

## Peals rung on simulators: time to recognise them?

by John Norris (*constructor and owner of the Wickham Ring*)

In 1995, when this issue first arose, the Central Council voted to exclude from the Peals Analysis a peal of Major rung at Pagham, a six bell tower, using simulated sound and two dumbbells. The decision was taken on the basis that the peal did not comply with Condition (D)B.2 “that peals of Major shall be rung on eight bells”, although arguably this condition was originally drawn up to formulate the number of bells on which such peals should be rung, not the nature of the bells themselves. In recommending exclusion of the Pagham peal, the Peals Analysis committee added that “the Council might wish to consider the suitability of the use of simulators in peal ringing.” A formal consideration has yet to take place.

In 2003 the Council decided that a peal rung at the Marches Teaching Belfry on 29th December 2002 should not be included in the Analysis. The 2003 minutes make no reference to the earlier Pagham decision and it isn't clear from the contributions reported in the minutes exactly what motives prompted individual representatives to vote for exclusion. However, the absence of real bells struck by clappers in conventional manner appears to have been a significant factor.

Since then there have been more such peals; one in 2010 and four so far in 2011. More are in prospect. Hence the suggestion implied in the title that it may be time for the Council to look at the issue again, and indeed to follow the advice of the Peals Analysis committee in 1995.

Those ringers who have taken part in such peals know they have rung peals. They have rung with rope and wheel in conventional tower or miniring manner, just as if there were real bells present. The intellectual effort was identical; the sound, synthesised from digitised recordings of real bells, fell well within the range of sound experienced from different towers and bells. No electronic assistance of any kind was given to the ringers, beyond the generation of the sound at the points appropriate to the actual movement of the individual bell wheels.

However, there are no doubt some ringers, probably many, for whom there is an irreducible minimum – that a peal can only be rung on real bells, made of bronze, with internal swinging clappers, turning full circle in the traditional manner. Nothing less will do. Leaving aside handbell peals, there is a powerful analogy to set against this view: Many churches now have modern pipe-replicating electronic organs where the sound is generated from digitised recordings, as is done in ringing simulators such as *Abel*. Such organs are played just like, and in the best cases sound extremely like, pipe organs. An expert might be able to detect that such an instrument wasn't a real pipe organ but to the average listener any difference would be unnoticed or negligible. No organist giving a recital on such an instrument would argue that

he or she hadn't given a recital and no member of the audience would argue that they hadn't heard one. The essentials are that the method of performing should be right and that the sound should be right. There is a clear and close parallel here with peals rung on tied bells or dumbbells, with simulated sound.

The issue of why ringers would actually want to ring peals on simulators is a secondary one but it may be worth mentioning a few of the advantages, which apply in greater or lesser degree according to the nature of the simulator (dedicated dumbbell ring or miniring, tied tower bells, hybrid rings). For example,

- **Informal secular atmosphere, so more inviting to non-church-going recruits.**
- **Easy teaching/learning environment.**
- **An earlier start for those too small/young for tower bells.**
- **Minimal inconvenience to neighbours, due to low external sound levels.**
- **Ready availability, whenever required.**

Against acceptance, some might argue that to do so would encourage the increasing tendency towards secularisation in ringing. But ringing is already becoming more secular and one doesn't have to like that fact to recognise it. Churchgoing generally is falling and the survival of ringing depends increasingly on recruiting non-churchgoers as well as church-goers. Bell ringing has always been a slightly uneasy mix of the sacred and the secular. Arguably, it is a worthy traditional art and craft activity worth fostering for its own sake, even without the religious connotation that is rightly important to very many ringers.

For better or worse, the Council already accepts handbell peals, miniring peals and tower bell peals rung in secular towers (for example, Manchester Town Hall, Imperial College and Quex Park).

Another possible objection is that accepting peals on simulators would open the door to further, less desirable, changes. This 'thin end of the wedge' argument has no doubt been around since the dawn of mankind. Change is all around us and we have to get used to weighing what is desirable, good or necessary and what is not, which is surely one of the reasons why we have a Central Council Methods Committee.

One other possible concern is that accepting peals rung on simulators could lead to the acceptance of lower ringing standards, since simulator peals are likely to be rung behind closed doors with little or no audible impact on the general public. There is no particular reason why this should be so. Ringers are taken on trust for the worthiness of peals they submit for publication and this should apply to miniring and simulator peals just as it does to tower peals. In addition to this, **simulator peals have one valuable inbuilt quality**

**control feature not available for tower bell peals** – the striking review facility offered by *Abel* and *Beltower*. This allows a complete peal to be saved, the striking display viewed, and the peal 'replayed' by the computer, exactly as struck when rung.

Any fears about falling standards could thus be allayed either by enforcing for simulator peals the tower bell condition that “the bells [in this case simulated] shall be audible outside the building in which they are contained” or by requiring the striking record to be saved, kept and made available on request, for example to the association Peal Secretary.

Another argument in favour of accepting simulator peals is that of conformity with other reporting bodies. Whatever the superior authority of the Central Council, it isn't helpful to its image to reject what more recent institutions like *Campanophile* and *PealBase* have no difficulty accepting. Nor is it helpful to the Exercise generally to have differing sets of statistics.

The purpose of this article is not to plead for change without consideration but to draw the attention of the Methods Committee to the matter and hope that they will give serious consideration to the issue and make well-argued recommendations to the Council, whether for change or for maintenance of the *status quo*.