a bell. Of the four other stages used to categorise different learning phases of ringing for the purposes of this question, the number of responses increased with the level of complexity, with the most surprising finding being that 42% of respondents were able to ring Surprise methods by the time they gave up ringing.

Question 8. What was it about ringing that you enjoyed the most?

Answered: 291 Skipped: 25

Respondents were given a list of options, with instructions to tick multiple answers, with a free text box for other answers.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
service to church	36.08%	105
social enjoyment and making friends	80.41%	234
mental exercise	59.45%	173
peal/quarter ringing	28.52%	83
being part of a team	64.60%	188
Total Respondents: 291		



From these results it is clear that the social side of ringing is by far the most important with 80% of respondents choosing “social enjoyment and making friends” and 65% for “being part of a team” (respondents were able to choose more than one reason). This is backed up by previous ART research (ART, 2017).

37 respondents completed the free text box for “other” reasons. Among these comments, the reason that was mentioned most often was learning a new skill, with 9 comments, followed by enjoyment of the sound/rhythms (8 comments). Ringing for weddings (where ringers are usually paid a nominal fee) garnered 5 comments with physical exercise and history/tradition each getting 4 comments. Other reasons given (1 or 2 comments for each) were relaxing/stress relief, leadership, teaching, challenge, maintenance, retirement hobby, outings/visiting other towers and good quality ringing.

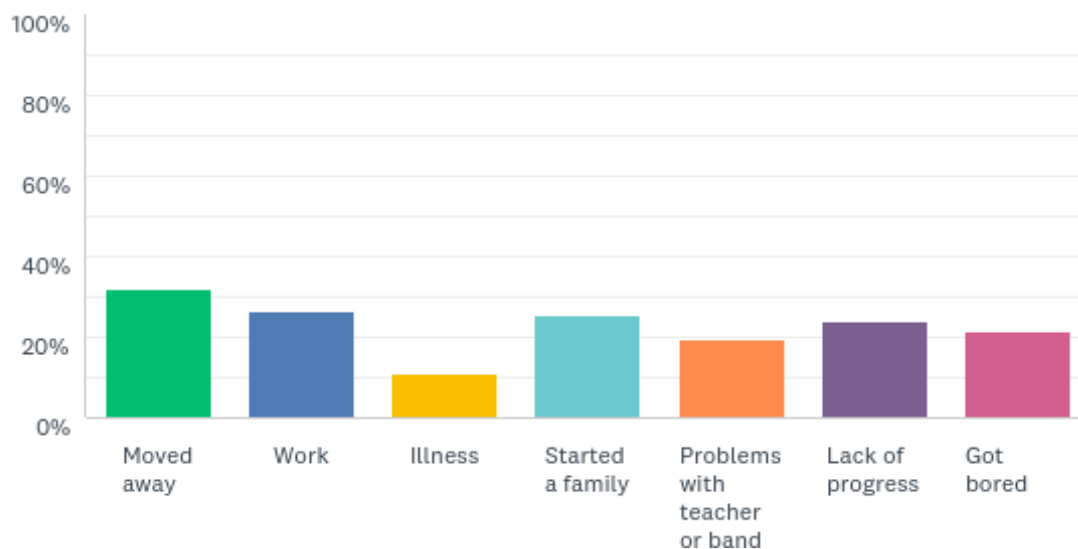
One comment in particular summed up their enjoyment of bellringing as a unique activity as *“The ‘neatness’ factor – very ‘English’ for someone from Canada to do. I just always thought it was a good kind of quaint. Also it was cool learning rope handling techniques and simple movements.”*

Question 9. Why did you stop ringing?

Answered: 249 Skipped: 67

Respondents were given a list of options, with instructions to tick multiple reasons, with a free text box for other answers.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Moved away	32.13%	80
Work	26.51%	66
Illness	10.84%	27
Started a family	25.30%	63
Problems with teacher or band	19.28%	48
Lack of progress	24.10%	60
Got bored	21.69%	54
Total Respondents: 249		



There was no one clear reason why people gave up, with all the suggested answers receiving similar numbers of responses, with illness receiving the least at 11% and moving away the most at 32%.

137 people completed the free text box for “other” reasons, which is where some more interesting answers emerge.

"Other" reason for stopping	Number of responses
Lack of time/other commitments	26
Relationships	14
Teaching issues	13
Injury/illness/infirmity	12
Personality clashes	9
Elitist attitude/cliقة	8
Leaving to go to university/college	7
Poor ringing by others	7
Lost interest	6
Emigrated	6
Changed church to one with no bells	5
Ringing politics	5
Lost confidence	5
Lack of people for band to continue	3
Attitude of other ringers when sessions missed due to other commitments	3
Found it stressful	3
Leaving university	2
Bullying	2
Lack of support from local Association	2
No follow up after absence	2
Not enough goes on a practise night	2
Accident whilst ringing	2
Tower closed	1
Red tape	1
Just couldn't get it	1
Leadership issues	1

The overwhelming reason identified is that of "lack of time" with 24 comments. Relationships (eg new non-ringing partner, divorce) accounted for 14 responses. Physical accidents are rare in ringing, but was given as the reason for giving up by 2 respondents, while only 1 respondent "just couldn't get it".

Three arising issues can contribute to the actions suggested later:

- Comments on teaching issues included both those who felt that teaching was too structured and those who would like it to be more structured than it is (in their specific tower). One respondent said *"Learning for leisure suddenly became very pressed with tests, targets and certificates everywhere – I just wanted to learn to ring, and have fun."*
- Individual personality clashes and whole bands or groups appearing to have formed a clique accounted for 17 comments collectively.
- Ringing being too good (eg experienced ringers not welcoming or encouraging learners) was mentioned by some respondents for giving up, but conversely other people mentioned that they were put off by the ringing at their local tower being too poor. Although this could be separated out as two issues, overlying both is the fact that ringers need to be more understanding and encouraging to each other!

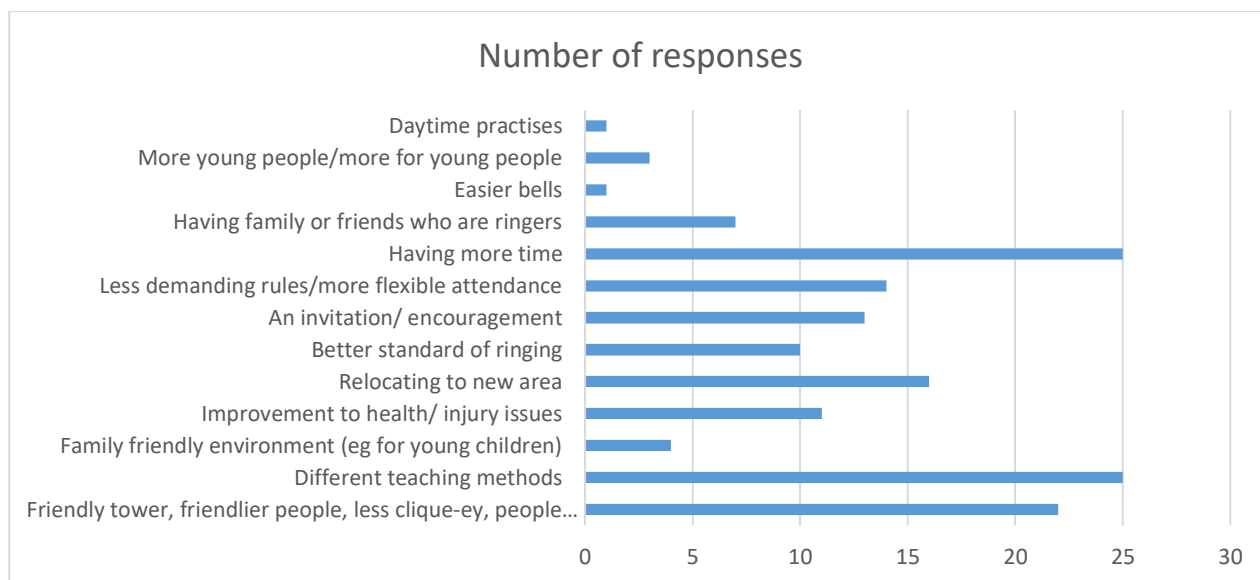
Question 10. If you haven't already taken up ringing again, what would encourage you or assist you to start again?

Answered: 166 Skipped: 150

Over half of the respondents chose to respond to this question, which was a free text box for individual responses. Of the 166 responses, these could be dissected into 206 specific reasons or answers.

35 respondents felt that nothing would encourage them back, or they didn't know what would. 19 respondents had already started again – some gave reasons why which are included in the answers below, but others did not. An analysis of the responses puts them into the following broad categories:

Reason	Number of comments
Having more time	25
Different teaching methods	25
Friendlier band	22
Relocating to new area	16
Less demanding rules/more flexible attendance	14
An invitation/ encouragement	13
Improvement to health/ injury issues	11
Better standard of ringing	10
Having family or friends who are ringers	7
Family friendly environment	4
More young people/more for young people	3
Easier bells	1
Daytime practises	1



The largest number of responses referred to “having more time” and to “teaching methods”, with 25 responses each. Personal reasons about which little can be done by ringing societies or ART such as health improvements and relocating to a new area received 11 and 16 responses respectively. A better standard of ringing, easier bells and daytime practises accounted for 12 comments.

4 respondents wanted to see a more family friendly environment, and 3 young ringers said that more young people taking part along with social activities not just about ringing would encourage them back.

Some more themes for future actions were emerging. A friendlier band was the next most important reason that people would consider returning, with 22 comments. 14 respondents felt that less demanding rules and more flexible attendance structure would allow them to return, while 13 felt that they just needed a prod in the form of an invitation or some encouragement to come back. *“If someone from the tower had stayed in touch, I would deffo have started again sooner rather than leave a 17 year gap.”*

Conclusion and suggested actions

From the above findings the following 4 actions have been identified:

Action 1 - Return to Ringing campaign

This is a proposal for a campaign for every ringer to encourage at least one lapsed ringer to return.

The findings of Question 1 indicate that ringing is something that people do come back to later in life when they have more time. This proposal would utilise personal contacts that already exist, with the promotion of this survey through social media having demonstrated that many former ringers are still in contact with existing ringers.

Question 3 responses demonstrate the wealth of experience that sits amongst lapsed ringers, while responses to Question 10 suggest that many of them just need (either now or in the future) an invitation or some encouragement to return.

Question 9 found that lack of time was a contributing factor for people giving up in the first place, and Question 10 responses indicate that ringers would return, or consider returning, in the future when they had more time.

All these findings point to an untapped potential of existing ringers just waiting to come back. If every ringer could successfully persuade one person they know to come back (even if it wasn't to the same tower they previously rang at) the campaign could double the number of ringers with fairly immediate effect. Even if only half of existing ringers succeeded in persuading someone to return, it would represent a significant boost to ringing as returning ringers would be likely to need little in the way of re-training to return the stage they were at before.

Action 2 – a more flexible approach

In question 9 a number of respondents mention the commitment required to attend practise nights and Sunday service ringing as a contributing factor in giving up, and many identified in Question 10 that a more flexible approach would encourage them to return. Although initially weekly (or more intensive) attendance is always going to be essential in order to make any progress due to the nature of learning to handle a bell, once a ringer has reached a certain stage a more flexible approach could be adopted to allow people to continue their involvement while fitting in around other commitments.

Perhaps towers or even guilds/associations could encourage a flexible membership where people attend as and when they can. This would mean a person could continue attending as and when they can without feeling unwelcome – the benefit to the band is that they have that person taking part occasionally rather than losing them altogether. Many bands place a strong emphasis on attendance, with attendance registers and a prize for the best annual turn out, for example, but this can actually be very off putting to someone who would like to continue to be involved but has other family, volunteering or work commitments, and they may choose to give up altogether rather than being the person with the worst attendance in any year.

Ringing bands could be encouraged to place less emphasis on formal attendance records and to welcome those who can only join in occasionally. Specific tower (and/or associations or guilds) could be asked to trial this approach as a further piece of action research which can then be shared with wider towers and associations nationally.

Action 3 – Ringers to be nicer to each other!

An issue raised by many responses to Questions 9 and 10 is that of personality clashes and groups of ringers forming cliques which can appear unwelcoming to other individual ringers. Whilst this is something that many, probably all, voluntary organisations suffer from, there could be merit in an overall campaign to encourage ringers to simply be nicer to each other! Other third sector organisations would also learn from the findings of such a campaign being shared.

A small number of comments specifically related to bullying, and a more open approach should be encouraged by associations to encourage whistleblowing through the proper channels and processes already in place.

One short term quick win may be for bands to consider who has recently stopped attending and try to find out how they are and why they gave up. A number of respondents referred to the fact that nobody checked up on them after they had stopped turning up. Bands should be encouraged to be mindful that if someone hasn't been to practise night/Sunday ringing for a while that they might just need a nudge or some encouragement to come along. As one of the respondents, a regular ringer who missed a few practices through work and illness, said "*No-one checked up on me*".

Action 4 – teaching methods

It will come as no surprising to any teacher (ringing or otherwise) that comments made in response to questions 8, 9 and 10 indicate that learners favour different styles of teaching. Whilst a structured approach works for some, for others (particularly perhaps older learners), it can be off-putting and a more informal approach might be required. A multi-style approach should be available at all towers rather than an expectation that all learners should sign up to a formal learning process. Equally, associations or guilds could support local towers that currently don't participate in any formal learning process so that their learners do not miss out on the formal process if they want it.

ART is better placed to interpret the comments made in response to questions 8, 9 and 10 in terms of whether any changes to teaching methods or training opportunities are required. ART trustees or management committee should consider whether a further piece of work is required in this area.

The 4 proposed campaigns and actions identified above are hereby presented to ART for consideration.

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