

A Virtual Phenomenon

As the Coronavirus guidance regarding social distancing and access to churches has meant that ringing in the real world has been stopped until such time as it is safe to return, bellringers across the world have been finding innovative ways of keeping in touch and keeping their ringing skills sharp.

Essex is no exception with some really good pockets of activity, both ringing and social, taking place. Following a recent Zoom meeting with various members of the Management Committee, Essex Ringing Course Tutors and other interested parties, it was clear that there was quite a diverse range of activities and quite a variety of feelings with regard to value of virtual ringing platforms.

I asked each District Master to send me details of what was going on in their district, how towers, groups, and the districts were keeping in touch with their ringers and if there was anything else that the Association could and should be doing to maintain enthusiasm for ringing during lockdown, so that when we do return to ringing for real, we won't have undone all that good work from the Ringing Remembers recruitment campaign.

The following is a summary of the tools and activities that are happening across the Association, and for those of you not already connected, maybe it will give you some ideas to join in with or set up your own. This is not a recommendation for any particular product as there are many different ones available and you would need to research what best works for you.

It seemed that a number of individual towers/groups had set up a WhatsApp group for keeping in touch. This is a free service text and voice messaging app that can be downloaded on smartphones and lets you create groups to communicate with.



Others use email to send messages, but of course this doesn't give you real time responses and is



probably a bit more clunky to manage with larger groups of people. Facebook groups were also mentioned as a way of staying in touch with allows either an open or closed group to see and comment on posts but you do need to have a Facebook account to participate.



Zoom seems to be the meeting platform of choice for most groups, although some use Skype, Chime or others. Zoom is a cloud-based video conferencing service you can use to virtually meet with others - either by video or audio-only or both, all while conducting live chats and is free for 40 minutes. You don't need to have a Zoom account, only the person setting up the meeting. You set up a meeting and send the meeting details to your list of invitees who need the ID and password to log into your meeting. I have discovered a useful way of circumventing the 40 minute problem though: when your Zoom meeting expires, you can log back in using the same meeting details without needing to set up a new meeting. Alternatively, you could pay for a licence which would give you unlimited time if you prefer.



Some groups are hosting regular online quizzes or virtual pub sessions, using Zoom or other meeting platform. This has been a great way to keep in touch socially. Themed nights have also proved entertaining.

One district is trying to maintain some semblance of district ringing activity by hosting district practices using Zoom and the Ringing Room virtual ringing platform on the same evening that the district calendar had booked a practice. This has proved quite popular in getting different groups of people together and trying to maintain bellringing skills.



Ringing Room is a virtual bellringing platform site built for change ringers to continue ringing with one another even when socially distanced and is free to use although you do need to set up an account. Once you've created an account, you'll be able to ring in any virtual tower that you have the tower ID for. If you are used to using Abel then this will be easier for you to adjust to. Bells can be assigned to those who are logged into the tower and you use keyboard

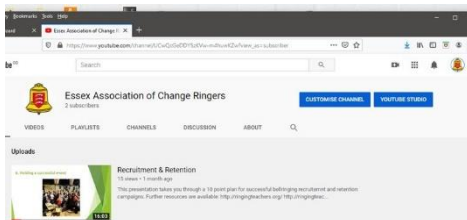
keys to ring your bell. It is usual to have a meeting platform (Zoom etc) running alongside to enable communication and instruction, although there is a Chat facility and some hot key instructions that can be used. Ringing Room runs better on a PC or laptop rather than a mobile phone or tablet and runs better on Google Chrome or Safari; Firefox (v75 or later) and the latest version of Microsoft Edge. You can change the number of bells you want in your tower and use it in handbell mode as well.

Handbell Stadium is another virtual platform that works with little motion controllers that plug into USB ports. They allow a realistic up/down action for simulated handbell ringing. The 3D version of Handbell Stadium gives a much more realistic experience than ringing with Abel.



We are also in the process of setting up an EACR YouTube channel as well

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwQcGeDDYSzKVw-m4huwKZw> . We could use this to



showcase ringing events and activities, and post tutorials, presentations and use for live streaming. We are hoping that some of the Essex Course tutors will share some of their theory presentations this way in due course.

I hope this has given you an insight into some of the possibilities for keeping in touch with each other during this uncertain time if you haven't tried anything yet. We don't know yet when we will be allowed back into churches to start ringing again, so in the meantime, it is important that we keep the enthusiasm going.

If you have any other ideas, or suggestions, I would be very pleased to hear from you.

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