

CONSULTATION ON THE FORMAL RECORDING OF ASCY VIRTUAL, SOLO AND FORMERLY UNACCEPTABLE PEAL LENGTH ACTIVITIES

Maintaining consistent terminology in this paper has been slightly challenging. In general “normal” and “traditional” refer to ringing on real bells, and “electronic”, “simulated”, “virtual” and “distributed” refer to ringing produced with the aid of a computer.

1. Background / context

a. Reasons for the consultation

Over recent years a number of technical developments have enabled change-ringing to take place without using real bells. As a result of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic that started early in 2020 severe restrictions, particularly on travel and social contact, led to most towers being closed. Many ringers have taken the opportunity to use new ways of performing change-ringing from home with electronic devices. Although most of this ringing has been short touches, a number of peal lengths have been achieved, including several by ASCY members. The Society needs to decide whether or not to include these types of performance in its records. There are strong views on both sides of the argument, and the Officers have set up this consultation to enable the Society to reach a decision that is acceptable to a clear majority of members. The outcome should be enabling rather than constraining – allowing if possible for future technical developments without needing to keep reviewing the approach. It should be very clear to members whether a particular performance is acceptable. The consultation is concerned primarily with performances using electronic devices, but examples of other non-traditional types of change-ringing are included for completeness. The matter of recording peals that the Society would not normally have accepted in the past (e.g. peals of Minimus) is also addressed.

b. How the Society records peals

The Society has a pre-eminent position in the field of change-ringing and has been at the forefront of its development for over 300 years. The Peal Book is a key historical record of the Society’s achievements. It comprises a number of bound volumes dating back, with some gaps, to the early 18th century and it is hand-written to a high calligraphic standard. The cost of writing it is met by the peal booking fee paid by participating members. Peals are normally written 4 to a page, but the Society may decide to record a peal of special note with a half-page, or exceptionally, a full-page record.

The Society used to keep a copy Peal Book which was written by the incumbent Master, and it is assumed, provided the information to be recorded properly in the main Peal Book. By the early 1980s however there was a back-log of several years

and it was agreed that with the development of electronic methods of storage the copy Peal Book served no real purpose, so it was discontinued.

At around the same time the Society created the official post of Peal Recorder, part of whose job is to prepare an annual report of peals rung during the previous Master's year. This typically includes a list of reported peals and a simple analysis of details such as methods, towers (and hand-bell venues) and ringers, and highlighting peals of note. Hand-bell and tower-bell peals are shown in separate categories. These reports are filed with the Business Meeting minutes.

The Society's website lists peals, showing, with minor variations, essentially the same information as appears in the Peal Book.

c. The Society's approach to what it accepts as peals

In practice the Society's rules say little about peals: essentially a peal is accepted if the peal booking fee is paid and the composition sent to the Peal Recorder (to confirm its truth). Peals are reported to the Society at a Business Meeting and normally accepted without discussion. Occasionally a performance is challenged, necessitating an *ad hoc* decision, but that happens rarely.

It is almost certain that every peal in the Peal Book has been rung with traditional bells, clappers striking metal, and also that hand-bell peals have been rung two in hand (although two in hand is not a requirement *per se*). The Society has in general valued and upheld traditional standards, but has asserted that it decides itself what is included in the Peal Book, and is not directed by outside interest. So, for example, the Society required umpires for hand-bell peals long after most other ringing societies had dropped this requirement. That noted, the Society's criteria for accepting a peal are generally aligned with those of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers (CCCBR), and although the Society holds itself not ultimately bound by the CCCBR, there have been few instances of it accepting a peal that the CCCBR rejected, or *vice versa*. One example is the first peal of "variable cover" Stedman Cinques, which is in the Peal Book even though it did not comply with the CCCBR Decisions applicable at the time it was rung.

The Society follows other conventions or long-standing decisions of its own and this consultation gives an opportunity to affirm them. For example, a jointly attributed peal is recorded only if the ASCY attribution appears first, ahead of that of any other Society, and peals of Minimus are not recorded, although the CCCBR allows them.

d. Evolution of CCCBR guidelines

Over the years the CCCBR has relaxed its view on what it considers to be a peal. The traditional view was that if a performance did not comply with the Decisions, it was not a peal, it did not exist and it was not included in its analysis or otherwise recorded. The policy shifted towards non-compliant performances not being included in the analysis, rather than being disregarded totally. This however still set them apart and did not really appease those ringers pushing for more change. A further relaxation of the Decisions was to include in the analysis performances rung on simulators, giving them effective legitimacy. It was still assumed they were rung by rope and wheel, but no distinction was made between simulation using real bells and simulated sound, and using dumb-bells and simulated sound, as for example at the Mancroft Discovery Centre. An older version of this was the Seage apparatus (or

similar) that was installed in many towers, including Washington and Glasgow for example.

Very recently the CCCBR Framework for Method Ringing has further relaxed what is included in the analysis. It is now intended more to be descriptive of what is rung, rather than saying what is allowed to be rung, though basic rules about falseness, starting and finishing in rounds, no jump changes, etc. still apply. Part extents are allowed in certain circumstances, for example a 5160 of Plain Bob Minor provided it has 120 rows 8 times, the other possible 600 rows 7 times. It could not though have 600 rows 7 times and 60 rows 9 times. This applies at all stages, but practically, to Triples and lower.

At the present time, there are no examples of part extents in the Society's peal records, but the question of giving retrospective recognition to previously disallowed peals that would if rung now be acceptable must be considered. Since the adoption of the Framework, at least two examples have come to light that might affect the records. First is the peal of "variable cover" Stedman Cinques mentioned above (which is in the Peal Book anyway). Secondly, it was stated that the performance at Adelaide Cathedral, an attempt for 10080 of Stedman Triples that was lost in the second extent, was acceptable as a 5040, the first extent having been a valid peal, despite the performance failing overall,

The most recent CCCBR innovations have been in its approach to distributed or electronic ringing. Some of the systems have been around for some time, but as already stated the restrictions necessitated by the pandemic have accelerated their development.

The essential features of these systems are:

- The ringers use electronic devices connected via the internet to a central computer
- The ringers are normally distributed i.e. in different locations
- The sound is simulated.

In the next section these aspects are described in more detail, because this is the core reason for the consultation.

2. Description of distributed electronic ringing

a. How it works in principle

The ringers are distributed in different physical locations and each has a device (e.g. smartphone or laptop) connected (assumed to be via the Internet) to a central computer where the software is hosted (the platform). On receipt of a signal from an individual ringer's device the platform generates a signal that is sent back to all the participants' devices which convert it into a sound. This process is more or less instant and all the ringers hear the same sound simultaneously. The actual sound generated is normally configured to be that of a real bell with an appropriate pitch, and each participant is assigned a "bell" with a different pitch so that when they ring in order they hear a pretty realistic simulation of a ring of tower-bells or set of hand-bells.

To simulate change-ringing the participants “ring” in different orders according to the method chosen, just like on normal bells. The key point is that the ringers themselves generate the performance: the platform simply relays what they generate to the rest of the team.

At its simplest the signals from the ringers to the platform are triggered by pressing a key. They can however be triggered by any sort of switch, for example in a dummy hand-bell – so the ringers experience the feel of real hand-bell ringing - or by a tower-bell with a sensor device.

In some systems the ringers’ devices can show a visual representation to assist with rope-sight. The ringers may also choose to use a video link (such as Zoom) to see themselves (and each other) performing.

b. Commonly used Applications

The consultation is not concerned with the particular merits of specific platforms or systems, but it is helpful to consider some specific examples.

Ringling Room

Ringling Room works by the participant tapping a key on a computer keyboard. Normally each participant controls one bell but in principle it could be two or more.

The screen shows a diagrammatic representation of bell-ropes with sallies, and these move up and down with each keypress to simulate hand strokes and backstrokes.

More recently it has become possible to use hand-bell simulators with Ringling Room.

Hand-bell Stadium

Hand-bell Stadium is specifically designed to use hand-bell simulators which are motion controllers in a dummy hand-bell. It does not work with keyboard input. The experience is close to that of traditional hand-bell ringing, in that the screen portrays ringers and the users employ the same action as normal hand-bell ringing, usually having two bells each

Tower-Bell Simulators

Although there is no system in common use, mainly because the pandemic restrictions mean access to tower-bell venues has been severely limited, a configuration whereby distributed ringers (i.e. in different towers) are connected to a central platform like Ringling Room triggering a simulated sound by a sensor on the wheel or clapper offers possibilities for future development.

Other

There are other applications in use e.g. Ding, Muster. The latter uses a computer to generate the changes locally then connects via the internet to others using the same program

Another type of distributed ringing not yet common would involve the telephonic transmission of real sound generated by normal ringing where the ringers are distributed– in effect ringing over Zoom.. This could be on either tower-bells or hand-bells, and there are further examples where ringers see each other via fast

video links and use real hand-bells and it is not difficult to envisage many other configurations that facilitate distributed ringing

c. Computer-generated change-ringing

A different type of system is where the central platform itself is programmed to generate an output that simulates change-ringing, and one or more ringers can join in by substituting their own sound although they have no control over such things as speed. The essential difference between these and systems like Ringing Room is that the ringing proceeds according to how the central platform has been programmed, regardless of what the individual participants do.

Given that a peal is a performance created by a band of individuals it unlikely to be acceptable for one or more bells to be generated artificially in this way.

d. Ringing robots

Another example of computer-aided ringing is where a robot is programmed to ring one or more of the bells independently. With advances in Artificial Intelligence it might soon become possible for such a device to interact, whether in normal or electronic ringing, with other human participants in a realistic way (like striking in the right place and allow for variations in speed etc) to an acceptable standard. At present however this is not seen as an imminent matter for consideration.

e. Other technological aids to ringing

It is quite common in towers with poor natural acoustics for the sound heard by the ringers to be modified by electrical or electronic equipment, so that it may be described as simulated. However in a normal tower setting this is not controversial and peals rung there are accepted without challenge.

f. Traditional bells rung by non-traditional means

Peal lengths have been performed by one person “ringing” the changes by tapping with a hammer on a set of hand-bells suspended from a pole, and in principle could similarly be performed using electrically controlled clappers static tower-bells. This is not a significant issue in this consultation, any such performance being considered on its own merits.

3. Key Considerations

The Society’s current position is that electronic peals, with the ringers not all in the same place, and not using real bells, are not included in the Peal Book. The main purpose of this consultation is to address the questions of whether or not they should be.

At present there are not many systems for electronic ringing, but it is very likely that in the future, there will be more, and that although the technology at present is relatively simple it will soon become more sophisticated. Consequently electronic peals are likely to become increasingly common.

Successful electronic ringing is often more mentally challenging than normal ringing. However, there is a valid view that it is not real ringing, and should not be regarded as equivalent in merit regardless of the effort involved.

Another question is around the degree to which the ringers not being physically in the same place affects whether or not a distributed peal can be regarded as a team performance

It is assumed that the current technical criteria for a peal are not changing as a result of the consultation, so normal peals and electronic peals are treated equivalently in terms of what is rung.

The final essential question is whether electronic ringing is seen to be of equivalent merit to normal ringing in terms of the effort skills etc required to achieve it, or it is so completely different that it is fundamentally not comparable with normal ringing

4. Options for recording

There are options both for including electronic peals in the analysis and for writing the details, leading to several scenarios to consider.

a. Including in the analysis

There are two ways in which electronic peals could be included in the analysis

- Include in the existing analysis as an additional category, alongside the existing categories of tower and hand. The number of electronic peals rung would be included in overall totals.
- Include as a completely new analysis, with separate totals. The number of electronic peals rung would be maintained separately from normal peal totals.

b. Writing the details

If it is decided not to include electronic peals in the analysis it is assumed it would not be logical to record the details, so that scenario need not be considered. The options for writing the details are not all exclusive.

- Write in the main Peal Book. This would recognise electronic peals as of equal merit to traditional ones. An alternative format would be needed to describe such things as the location of the individual ringers, type of system or platform used, with an explanation of the technology employed. This would have to be compatible with the existing format used for normal peals. This option is not compatible with including electronic peals in a new analysis.
- Write in a new separate physical book, which would not necessarily be hand-written. A new format would be devised to describe such things as the location of the individual ringers, type of system or platform used, with an explanation of the technology employed. It would not need to follow conventionally used peal-writing layouts.
- Publish online. This could be in addition to writing in a book, or online only. It would almost certainly be on the ASCY website. Depending on the type of analysis it could be part of the existing online list or a new separate one.
- Do not either write the details in a book or publish them online.

5. Process for consultation and eventual decisions

The Officers have tried to apply the following principles in carrying out the consultation

- Given that a number of electronic peals might have been rung by members by the time a decision is made, an informal note of them is being maintained so that they can be retrospectively included in the records if necessary
- The Survey must be simple, with easy-to-understand questions, and interpreting the results must be straight-forward.
- The Survey results should be anonymous, although respondents may voluntarily identify themselves in the comments sections
- The Society must avoid if possible inventing its own set of guidelines or definitions that will need maintaining and updating every time something new or different is rung

a. Outline Process

The consultation process involves the following steps

- Prepare this Consultation Paper and design the Survey
- Invite members through the email group and in the Newsletter to complete the Survey either online or on paper
- Members return their completed Survey
- Survey results are analysed, and recommendations made for consideration by members
- Members decide on the recommendations

b. The Decision

Part of the Survey concerns the way any recommendations are discussed and implemented.

Things to consider include

- Is a rule change required, or is the decision of a Business Meeting recorded in the minutes sufficient?
- Should the recommendations be discussed at a Business Meetings in the room (as opposed to online)? That would enable a more interactive debate to take place, but restrict the number of members taking part
- Should there be an online vote, allowing more members to have their say, even if the discussion is at a Business Meeting in the room (as opposed to online)?

6. Other considerations based on comments received

The following statements are based on comments received from various sources since the consultation was announced. They are presented here for members to consider before doing the Survey.

The Society should be aware of how the decision affects its reputation, amongst both members - particularly those who do not ring regularly in London - and ringers in general. It might appear “out of touch” or “fuddy-duddy” if it does not embrace new ways, especially if these become common in ringing generally. On the other hand, members are rightly proud of the Society’s traditions and achievements and might see these as being diluted or devalued by change.

It is likely that the new platforms are here to stay, and will rapidly develop in sophistication and reliability. The Society needs to be seen as innovative and has a leading part to play in developments. The Society also encourages the development of individual ringers’ change-ringing skills and electronic ringing has value as a training tool, particularly for method learning and practising.

Distributed ringing provides opportunities, for those who live too remotely from others, to take part in performances in more advanced methods to a higher standard than their local circumstances allow.

Recording electronic peals rung during lockdown will provide an important historical reflection of the Society’s activities at the time.

Ringing involves both physical (handling a tower-bell or holding a hand-bell) and mental skills. Although the action of pressing a key is very different from that of physically ringing a bell, it requires skills of timing and coordination to achieve an acceptable result, as well as similar if not increased levels of attention and concentration.

There are technical issues such as connection problems. If a connection fails or the standard of ringing is low due to timing irregularities, it is unlikely the participants would wish or be able to continue, in the same way as a tower bell peal would stop if a rope broke.

There are questions around honesty, for example a ringer in an electronic peal might have a blue-line or other visual aid in front of them, which is not regarded as acceptable in ordinary peals.

Individual ringers in electronic peals should feel they are working as a team, just as in normal ringing, managing and controlling aspects such as speed of ringing and quality of striking. This would not necessarily happen if a computer generated the changes or rang one of more of the bells.