

Are you teaching "returning ringers"?

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Teaching Tips

It's good news for the exercise that lapsed ringers are returning to towers in significant numbers.

First Impressions – yours or theirs?

The first time a returning ringer comes to ring in the tower is incredibly important. How they feel about this first practice back ringing could determine whether they continue or never come back. They will want to feel both welcome and wanted, so it is essential that we treat them in a manner that will ensure they feel both.

When they arrive, we won't necessarily know much about them and they may feel uncomfortable with being bombarded with too many questions. We can't necessarily presume they were a previous method ringer so a question such as "What do you ring?" might confuse. Perhaps a question such as "Did you ring call changes and methods in your previous tower?" is broader and may be more appropriate. As time passes and you get to know them better, of course you will want to know how long they rang for, how old they were when they started, what they rang, why they ceased ringing and perhaps most importantly why they have returned and what do they want to get from ringing now?

Ringers do not always explain their previous ringing experience in terms we understand and there is room for confusion. They may be timid and nervous or overconfident. They may be a call change ringer or an expert on higher numbers. We once had a ringer who came up the tower telling us that he was an experienced ringer. He immediately, without being invited, grabbed hold of a rope of a bell which was raised and took coils. Needless to say, there

were many, immediate verbal warnings shouted to him. It turned out that his previous ringing experience had been in a tower in the USA where they chimed the bells. When he told us he was an experienced ringer we had interpreted that as meaning ringing full circle, however he wasn't familiar with the term full circle ringing.

When assessing the returning ringers ringing skills we need to go gently and be aware of both physical and psychological factors.

Introducing the band

If you ask your returning ringer to join in with some rounds you will instantly be able to observe their handling skills. The nervous returner who may not have touched a rope for years will have time to settle in. If the ringer is very nervous it may be better to let them ring a single bell first to get their confidence.

If the ringer obviously has good bell control and handling skills, at this point they could be asked if they would like to join in with something else such as Plain Hunt. When they are ringing this you will be able to gauge their sense of rhythm, their leading skills and the accuracy of their striking. If your ringer is patently competent they can observe the regular ringing in the tower. After all, if you ask them immediately what they would like to ring and they reply with a surprise method they will be rather embarrassed if it turns out that your band doesn't ring surprise but rings doubles or Call Changes.

What will have been remembered and what forgotten?

Likely to be remembered

Rather like riding a bicycle the physical side of bell ringing will have been remembered, even if they are a bit rusty at first. Physical activities become automatic and are stored as movement patterns in the automatic part of the brain – the cerebellum. Skills which can become automatic and will be remembered by the brain include bell handling, ropesight, raising and lowering in peal and rhythm. Rhythm will include the skills needed for ringing on higher numbers if the ringer has had rung at this level in the past.

When it comes to bell handling, good style will be remembered but unfortunately so will poor handling style. If your returning ringer has poor handling style it may be worthwhile spending time building accurate skills using the stages of learning to handle a bell as set

Quotes taken from a survey of lapsed and returned ringers by Alison Smedley of Anglia Ruskin University. Her full report (2019) can be downloaded here: http://ringingteachers.org/download_file/view/1940/273

What made me come back...

Structured practice sessions aimed at producing a decent standard of striking rather than "well at least the bells are being rung".

When my daughter reached an age where she could, I restarted.

I met a very competent ringer who invited me to a local tower where they regularly ring Surprise Minor Methods.

I have found excellent teachers who ensure old mistakes don't get repeated.

out in the Learning the Ropes scheme. This process often produces very good results but at other times intensive retraining does not lead to much improvement. The poor handling is so deeply ingrained it doesn't respond to being retrained. Remember that this type of programme can only be undertaken successfully with the full co-operation of the ringer. To be effective the goal of improved handling style must be agreed mutually between ringer and teacher.

Likely to have been forgotten

Blue lines and method structure are the things that are likely to have been forgotten. These skills are cognitive and as such are not stored automatically by the brain. Factors affecting how much has been retained with depend on:

- How long the ringer rang for in the past
- How far the ringer had previously progressed with method ringing
- How long the ringer has been out of ringing

What would make me come back...

A family-friendly environment.

A more welcoming atmosphere in the local towers.

More people my age around and more social events for people of my age.

Support from the local Association rather than being abandoned – no one asked if I was OK.

Encouragement, not being the only newbie.

Knowing that the band were prepared to accept learners.

Opportunity for more practice time – e.g. on a simulator.

Finding a tower with people I can trust to stand with me and get my confidence back.

Fun, encouraging, teaching that doesn't belittle, no overt or covert pressure to do what you don't want to.

What made me stop...

Lack of opportunity and frustration at poor teaching of learners.

Poor handling and bad striking really put me off ringing. This is the biggest issue I see.

Patronised by older ringers.

Standard of local band very low with no wish to progress.

Got thrown out of the tower (literally) because although I attended for ringing for service I did not stay for the service. Only committed Christians were allowed.

Serious and continual unpleasantness by one of the band, about and to many less capable ringers, and no support from the others in the tower. Toxic.

How far and how fast can we expect returning ringers to progress?

For skilled ringer who had previously progressed up to ringing surprise major or beyond, progress is likely to be quick. The ringer will still have the sense of rhythm of the ringing and ropesight. This ringer will have to relearn the blue lines. It will not take long, (given the right supportive environment) to regain the level of ringing they previously had.

Ringers who return to ringing having been competent at the level of Grandsire Doubles and Plain Bob Minor also often do well. Perhaps they were ringing as children or teenagers and lost interest. It seems as though this level of previous ringing, accompanied by the focus and drive of the adult, will enable them to progress well and above their previous level, becoming highly skilled.

Returning ringers at a low skill level may not have built up an understanding of method construction or developed the skills required to ring methods and will have to learn from scratch. A particularly difficult situation to overcome is where the ringer has been taught to hunt by following bell numbers rather than counting their place. Sometimes, following certain bells in rote order completely blocks the ability to learn to count places. This places a ringer in the situation where they cannot develop ropesight and therefore will not progress to ringing touches.

A member of the band

Returning ringers, unlike new ringers, will be able to ring for service immediately. This is not only good for the band but a great way of ensuring the returning ringer feels involved and valued from the start. It is often the time when the relationship between the band and the ringer is forged.

Finally, don't forget the social side of ringing, which will help your returning ringer integrate with the band and the wider ringing community: visitors, neighbouring towers and the local district and association. Going down the pub after practice, offering to take them to branch practices or to ringing-related social events will help cement your relationship.

It is really great that ringers are returning all over the country and ringing needs to keep as many of these experienced ringers as it possibly can.

First impressions really count. Just as you will be assessing the ringer's skill, they will be assessing your ability to make ringing really enjoyable for them. It is a delicate area requiring skilled management. Your aim should be to give the returning ringer an experience in the tower which is both enjoyable and rewarding. This will be challenging for the teacher and will require empathy, thought and planning.

And there are some things we can't help with...

My children going to bed early.

New hands.

Got bored and sport took over.