

Ringling biographies – past, present and future?

Why record the lives of ringers?

Ringling is a vibrant, and in many ways modern activity, and ringers are rightly concerned with attracting new blood, advancing the art – and of course ringling. But we also share a long and rich heritage, and learning about our history can create a stronger sense of our identity and how we came to be here.

Countless ringers – many long forgotten – contributed to the evolution of ringling as we know it, and learning about their lives can add an extra dimension to our understanding, give texture to the ringling landscape and can put flesh on the factual narrative of what happened before we arrived.

The past

Writing about the lives of former ringers is not new. Over the last 150 years, *The Ringling World* and other journals regularly published obituaries and various series about living ringers, for example ‘Famous Ringers’ in *Church Bells and Bell News* and ‘Up and Coming Youngsters’ in *The Ringling World*.

Ringers’ lives have been documented in books – about individuals, or in collections such as John Eisel’s *Giants of the Exercise* (1999 & 2006).

The Central Council got involved with biographies in 1935 when a motion to: ‘*prepare records of past members of the Council, giving a short account of their work, and where possible a photograph*’ created the Biographies Committee.

The Council was nearly fifty years old then and 160 former members had already died. Over the next 70 years the Committee wrote 550 records but the backlog grew relentlessly to around 300 in the early 2000s. Then in the middle of a massive effort to clear the backlog (it came down to 30 before rising again) came a major change. In 2009 the inward looking 1935 remit was still in force: *To maintain an account of the work and general ringling activities of past and present Council members* – out of step with the Council’s role to serve the whole ringling community – so it was changed to: ‘... *past and present ringers*’. At a stroke, the Committee’s task became bigger. It was also open ended – how was it possible to decide which ringers to include?

In 2014 the remit was extended to make it even more outward looking by adding: ‘... *to make the information created available to ringers and the wider public, and to foster an interest in the history of ringling*’.

The first move driven by the new

perspective was to put all biographies online, making them far more accessible than they had been just in the Council Library.

The present

Most of the 960 current biographies, are still of former Council members (that’s inevitable given the history) but a handful of others have been added in recent years: 22 are ringers who predated the Council and 5 are ‘modern’ ringers. But that’s still tiny compared with the potential number of ringers whose lives could be covered.

In 2018 Biographies work was absorbed into the History and Archive Workgroup as part of its broader remit: (1) *to develop and manage a comprehensive historical and reference resource relating to ringers and all aspects of ringling* and (2) *to make these resources as widely known and appreciated as possible within the ringling community and more generally*.

The ethos of the new workgroups is different from the old committees, which were almost entirely manned by Council members and focused on doing things themselves. The workgroups are open to anyone, and are expected to be more collaborative if it helps to achieve the objective. So the biographies team has been considering the way ahead.

The future

We are working towards providing access to a comprehensive online biographic resource that integrates:

- The current biographies collection – expanded to cover more ringers.
- Prolific Peal Ringer articles – written by Bill Butler before he died, telling around 50 stories of ringers who had rung 1,000 peals.
- Obituaries – over 12,000 of which were published by *The Ringling World* and its predecessors. John Eisel (former Library Steward) and Chris Ridley originally developed a comprehensive index (currently being updated) but it only lists journal/issue/page leaving the user to track down the article (in print or on the DVDs) but we are developing the ability to link direct to the articles.
- War casualty stories – researched and published by Alan Regin in the run up to 2018, short life histories of around 1,000 ringers killed in World War I.

The other part of our review was into how new biographies are produced, and we concluded that the previous model where the central team researches and writes everything itself is not viable if we want to provide a comprehensive and growing resource. It was just about viable (with a bigger team) when the scope was limited to Council members

but it is not practical with the much wider scope of ringers in general (unless a lot more people volunteer to join the team).

We looked at two possible ideas:

1 – Recruit the services of many ‘associates’ who do not wish to be full members of the workgroup but would be willing to contribute to its work by researching and writing about ringers connected with their area, or ringers in whom they had some particular interest.

The Biographies Committee did this on a very small scale but it would require far more than a handful of external authors to have a significant overall impact.

2 – Provide a ‘hub’ for a network of biographic collections, possibly associated with ringling societies. That would need societies (or maybe individual historians) who either have such collections already or would be willing to create them, and who would want them to be part of the network.

There are many ways such a network could be implemented. Each collection could be separately hosted with the hub providing a global index to link users to resources, or the nodes could be hosted along with the hub while appearing as separate identities when seen by users.

Some questions

To help us plan we would welcome comments on what has been done so far. Do you think our ideas for the future are sensible? Do you have better ideas?

If in the future you needed to look for ringling biographies (for example to provide some historical background to a local project) how comprehensive a resource would you like to be available, and what sort of facilities would you expect to be provided?

If you think you might be interested in this area of work (or already are in some way) then please let us know. Might you be willing to help? Might you be interested in the idea of a satellite?

We hope this article will elicit ideas and reactions from the ringling community about the way ahead for this work. In particular we would like to hear from you if you have any suggestions (or offers of help).

If you feel our work could make a contribution to promoting the wider public’s interest in ringling, then let us know how you think we could help.

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The biographies collection is currently on a development site and will in due course move to a cccbr.org.uk address, see: bellringinghistory.org.uk/Biog.aspx

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