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What's it all about

One of the services the Central Council provides for ringers is to act as the central repository for definitions and information about change ringing – methods and peals. That helps ringers to exchange information about ringing in another place or at another time, and to know what was meant. We benefit without realising it – for example if you visit a tower and are asked what you can ring then your reply will be understood.

Managing a shared resource carries with it the responsibility to ensure order, and since some aspects of ringing can be complex it can be harder than you might think to provide consistent ways to describe everything. The Council has always accepted this responsibility – and has been accused of exerting too much rather than too little control.

The Council has decided to review its approach (as embodied in the 'Decisions'), and wants to hear the views of ringers so that the result may satisfy as many of their needs as possible. That presents a problem because most ringers are unfamiliar with the Decisions, which are quite technical and rather long.

In this series of articles I will give an overview of the purpose and function of the Decisions, aimed mainly at non-technical ringers who are not already familiar with them. I will look at their role within the ringing community and explain some of the key features, as well as discussing some of the changes that have been suggested. I hope that I may help the majority of ringers who haven't so far been involved in the debate to understand what the fuss is about and to feel able to contribute to the review process.

The Decisions

As the name implies, the Council's 'Decisions' are things it has decided. They include several different things. Some decisions state the Council's approval or disapproval – for example it encourages ringing societies to have specialist advisors and bell restoration funds, it approves of muffled ringing for public mourning and good striking but it discourages breaking up good bells or installing electronic bell substitutes. Some decisions describe things the Council will do, for example look after Rolls of Honour or form beneficial alliances with other organisations. Those are pretty uncontentious. The heated debate is about the technical aspects – peals, methods and compositions – which account for some 85% of the words. Critics call them 'rules' but that is an over simplification and a bit misleading.

Definitions

Some Decisions are just definitions – they give precise meanings for specialist words (or

specialist uses of common words), which is sensible. To take a trivial example, the word 'change' is commonly used with two completely different meanings, but anyone involved with ringing theory uses two separate words to avoid confusion: A 'row' is a sequence of bells in order (eg 123456 or 324165) and a 'change' is the process that transforms (ie changes) one row into another. A method is defined in terms of its changes, which can be applied to any starting row.

Classification and codification

Some of the Decisions classify what we ring, for example methods are classified as 'Bob', 'Treble Bob', 'Surprise', etc based on their structure. These are more than mere definitions, they codify things in a way that represents choices about how they should be grouped and named. Over time these have changed as new classifications have been added and old ones have been dropped or merged. Classifications are useful because they simplify things and help to bring order, but they need to reflect the ringing community's needs or they can get in the way, as we shall see in a later article.

Requirements

Some Decisions do sound like rules. For example the 'conditions required for all peals' say that every bell must be rung by the same person throughout and that none of the ringers may use any physical memory aids. Most of these broadly reflect what ringers do anyway but a few seem questionable as we shall see.

One requirement is particularly problematic because it requires the methods rung to be as defined elsewhere in the Decisions, which makes it difficult to ring a peal in a new type of method that hasn't yet been described and classified.

How we got here

The Decisions originated in the Council's early years. In previous centuries ideas and terminology had spread through books and word of mouth but some ambiguity and contradiction was inevitable without a central reference.

The growth in change ringing and the greater organisation that came with territorial societies led to a desire for more order in the technical side of ringing. Sir AP Heywood once said that: 'of all the sciences, ringing is possessed of the most indefinite, most ambiguous and most inadequate phraseology'. This was one of his motives for forming the Central Council.

The early Council went well beyond standardising terminology and trying to provide consistent central records of performances. The 'Legitimate Methods Committee', defined what constituted a legitimate method and in the process condemned some things that had long been rung (and many things that we consider acceptable today) as illegitimate. In debate such methods were variously described as worthless and those who performed them as unworthy.

This authoritarian mindset may shock us today but that was in an era when society was more hierarchical and deferential than it is now. For example, one in twenty of the British population was in domestic service and

one in five Council members were clergymen (it's around one in a hundred today).

Another indication of the different ethos of ringing during those early years was the competitive nature of peal ringing, and the desire to rank the merits of different peals. The Council spent some time trying to devise a scoring system for the level of difficulty of a peal before abandoning the idea.

The Council still keeps records of peal ringing, but it is more as an indicator of the overall health and progress of ringing than to support competition between individual bands.

In the century since their creation, the Decisions have been greatly changed to bring them more into line with modern needs. Constraints have been removed and additional types of method have been added but the process has been problematic for various reasons that I will cover later.

The status quo

Despite a lot of effort to adapt the Decisions to the needs of modern ringing they still come in for criticism from both ends of the spectrum. Ringers at the cutting edge typically complain that the Decisions get in the way of innovation while the mass of ringers tend to see them as over complicated and remote from their needs. That is clearly not an ideal situation and it is why the Council wishes to review the Decisions.

Future articles will discuss: peals (compliant and non-compliant), methods (what's allowed and what's not), method naming (competing pressures/???), method extension (why it's difficult), quarter peals (their role alongside peals), our audience (and the implications) and finally some thoughts about what we might do.

John Harrison

(Cartoon by Yvonne Hall)

The Decisions are at:

<http://www.methods.org.uk/ccdecs.htm>

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Peals that comply ...

The Council long since stopped talking about 'accepting' or 'recognising' peals, and it has never 'approved' peals (though when you read some of the language used in debates in the early 20th century you get the impression that the individuals concerned would have liked some things to be banned – and a few ringers still think this way today).

In modern times the Council has tried to find a way to shed this image, most recently by replacing the Decision on recognition that said: 'The Council shall recognise all peals rung in complete conformity with parts A to D above' with a Decision on analysis that says: 'The Analysis shall include all peals published in *The Ringing World* and shall identify peals not complying with parts A to D above'.

That change was intended to avoid further criticism but it didn't because whatever they think of the Council, most ringers do care about recognition by the wider ringing community, so they do not like it when the custodian of the community's central standards refers to their performances in a way that seems to marginalise them.

What makes a peal compliant?

The 'conditions required for all peals' cover several different aspects. I've rearranged them into groups and simplified the wording.

About what is rung:

- Start and end with rounds
- No row rung twice in succession
- Every bell sounds in every row
- Methods etc conform to relevant Decisions

About what the ringers do:

- Continuous ringing
- Same person(s) ring each bell throughout
- Handbells to be retained in hand
- No physical memory aids
- No assistance from someone not ringing

About performance quality:

- Mis-call not corrected after it takes effect
- Shifts or errors immediately corrected

External to the ringers:

- Tower bells audible outside the building

Administrative:

- Any objection raised rapidly in writing

To a large degree these reflect what most people would do anyway so the question is whether the things they exclude really should be excluded. Let's look at what is and isn't.

Content

• *Start and end with rounds* – rules out for example calling the bells into Queens and ringing the peal starting and ending there (as some Devon call change 'peals' do). It would also rule out some quirky Triples compositions where each of the 5,040 possible rows is rung once starting from Rounds but where the 5,041st row would not be Rounds.

- *No row rung twice in succession* – rules

out for example the possibility of ringing a peal in whole pulls – something that might be particularly effective half muffled (and probably more difficult to ring – as well as being longer because 5,000+ changes would mean ringing 10,000+ rows).

• *Every bell sounds in every row* – reflects the physical limitation on the timing of bells rung full circle, which originally led to the development of change ringing. However, the physical limitation doesn't prevent a type of ringing called 'cylindrical' where instead of turning round at the back and front of a row bells continue in the same direction – hunting past the back and arriving at the front of the next row, or vice versa. Drawing the blue line needs cylindrical paper, hence the name. Cylindrical ringing is a much greater challenge with bells on opposite strokes, but the handling and sound is essentially like normal ringing.

• *Methods etc conform to Decisions* – I will discuss this in a separate article.

Conduct

• *Continuous ringing* – rules out stopping for a break like other performers do (say between movements of a symphony), something ringers have never done.

• *Same person(s) ring each bell throughout* – rules out ringing in relays, for example like they did in the 27 hour long extent of Major rung at Leeds, Kent in 1761.

• *Handbells must be retained in hand* – rules out ringing 'off the table' like some tune ringers do. It also rules out 'tapping' bells hung in a frame, for example the 13¾ hour 19,440 Kent Treble Bob Maximus performed by Elijah Roberts in 1837.

• *No physical memory aids* – rules out having the method or composition visible while ringing. Whether it rules out putting left or right foot forward to remember whether you are going in quick or slow in Stedman is an interesting question.

• *No assistance from someone not ringing* – rules out conducting from outside the circle or having standers behind. Whether it would rule out asking a passing warden to turn on the light or open a window is unclear.

Quality

• *Mis-call not to be corrected after it takes effect* – The actual wording is: '... later than during the change at which the call or change of method ... would properly take effect' so it applies to missed calls or method changes as well as to incorrect calls. That gives the conductor about 4 seconds to realise the mistake and make the necessary correction, or to set up the attempt. Putting the affected bells where they should be a few blows later or at the next lead is not permitted.

• *Any shift or error immediately corrected* – This is not a simplification – the Decision says: '... shall be corrected immediately' – but how rapid is 'immediate'?

A notable omission from the Decisions is any reference to that most important aspect of a ringing performance – the striking. Most conductors require a higher standard of striking for a formal performance than for general ringing, and most set a higher standard for a peal than for a shorter performance such as a quarter. Elsewhere in the Decisions (under recommendations to associations) the

desirability of accurate striking is mentioned so one might expect it also to be mentioned among the peal requirements.

Length

The Decisions specify the minimum length of a peal as 5,000 for Major and above, but 5,040 for Triples and below. 5,040 reflects the historical link with the extent of Triples, which would probably have been taken as the standard for all peals were it not for the fact that an exact 5,040 isn't possible with a lot of methods above Triples – hence the historic adoption of 5,000 as a convenient round number to act as a minimum. But this raises an obvious question. If 5,002 London Royal is a peal why should, say, 5,029 Grandsire Doubles not be a peal?

The Decisions impose another constraint for Triples and below, that the length be made up of whole extents (or multiple extent blocks). For Triples that rules out any length between 5,040 and 10,080, which seems unduly restrictive. For Minor it rules out peals of spliced Surprise with 14 different 360s (which were rung in the 19th century before the Council made the rule). For Doubles it means that 5,040, 5160 or 5280 are allowed but 5100, a length often rung on higher numbers to mark a 100th anniversary, is not (because it includes a 60). This too seems anomalous.

Other requirements

Other peal requirements include:

- *Minimum not allowed on handbells*
- *Only one cover bell*
- *Peals of 'spliced' must change methods at the lead and/or half lead*
- *Tower bells audible outside the building*

I'll discuss the latter in a future article.

Does compliance matter?

Anyone can ring and publish a peal that doesn't comply with the Decisions, and the Council has tried hard to remove the stigma associated with doing so, but the fact that the Council's Decisions still say 'all peals shall ...' gives a strong impression that anything that doesn't is somehow not a peal, or at least not a proper one.

The other substantive difference is that the Council doesn't recognise any method names given in non-compliant peals, something I will discuss in more detail in another article. I will also discuss an alternative approach to the tricky question of compliance.

John Harrison
(Cartoon by Yvonne Hall)

The Decisions are at:

<http://www.methods.org.uk/ccdecs.htm>

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Methods

The Decisions on methods, perform the important function of providing a clear framework for exchanging information about methods. Without an agreed language and set of constructs it would be much harder to do so concisely and unambiguously.

Definition and classification

The Decisions define the terminology used, giving precise meanings to technical terms like row, change, lead head, lead end, cross section, stage, hunt bell, working bell, round block, and so on. There's a bit more to it than that of course, since change ringing can get quite complex when you want to tie things down precisely.

They also describe a classification scheme, based on sets of common characteristics, that is used to group methods into different families (for example, Bob, Treble Bob, Surprise or principle).

The classifications have evolved over the years. As new types of method have been devised the classifications have been extended and refined to describe what has been rung. In addition, some categories of method that used to have separate classifications have been merged where the distinction no longer seemed useful, with the old class name often absorbed into the method name (eg 'Court' in Double Norwich Court Bob Major).

If the Decisions on methods provide a useful service why are they criticised? There are two broad reasons, one is that they impose some arbitrary constraints and the other is that they are 'prescriptive rather than descriptive', so let's look at each.

Constraints on methods

- *No more than four consecutive blows in the same place in a plain course (except Minimus).* – This rule became notorious during the Olympic year because it implied that Five Rings Triples – the method specially commissioned from musician Howard Skempton to mark the event – was not really a method. Making very long places is not an endearing feature of a method, but is it sufficiently worse than other unattractive features to merit being banned? What is special about four places, rather than three or five or any other number?

- *Plain course must be divisible into equal leads* – It is for most methods we ring but there are others for which it isn't, including so called 'rule based' or 'dynamic' methods where what the bells do depends on the position of several bells, not just the Treble. The most famous is Dixon's Bob Minor, which was rung in the early 19th century, long before the Council was formed.

- *Plain course must be a true round block* –

This sounds reasonable – after all, why would anyone want to ring a false method? But people don't usually ring plain courses in peals and there are methods with false plain courses that can produce true extents within a suitable touch. Methods that have fallen foul of this rule were never intended to be rung as plain courses but to be rung in peals of spliced where a few (true) leads can be used to achieve a desirable result, for example joining together different parts of a musical composition more effectively than using conventional methods. The peals are true, and surely it is the truth of the performance that matters, not the truth or falseness of blocks of rows that weren't rung.

Method types and a Catch 22

The method types included in the Decisions are based on classes of method that have been rung (in peals), and the Decisions require (compliant) peals to be rung using methods that have already been codified in the Decisions. This sets up a 'Catch 22' where it is impossible to ring a (compliant) peal using any other type of method. This is one reason for the accusation of being prescriptive.

Could the Decisions be extended to describe other types of method? They could, and over the years they have been, but the change has usually followed bitter argument, and the innovative peals in which the methods were first rung were branded non-compliant (or in earlier years were not accepted) when rung.

It isn't practical to attempt to define all possible types of method. We probably can't conceive of everything that might be invented in the future, and even if we could, trying to define and classify all conceivable types would be massively complicated and quite a bit of the result may never be used. So it seems sensible to concentrate on classifying and describing things that have been rung or which people want to ring, where the insights gained by those who devised, composed and rang the methods may well help in formulating the classification.

If classification is best done after things have been rung then it would seem sensible to remove the requirement for peals to contain methods that have already been classified, and break the 'Catch 22'. Then people could ring innovative methods without fear of their peals being non-compliant and it would remove pressure and dispute from the process of updating the method classifications.

Methods that don't fit

Inevitably with a tightly defined official classification of methods sooner or later someone will devise methods that don't fit. A good example was when 'link methods' were devised. They were intended to join together longer blocks of conventional methods and to switch around the order of the bells between blocks to achieve specific musical effects. Their unusual structure enabled them to do this more rapidly than using conventional methods.

These new methods were 'round pegs', that were difficult to classify using the 'square holes' of the Decisions. Some didn't fit at all, and in an attempt to legitimise them a new classification of 'non method block' was added to the Decisions. Needless to say,

telling people that their new methods had to be called non methods wasn't any more popular than telling them that their peals weren't really proper peals (as discussed last time). Some of the round pegs were squeezed, not very intuitively, into the square holes of existing classifications, but not all into the same ones. So what was devised as a family of new methods ended up spread around several classifications (including 'non-method').

More misfits

The introduction of non method blocks was intended as a catch all for anything that didn't fit within the confines of how the Decisions have classified methods so far, but it didn't even do that. As noted above, there are methods where the sequence of changes varies depending on the position of individual bells, but in a non method block (or any class of method covered by the Decisions) the sequence of changes is fixed in the absence of a call.

Another type of misfit is what are known as 'jump methods'. Everything I've discussed so far uses conventional changes where bells move no more than one place at a time. This was originally a physical restriction imposed by the dynamics of swinging bells, and it led to the mathematical richness and complexity of change ringing as we know it. But in jump methods, which have also been rung, one or more bells may move more than one place, which is quite easy to do with light tower bells or handbells. Those who have rung them say that the experience is much the same as ringing conventional methods. In the past, peals of such methods had to be published as 'miscellaneous performances' to satisfy the rules in the Decisions.

When devising a classification system there is a conflict between keeping it tidy and consistent on the one hand and ensuring that it can cover (or be extended to cover) all the things that people might want to ring on the other. In the past the Decisions erred on the side of tidiness, even to the extent of excluding things that had already been rung. Obviously this deters anyone wishing to ring other things. Should the balance now be moved in the other direction, towards inclusion rather than exclusion? In the next article I will discuss method naming.

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Method naming

Methods have names. We discovered that early in our ringing careers and it seems so obvious that they should have names because it would be more difficult if they didn't. But how do they get them?

In the beginning

Methods have been given names since the early days of ringing but there was no universal system of naming until the Central Council set about creating one. Ringing was essentially local, though there were books on ringing and some information was exchanged between centres. Some methods had more or less universally agreed names but others did not, and words that currently have specific meanings like Surprise or Delight were used very loosely.

To bring order to this situation, the committee responsible devised a systematic structure to classify methods. It was based on ideas that already existed but tidied up to fit into a more consistent. Methods were classified as either principles (where all bells do the same work) or methods (where one or more hunt bells do the same work every lead). Each of these was further subdivided into categories based on the structure (ie location of places within a lead). As noted in the previous article the categories have since been modified but we still have the familiar three part names that came from the categorisation – specific + type + stage (eg Cambridge + Surprise + Minor).

Naming is a privilege

A central naming scheme only works if once a name has been given everyone uses it. That makes naming a new method a privilege, because once a method has been named it can't be renamed, and the name can't be used for another method (unless it is an extension of it to another stage, which I will discuss later). So who decides on the name of a new method?

At first, the Council retained the right to name new methods for itself (and it renamed some existing methods whose former names it thought unsuitable) but it later stepped back from this autocratic position and allowed the band that rings the first peal of it to name it (but with the right to change any name considered to be unsuitable).

Since then the criteria have been broadened, and the Decisions currently specify two criteria for naming a new method – either ring it in a peal or (for Doubles and Minor) ring an extent of it.

It seems quite reasonable to restrict the naming privilege, given the permanency of the effect, and requiring it to be rung in a performance is one way to do that. Of course there is then the question of what type of

performance, and it is notable that the current criteria exclude performances shorter than peals such as date touches and quarter peals (which I will discuss in a later article).

Performer or creator?

It seems natural to grant the naming right to whoever introduces the method to ringing, but are the first performers the only ones who can make that claim? Where a method has been specifically created by a peal composer, to enable the composition to achieve a particular result, for example because of its musical or splicing qualities, would it not be more logical for the composer who devised the method to name it, since the new methods are effectively components of the peal composition?

In many cases the composer and deviser of the methods may be a member of the band that first rings the composition, but not necessarily so. If the first attempt were lost and another band then rang the composition they could give the new methods different names. Does that seem fair?

The situation could be avoided by enforcing complete secrecy until the composition with new methods had been successfully rung, though that might be hard to achieve. In any case do we want to encourage secrecy, or would a more open culture be more in keeping with the spirit of ringing?

Unique classification

Another naming issue is the desire for methods to be uniquely classified, which makes things tidier. That was almost certainly one of the goals motivating the Legitimate Methods Committee when it first set about classifying and renaming methods. Since then great care has always been taken to maintain separation between categories whenever a new classification has been added. As a result when you ring a new method although you can give it any (unused) specific name you like, the classification rules determine its family name (Plain, Surprise, Differential, etc). That works pretty well almost all of the time because most people broadly want to ring the same sort of things that have already been rung. But it can cause problems when ringers want to do something new and conceptually different.

As we saw in the previous article the strict classification system can force some methods to be categorised, and hence named in ways that may not reflect the intention of those who created them, by forcing 'round pegs into square holes' and maybe forcing related methods into several different categories.

Alternatives

If we went back to basics there are two completely different ways we could think about naming and categorising methods.

Option A (what we have now) starts with methods that exist in their own right. Composers select methods to build their compositions from the publicly available repertoire. If they want to use new methods then they add them to the public repertoire.

Option B starts with compositions. Composers structure their compositions using various components, and name the components to make their compositions easier to learn and ring. Where composers use the same components as other composers have

done they re-use names to make things simpler for themselves as well as for ringers and conductors. Otherwise they give suitable names to any components that don't already have a name in common use.

Although these options are radically different in concept, in practice there is a huge amount of overlap, assuming that everyone has ready access to lists of methods/components that have already been given names. The observable behaviour under the two regimes (give or take any slips) will be identical – as long as composers stick to types of method that have already been defined. The difference comes when composers use components of types that haven't already been defined. With no precedent to follow the composer will describe the new components in whatever way seems most logical, and will generally reflect the nature of the new components in the way they are named (for example the Link methods mentioned in the previous article).

If other composers follow suit with similar compositions using the new type of component, and the naming makes sense then they are likely to follow it (because it makes life simpler for them and everyone else).

Option B may seem strange to us, partly because it is different from what we are used to and partly because in most 'ordinary' ringing we just ring methods – either plain courses or touches so simple that the composition seems incidental. But is 'ordinary' ringing, which invariably involves the same old methods, a good guide for how to handle innovation, which is not 'ordinary'?

So what?

In this article I have tried to dig beneath the skin of naming and classification, seeking insights that might be helpful when trying to resolve the clashes between the desire for rigid classification and a better approach to handling innovation, which to a significant degree seems to hang on what things are called.

In the next article I will look at the problems of extension, where related methods at different stages share a name.

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The Decisions are at:

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Method extension

The Decisions include a fairly complex section on method extension. This is another area that can cause controversy, so let's look at what method extension is, and why it is criticised?

What is extension?

We recognise the likeness between some methods at different stages. They seem to form natural families and the common name that they share reflects this. Early in our ringing careers we met methods like Plain Bob and Grandsire, and when someone explained the pattern for relating together the versions for Doubles, Minor, Major, and so on, we could see it fitted into a neat pattern. When we went on to learn methods like Little Bob, St Clements Bob or Kent Treble Bob we find that they too extended in a systematic way and the patterns were fairly obvious once pointed out. They made sense to us so we probably didn't realise that different methods extend in slightly different ways. If we were asked to describe the rules that make extension work for methods in general, most of us would struggle.

Why is it difficult?

Method extension is quite a complex business once you get beyond simple things like Plain Bob. There are several different ways to generate what seems like an obvious relationship when you look at the result, and it can be quite hard to work out which of the ways that a method could be extended will be possible or produce a useful result. For many methods no one has discovered an obvious way to extend them, and often there isn't one.

I won't try to give a full explanation but you can get an idea if you imagine a lead of the method drawn on squared paper with the paths of the bells drawn in. Now notice where all the places are made – some are at the front, some at the back and some at various places in between. These places define the structure of the method (it's why people can use place notation to specify a method). Now add some extra columns of squares on the right of the paper to accommodate more bells. The question that the rules of extension try to answer is: Where should all the places be to preserve the essence of the original method?

There are several possibilities. Places might remain the same distance from the front or from the back or they might maintain their relationship to the path of the Treble. As well as places moving within the longer changes, some new places will be added if extra changes make the lead longer. Which options make sense, and whether any of them will work, depends on the particular method, ie on the original set of places.

Decisions on extension

The Decisions describe mechanisms for extending a method to form another method at a higher stage – a set of rules for how to generate the structure of the extended method from that of the parent. This is useful given the technical intricacy of the subject. But they also impose several constraints on whether the result is permitted or not.

The first requirement demands that an extension relationship must work for an indefinite number of stages – So even if Minor extends successfully at Major, Royal, Maximus and so on, but fails at (say) 22 then the method can't use that extension.

Other requirements specify various properties of the parent method that must be preserved in all of its extensions. I've simplified the wording to give a flavour. All extensions must preserve:

- The same type of symmetry
- The number of hunt bells (even extension)
- Whether or not it has Plain Bob lead heads
- The number of consecutive blows made by bells in related positions
- Equivalent places made or not made adjacent to path of hunt bell(s)
- Adjacent places made by working bells
- The number of groups of working bells that do the same work (and their size).

All of these features can contribute to whether or not methods at different stages feel related to each other, but should they all be mandatory?

Single step extension

Much of the content relates to extension by even steps (eg Minor to Major, Major to Royal, Major to Maximus, ...). As noted above, it is assumed that the number of hunt bells will be preserved (with path extended as appropriate) so the essence of the extension is about what the working bells do.

For extension by a step of one (eg Minor to Triples) the Decisions specify only one type of extension, from a single hunt plain method to twin hunt method, with everything above the hunt bell moved up to fit.

According to the logic of the Decisions Plain Bob Minor should extend to what we call Grandsire Triples, and it should be called Plain Bob Triples. The fact that we still call it Grandsire Triples is thanks to historical precedent – the Decisions acknowledge this as one of a short list of exceptions to the rule.

You might think that extending Plain Bob Minor to the method we know as Plain Bob Triples makes more sense. That might be because you've got used to it being that way, but it neatly demonstrates that there can be more than one 'obvious' way to extend a method. The reality of course is that there is no single 'right' way to extend a method.

Do we need rules on extension?

Given that ringers like the idea of sharing names between methods that seem related at different stages, and given that trying to work out how to do it can be quite complicated, there is a clear need for something to help do it. It would certainly not be sensible to throw away all the work that has gone into trying to make sense of extensions and the relationships behind them. So better questions would be about how the knowledge on extensions can be

most effective, about whether the relationships described in the Decisions are the only valid ones that should be used and about whether extensions should always be subject to every one of the constraints listed.

It has been suggested that instead of the information about extensions being presented as rules that must be obeyed, it could be presented as guidance to help people seeking satisfactory extensions to find them. This would recognise the fact that people may wish to use extension relationships other than the ones already described, and that in individual cases people may wish to make some compromises to get a workable extension.

If someone developed a new type of extension that looked like being more widely applicable then it would be sensible to add it to the guidance so that others may benefit from the accumulated wisdom of using it.

Would it work?

The reason for having central standards for the whole ringing community is to help bring order and coherence. Rules do that but in a heavy handed way. Would relegating information on extensions to that role of guidance open the gates to chaos and confusion, bearing in mind that once a method is named then the rest of the ringing community is expected to respect it, and creating a family of extensions ties up more than naming a single method?

It's easy to think of ways people can break any system, but experience suggests that the people who spend effort trying to break rules don't normally do so when the rules are removed and they are trusted to act responsibly.

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Quarter peals

The Central Council is criticised for focusing all its attention on peals and ignoring quarter peals. That is only partly true, since much of the Council's work benefits ringing in general, including quarter peal ringing. But it is certainly true of the Council's Decisions, which have a section on peals but nothing about quarter peals. Does that matter? Should the Council do more for quarter peal ringers, compared to what it does for peal ringers?

How we got here

The modern concept of a peal emerged around 300 years ago. Before that ringers called any performance a peal. The concept of truth (not repeating rows) was established much earlier, and ringers sought to ring what they called 'complete true peals', which we now call extents, on four, five and six. The move to ringing the extent on seven was a huge step in terms of endurance and concentration (3 hours v 25 minutes) and it was obvious that the next logical step could not realistically be ringing the extent of Major, which *Tintinnalugia* had declared to be 'altogether impossible'. So on higher numbers ringers shifted their goal from ringing extents to ringing a standard length, based on the length of an extent of Triples.

The fact that we have such comprehensive record of peals rung over the centuries since the modern concept of a peal emerged reflects the high regard that successive generations of ringers have had for these special performances, and for those who ring them. It is also a tribute to the diligence of record keepers and historical researchers, no doubt motivated by the same high regard for peals.

When the Council was formed in the late 1800s, the peal had been established as the gold standard ringing performance for nearly two centuries. People reported a few quarter peals and 720s of minor, but nothing like on the same scale as peals. Quarter peals became popular much more recently. Around the time that the Council originally formulated the Decisions something like three times as many peals as quarter peals were published but that has now reversed with nearer to three times as many quarters published as peals.

Quarters are not just more numerous now, far more ringers take part in them as well – something like one in three of all ringers compared with one in ten for peals. In that sense quarters are more closely linked to everyday ringing. But the peal is still the gold standard, and even though many ringers don't aspire to ringing one most recognise the achievement of those who do. The difference with a hundred years ago is that as well as the gold standard we also have a highly respected

silver standard in the quarter peal.

The Decisions only refer to peals but in practice most ringers apply them informally to quarter peals (dividing by 4 where appropriate), so do the Decisions need to mention quarter peals explicitly? There is one important respect where the Decisions do marginalise quarter peals – method naming.

Method naming

I discussed method naming in an earlier article, and noted that the Decisions specify two alternative requirements for the privilege of naming a method: either ring it in a peal or ring an extent of it. The second criterion applies to Doubles/Minor, and allows a method to be named in a quarter providing it includes a whole 120/720 of the method. But for anything above Minor it has to be a peal. Even ringing a Triples or Major method for a whole quarter peal doesn't currently entitle the band to name it whereas ringing just one lead of it in a peal of spliced would. Is this fair.

This anomaly could be removed by changing the requirement (for Triples and above) from ringing the method in a peal to ringing it in a quarter peal. That would still require a longer performance than an extent of Minor or Doubles but the whole performance would not need to be in the one method.

Compliance again

There's a bit more to it though – the current Decisions not only require a peal length to be rung to name a method, the peal must also comply with all the constraints imposed, which I discussed in an earlier article.

Last time someone suggested to the Council that method naming should be allowed in quarter peals two objections were raised – from opposite perspectives:

- One – speaking for the rule makers; – said that a quarter peal would have to be 'defined', by implication with lots of requirements specified like there are for peals.

- The other – speaking from a quarter peal ringer's perspective – said that they didn't want all the peal rules applied to quarter peals.

The second point was perhaps more telling. Did it mean that quarter peal ringing is some sort of wild-west outlaw activity, best left unregulated? Or was it merely an indication that there is something wrong with the over restrictive regulation of peals? As noted above, the vast majority of quarter peal ringers apply the basic criteria for peals to quarters anyway. So if the issues that I discussed in the article about peals can be resolved, perhaps quarter peal ringers would be happy to be included.

Records

Another way the Council could engage with quarter peal ringers would be to provide formal analysis and records of quarters, as it already does for peals. Currently the only public analysis of quarter peals is produced by Alan Buswell. Should the Council be relying on a private individual to fill a gap in the service that ringers could reasonably expect it to provide?

The much greater workload involved in analysing quarter peals has in the past been cited as a reason for only analysing peals, but the advent of BellBoard makes analysis and reporting of all ringing performances much

easier than it has been in the paper era.

Of course analysis relies on reporting. Ringers rightly expect the Council to produce accurate records and analysis, but that in turn depends on the accuracy and completeness of the performance reports published by the bands who ring them. Currently quarter peal reporting is less rigorous than peal reporting, possibly because of the lower status accorded to quarter peals. For example, while peal reports almost always use standardised 'peal names' (eg Frederick J Smith) there is much less consistency of names used in quarter peal reports (eg Fred Smith, Freddie Smith, F J Smith as well as Frederick J Smith). That makes it harder for an analysis to determine, for example, how many people ring quarter peals or the turnover of quarter peal ringers from year to year. If the Council took more interest in quarter peal ringing then it could maybe encourage ringers to be more consistent in their reporting, knowing that it would lead to better information about the state of ringing.

John Harrison

(Cartoon by Yvonne Hall)

The Decisions are at:

<http://www.methods.org.uk/ccdecs.htm>

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Who's listening to us?

Among the 'conditions required for all peals' in the Central Council's Decisions is one that requires tower bells to be audible outside the building containing them. For service ringing that scarcely needs stating, but the Decisions aren't about service ringing they are about peals, most of which are not rung for services.

Many churches are surrounded by houses or offices where three hours solid ringing would be a major nuisance or perhaps intolerable. To make peal ringing possible at such towers there may be shutters to reduce the sound, though it can still be heard near the tower.

What would happen if you rang a peal at such a tower and then discovered that the traffic had been so loud that it drowned out the sound of the bells so they weren't audible? Would the peal be non-compliant?

Installing shutters is a costly option not available to all towers and it is much cheaper to tie the clappers and generate the sound in the ringing room electronically. The ringers hear, see, do and feel the same as normal but there is no sound outside to disturb anyone. With no sound outside a peal rung at such a tower would definitely be non-compliant.

Around 20% of peals are rung on handbells. They are invariably performed in private and aren't audible outside the building, but they are deemed compliant because the Decisions only require external audibility for tower bells.

Does this all make sense? Is it really important for peals to be audible outside and if so why doesn't it apply to all peals?

Who are we performing for?

Requiring external audibility suggests a concern for the needs of the audience, but that raises the question: who are we ringing for when we ring a peal?

Ringing is a performing art but it differs from most other performing arts in several ways, notably the way that we relate (or rather don't relate) to our audience. How often do we think about our audience when ringing? How often do we know who is listening or even whether anyone is listening at all? If you asked those questions of any other performers can you imagine that their answers would be the same as those of a ringer?

In a concert the audience sits in front of the performers and (most of) those present will have paid to be there. In informal settings like a bandstand or jazz club the audience comes and goes but the performers can still see them, and if everyone left they would quite probably stop playing. Even musicians in a studio are aware of their audience, and they get feedback via audience ratings or record sales. If for any reason the recording or broadcast equipment

stopped working then they would almost certainly stop playing until it was fixed.

But ringers are different. We can't usually see our audience and the only time we might stop when they've gone away is after a wedding. In a performance like a peal or quarter we ring on regardless, whether anyone is listening or not. In fact many peals are rung at towers specifically chosen because few if any people are likely to hear or be disturbed by the ringing.

Of course some peals are rung specifically for public events and are publicised as such in the community around the tower (not because the Decisions say so but because it makes sense) but the vast majority are not. They are rung primarily for the satisfaction of the performers, and whether or not anyone else hears is incidental. That is a very different ethos from other performance arts.

So why impose the requirement?

There must have been a reason why the requirement of external audibility was added. Do we know what it was?

In 1950 when the Council consolidated various decisions that had been made from time to time the requirement for external audibility applied to: 'a peal rung to surpass a previous peal', in other words a record length peal. In 1968, as part of a major revision, external audibility was added to the requirement for any tower bell peal to be recognised (roughly equivalent to what is now termed compliant).

The requirement for a record peal to be audible is easier to understand. Record performances in any activity are open to greater scrutiny, and external audibility coupled with the requirement to give prior notice, means that anyone interested can listen outside. However, that is merely a way of achieving the real requirement, which is stated explicitly for record length peals in hand, namely: 'arrangements must be made so that the ringing can be heard by interested parties'.

It is less clear (and I can find no rationale in the reports and minutes) why the requirement was then imposed on all peals. A possible reason is that knowing the performance might be heard by someone outside would remove the temptation to 'cheat' by reporting a peal incorrectly or ringing one of too low a standard. That seems a little implausible though. If conductors can't be trusted to report peals honestly then they should all have an umpire, not rely on the off chance that someone competent to judge the accuracy and or quality might happen to be passing. In any case, the fact that reports of handbell peals rung in private are accepted implies that we do trust conductors to be honest.

Does it matter?

For the vast majority of tower bell peals it doesn't matter because the bells are audible outside anyway. The impact is felt in towers where the only practical way of meeting the requirements of good neighbourliness makes the ringing inaudible outside, either because traffic drowns what little sound leaks through shutters or because the internal sound is generated electronically.

In a noise conscious society the number of such towers will increase. Is it reasonable for

peals rung in them to be treated as abnormal?

Would it be better to go back to the requirement for external audibility only applying to record length peals? Or would it be simpler to go one step further and instead of external audibility extend the requirement to make arrangements for interested parties to hear the ringing [in comfort] to all record peals in the tower as well as in hand?

John Harrison

(Cartoon by Yvonne Hall)

The Decisions are at:

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What to do now?

In these articles I have talked about the role of a central repository for information and standards on the technical aspects of ringing. I have given a brief overview of what is covered by the Central Council's Decisions on methods and peals and I have explained some of the reasons they are criticised. There is a fairly broad consensus that change is needed, but how much should change and how it should change is less clear cut. Even those who criticise the Decisions have a range of views about how radically they should be changed.

It's not surprising that we have different personal preferences, but the task of those who revise the Decisions is to determine how best to meet the needs of the ringing community as a whole, with something that will command the widespread respect of ringers despite their range of personal preferences.

In this final article I will summarise some of the possible changes and discuss areas where the right compromise might be hard to find.

Prescription

Ways the Decisions could be made less prescriptive include:

- Recognise performances that use types of method not yet codified in the Decisions.
- Support definition of new types of method.
- Providing advice on ways that methods can be extended rather than requiring them to be extended in ways already codified in the Decisions.

These changes would have avoided many historic conflicts where methods were either outlawed or forced to be reclassified in ways that didn't reflect the essence of what was rung. The more open approach would be welcomed by many but it could introduce ambiguities. Is that important?

Inclusiveness

Ways in which the Council could engage with a broader section of the ringing community include:

- Allow methods to be named by ringing them in quarter peals.
- Provide appropriate routine analysis reporting of quarter peals as well as peals.
- Making it easier to innovate without 'breaking the rules'

These would help the Council to seem less remote from rank and file ringers as well as leading edge ringers.

Arbitrariness

There are many arbitrary constraints that could be removed from the Decisions, for example:

- Rationalise peal length for all stages.
- Require true performances not methods.
- Remove external audibility requirement
- Remove four blow limit in methods

These rules have some staunch defenders, but would their loss materially undermine the essence of ringing?

Performance standards

A tricky area on which to obtain a consensus may be the requirements for performances. I listed the current ones in the second article along with examples of what sort of thing they exclude.

During recent discussions about possible changes, several people mentioned 'lines in the sand' beyond which they felt any relaxation should not go. In contemporary politics these might be termed 'red lines'. The problem of course is that different people put their red lines in different places. The only way the Council could avoid stepping over anyone's red line would be to take the most restrictive stance, as the current Decisions tend to. But doing that excludes a lot of things that many ringers would be happy to accept. Alternatively, if the Council took a less restrictive stance there would no doubt be some who accused it of devaluing the peal standard, and demeaning the achievement of those who have rung peals in the past.

It is a dilemma that can't be solved just by changing words (for example from acceptance to compliance or to any other term separating 'in' from 'out'). Is there a way to include more performances without devaluing the achievement of others? An approach has been suggested (outlined below) but hasn't yet been tested by public opinion.

Norms and reporting

A peal of 23 spliced all the work Surprise Major is clearly more of an achievement than a peal of Plain Bob Major (assuming ringers of comparable ability). Reporting both as peals does not undermine the achievement of the former because each report makes it clear what was rung so they can be judged independently on their merits. The standing of the respective performers is based on what they achieved, and is neither diluted nor enhanced by the fact that their performances share the name 'peal'.

A lot of the attributes of peals are not mentioned explicitly, but they are taken as read because everyone assumes they apply. If someone published a peal that didn't conform to these expectations it would be considered dishonest, and if the practice became widespread it would indeed undermine the peal as a respected standard.

But what if a peal were published, openly stating how it differed from the norm? Obviously it could be judged on its merits. Would it undermine the value of other peals? We accept that some differences from the norm will be declared in the performance report, for example 'all the work', 'silent and non-conducted' or 'rung blindfolded'. These features too are judged on their merits, and don't change our assumptions about the status of peals in general.

Most of our expectations about how peals are rung feature in the Council's Decisions as 'requirements for all peals'. But stating them as 'requirements' draws a line with 'peals' on one side and something else (currently 'non-compliant peals') on the other side – like sheep and goats. The alternative approach would be to define these features not as 'requirements'

but as 'norms' – things that can be assumed unless stated otherwise in the report. That could allow the whole spectrum of performances to be reported on an equal footing, with the onus on the conductor to report any aspect that differed from the norm. Nothing would be hidden and everything could be judged on its merits.

Records and analysis

The Council would still have to decide whether, and if so how, to take account in its analysis of the fact that some peals rung differ from the norm. In practice the number of such performances is likely to be extremely small, whether in the 'easy' direction, such as ringing in relays or calling from outside the circle, the 'hard' direction, such as ringing non-conducted or ringing blindfolded, or neutral, such as ringing dumbbells with simulated sound. So while it might be worth noting performances that differ from the norm it is unlikely to be worth separating them out from the main statistical analyses in terms of the overall picture.

Quality

In the earlier article I mentioned the very stringent requirements stated in the Decisions for the correction of calling or method errors, and the absence of any requirement for good striking in performances. In reality (with the exception of record performances that have umpires) ringing performances are not policed – conductors are trusted to apply appropriate standards. Most of them do, though a few may not. Some conductors apply a slightly higher standard for peals than for shorter performances, and almost certainly some conductors have applied a higher or lower standard in exceptional circumstances. Should the Decisions remind conductors of this responsibility?

The way forward

I hope these articles have helped to bring alive for rank and file ringers some of the issues that have been exercising specialists for quite a while. Inevitably I have had to simplify a lot and could not cover everything.

I was motivated to write the articles not just because I think we need change, but because I feel strongly that the standards at the heart of change ringing should not be seen as the private preserve of experts. The experts may use their skills to develop and maintain the detail but ringers at large should understand the broad principles and should have a voice if they feel that things need changing.

Obviously I have my own thoughts about the direction in which we might move, some of which I have hinted at, but I hope I have managed to present a reasonably balanced view that will enable you to find out more and form your own views.

*John Harrison
(Cartoon by Yvonne Hall)*

The Decisions are at:

<http://www.methods.org.uk/ccdecs.htm>

Information on the Initial (October 2015) consultation is at:

<http://cccbr.org.uk/methods/oct-2015-consultation-feedback.php>