

We could add some general interest activities, for example:

- Visits to places on interest – eg Whites of Appleton, Whitechapel foundry, Taylors bell museum, Ringing Roadshow (Newbury, 10 Sept 2005), Guild festival (July)
- Something completely different – eg Talks by members on topics of general interest, or display of members' collections, hobbies, crafts, etc.
- An 'outing with a difference' – eg walking or cycling outing, or steam train or river boat ride, with a few towers included at each end
- An occasional 'extra' before a Branch practice – eg a local expert to show and talk about items of interest in the church visited

Communicating better

The Branch currently communicates with its members mainly via the newsletter and the yearly event card, which are sent via the tower correspondent to the tower, where it is assumed that members will see them. There are several ways that communication could be improved.

Basic communication of time related information could be made:

- More prominent – Including inserts with the Newsletter that could be pinned to tower notice boards to promote forthcoming events
- More direct – Hand delivering notices of meetings, practices, etc to towers on their practice night
- More rapid – E-mailing more information to tower correspondents
- More personal – E-mailing to all members with e-mail addresses so that they can receive things even if they miss practices, and receive it sooner
- More widespread – Informing potential visitors from outside the Branch to attend our events by including them in the event calendar in Odd Bob, and by notices in the Ringing World.

Communication should be two way. We should seek more feedback, including perhaps:

- Feedback about what members would like, on a more regular basis
- Comments about whether things are improving, and what needs doing to make them
- Listening more to the young members, whose new ideas could be useful
- E-mail responses from people who intend to be at a practice

The last one is an interesting possibility, which works quite well for the periodic Surprise Major practices at All Saints Wokingham. Events are notified by e-mail, asking people to say whether or not they expect to be present. Knowing whether there will be a lot or a few people present, makes it possible to plan them in a way that is most beneficial for those who attend – much better than the traditional way of having no idea until people turn up (or don't turn up).

And so on ...

Remember that this is an initial list to start people thinking. Which ideas do you think most worth pursuing? What other ideas can you suggest?

JAH

Sonning Deanery - increasing benefit to its members

Summary

How much benefit do you get from being members of Sonning Deanery Branch? If the answer is not much, or not as much as you would like, then the Branch is not fulfilling its objectives. If that is so, what are we the members going to do about it?

These were the sort of questions underlying discussions about Branch events at the November meeting. That meeting asked a small group of us (Daniel Chafen, John Harrison, Louise Marshall, Rob Needham and Clare Wright) to put our heads together and come up with some ideas for things that could be improved. In other words, how could the Branch run more interesting, more enjoyable and more useful events for its members?

We found that brainstorming ideas was easy but we realised that making some of them work would be harder. We also realised a catch 22. Most people only do things that they think will be worthwhile, but if you never attend Branch events, how do you know whether they are worthwhile, and how do you find out when they improve? The flip side of that is that if more people get involved, things are more successful, so more people are likely to take part.

Rather than present the list of raw, unsorted ideas, we have tried to group similar things together. We recognised that most of them contribute to one or more of three broad objectives:

- Helping members to improve their ringing skills
- Developing ourselves as a ringing community
- Communicating better

These three interlock. The first is a core aim of a ringing society. The second is equally important – we are people after all, not machines. The third is needed to hold everything else together.

The remainder of this document discusses our thoughts and some ideas about what might be possible. We don't claim that all the ideas will work, nor do we pretend to have thought of everything. You might have a good idea that we have missed. But we feel our list has enough in it to act as a starting point. Not all of the ideas are new. Some have been successfully used in the past, either here or elsewhere.

Please read our ideas, discuss them with other members in your tower, and let us know what you think. If you come to the AGM, you will be able to have your say directly, but if not, please contact any Branch officer to say what you think.

Some of the ideas are simple, obvious and low risk, so we propose that the relevant Branch officer(s) just get on and make them happen. Others are more substantial – they either change the way the Branch operates, or they would entail financial layout. They would need careful thought before committing to them. Each needs considering on their merits, taking account of feedback on what you and your fellow members most want, what you would and would not like to be changed, and what type of events you would be most likely to support.

Several of the suggestions involve organising more social events. If the Branch is to do this, then we feel it would be sensible to appoint someone to focus on this aspect (possibly called a 'social secretary') rather than just adding it to one of the other officers' responsibilities. Such an appointment ought to be made at the AGM, which is in a few weeks time.

Please let us have your feedback and ideas. It is your Branch, and it exists to serve and support you. But it can only do so with your help.

JAH

Discussion

Improving ringing skills

We should all care about this. None of us is so good that we can't improve, whether our aim is to ring as well as possible on Sunday morning, or to ring peals of exotic methods. In any case, we should all be trying to help the upcoming generation of ringers in as many ways as possible, in return for the time and effort that was invested in us by those who came before us.

Looking for improvements in this area raises a lot of questions, for example, we all have different needs and different constraints on what we can do (or want to do) about them. As a branch, we should be trying to respond to these differences, not forcing everyone into the same mould.

How can we improve current activities? What potential new activities should we consider?

Branch practices

To attract more members, Branch practices could be made:

- More friendly – eg provide refreshments, socialise in adjacent room where possible
- More substantial – eg ring a quarter peal beforehand, with first refusal for the hosts
- More interesting – eg special methods announced in advance, simple interesting methods that can be learnt on the spot, tutorial material for new methods, tips for keeping right, etc
- More flexible – eg at different times on a Saturday (to fit in with other activities) or on a different week (when needed to avoid Easter or other holidays)
- More available – eg during weekdays for those not in regular work
- More focused – eg for beginners, for improvers, for special methods, for those who want to improve their striking

Training courses

These are very successful for those who attend them (because we organise the time and topic to suit the participants) but more members could benefit from them with:

- Better communication of the opportunities available
- Possible extra topics to meet members' needs.

Striking competitions

Competing to strike well can provide a useful incentive to improve ringing quality – for those who take part. The current 6 and 8 bell competitions could be made:

- More enjoyable – eg by providing other things to do during the ringing (such as quizzes) running refreshments, or maybe all participants bring food on a special theme (perhaps international cuisine)
- More instructive – eg by encouraging participants to have a go at judging for themselves (and see if they agree with the order in which the judge places the teams)
- More rewarding – eg certificate the first time an individual takes part, or for the best 6 bell band in the 8 bell competition
- More inclusive – eg encourage joint teams to take part (to enable towers that could not raise a complete team to take part) [such a team could not qualify to represent the Branch in the Guild the 6 bell contest]
- More friendly – eg provide things for non ringing family to do
- More incentive – A special prize open only to towers that enter a team

We could try other forms of striking competition:

- Small weekday competitions on the practice evening of the host tower
- A striking ladder – two way competitions between towers when and where they choose, and judged however they agree. Towers compete with the band the next above them in the ladder, like a squash ladder.
- A knockout contest – series of two way contests in rounds leading to a final.

Other activities

Other ways to help develop members skills might include:

- Visiting local practices to augment what can be achieved locally
- Sessions on training ringers, and on running practices
- Coaching sessions for ringers with problems
- Encourage a quarter peal in each tower, with help where needed

Developing as a ringing community

This is about how we relate to each other, as well as what we do.

We could develop relationships by:

- More officers visiting towers' own practices
- Encouraging more members to visit each other' s practices
- Socialising after Branch practices (in a pub or elsewhere if suitable)
- Officers making a point of talking to new people at practices
- Providing additional activities (eg a quiz) as part of striking competitions

We could organise separate social events, for example:

- A carol service (perhaps with hand bells) followed by tower bell ringing
- A half day local ringing outing, followed by a barbecue or other entertainment
- Quiz nights – often very popular
- An annual dinner – we had one in our centenary year
- Barn Dances
- Skittles or bowling
- A tower treasure hunt – A clue at each church, with the answer in the church grounds, and maybe ringing at some of them

We could provide more effective support services, for example:

- Activities aimed at young people – so we need to find out their needs
- Activities aimed at retired people – eg daytime practices
- Support for individual towers when needed
- Organising quarter peals for people who need them
- Better use of the book stall – eg provide towers with a list in advance so they can decide what they need, publicise when it will be available, add new titles, provide more information about the content and uses of available publications.