

# Success is not a finish line – Reflections on a good year

By Lucas Williams

At the start of this academic year, the Birmingham Universities Society (BUSCR) faced a daunting reality: many experienced ringers had graduated or moved away, leaving just four student ringers to carry on. Despite these challenges, our year has turned into one of the most successful recruitment periods in recent memory. With the support of ART, the local guild, and a lot of community assistance, we've not only replenished our numbers but laid the groundwork for long-term growth and sustainability. We have done our best to set out some factors we believe to have been key to our success this year, in the hope they may be able to help your society/tower/region too!

## First impressions matter

Before we even met a single recruit, we began by transforming our ringing room. A dusty, cluttered tower tells potential learners that this is a forgotten space. If your ringing room has piles of dusty old annual reports and hooks on the walls taken up with manky old ropes – start there! We cleared out old materials, freshened up the environment, and used clean, visually appealing Central Council pop-up banners to create a welcoming and professional space. Just as importantly, we made sure those welcoming new faces to the tower were friendly, encouraging faces who gave a positive first impression. Consider carefully who to ask to support your recruitment event, some ringers are very useful in other ways but might not necessarily be the most immediately welcoming greeter at the tower door

## Don't be afraid to ask for help

We actively sought support from: Association of Ringing Teachers website online teaching resources, teaching handling courses and financially from the University Package they provide

- Local guild bell fund
- Ringers with trade and teaching expertise for everything from tower maintenance to teaching strategies

It's vital to create a space where learners feel encouraged, not intimidated. Too often, potential learners are driven away by an atmosphere dominated by a few personalities. We chose to build a team of patient and enthusiastic helpers who make the environment welcoming.

## Think from a learner's perspective

With a high learner-to-teacher ratio, we used creative methods to minimise the time they were sitting out doing



BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITIES  
SOCIETY OF CHANGE RINGERS

Top: A sunny spring Sunday social event in May  
Centre: At the last practice  
Left: Branded clothing in a range of colours  
Opposite page: Ringing at St Matthias, Malvern Link. (photos Lucas Williams)





nothing. Handbells allowed parallel progress, and structured rotations ensured everyone got meaningful time with an instructor. We also deliberately assigned someone to chat with learners during downtime, making everyone feel involved.

To further help occupy the learner's time we introduced a cake break at every session – complete with a rota for baking – instilling early commitment and sense of community.

We aren't saying any of these specific problems and solutions will work for you, but you need to apply the principle of trying to think about what learners are experiencing.

### More is more

Rather than relying on a single weekly practice, we committed to:

- Two evening practices per week
- Sunday quarter peals or masterclasses

This intensive schedule allowed focussed, faster development of the most promising learners, who soon became useful fill-ins for the other learners, strengthening the group from within. The pace was challenging but deeply rewarding.

### Create a community, immediately

We knew our new learners might not become Sunday service ringers immediately, but they needed to feel part of the group from day one. Everyone joined a WhatsApp group where we shared fun content and ringing resources, encouraging banter and connection.

We also planned a full social calendar, including a Halloween quiz, Christmas meal, BBQ and a small tower outing. Even with a small group, visible fun encouraged consistent attendance – and made others want to be part of it. Polos and fleeces with our logo on were really popular.

### Plan for the long term

Sustainability was front of mind. We asked:

- Will the tower have enough ringers to be viable in  $x$  years? It takes years to train

someone up, so you must think years in advance.

- Who will care for the bells once our current steeple keeper leaves? Are we training learners in the practicalities of tower maintenance?
- Do we have funding set aside for new ropes? Start saving then!

We invested early in equipment repairs and training – knowing that future ringers will benefit from the effort. Taking advantage of a productive year we raised funds and used grants to refurbish the handbells, rebush the clappers, and purchase replacement stays

## We introduced a cake break at every session

### Results and reflections

Thanks to our efforts:

We hosted three well-attended taster sessions with over 40 participants

- 15 new recruits are attending regular practices and making real progress
- We have rung nine successful quarter peals for new learners
- Received the ART Youth Group award for our recruitment
- We've built a culture that is friendly, active, and resilient

Perhaps the most important lesson? Success is not a finish line. If we stop nurturing the environment we've built, it will fade. So we celebrate the wins—and then get back to work, ready to do it all again next year.

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