

A word with an ART Award winner – Liz Christian

by Rachel Naylor

Last month I spoke with Max Drinkwater, a ringing priest, about the relationship between the church and ringers. That got me thinking about relationships in general within the tower. How important are those relationships, and what difference do they make to the way people experience ringing?

Who better to speak to than Elizabeth Christian, the joint 2025 winner of the ART Award for Inspiring Leadership in Ringing. Liz is well known for the thoughtful way she plans her weekly practice sessions. By combining fun with improvement, she has helped grow tower numbers from four to 18. She currently leads the bellsashen Teaching Hub in Suffolk, alongside her husband, Podge. (Liz assures me that is the name I should use for him!)

Liz started ringing at the age of 10 and inspired members of her family to learn too. For Liz, ringing has always been about the people around her and the sense of belonging that comes from being part of a team.

I suspect Liz's teaching background has helped her create a positive environment in which every individual can thrive. It seemed a natural place to start by asking Liz about the award and what it meant to her.

Tell us about the ART Award

Oh, it was a total surprise! My husband (the experienced ringer) and I teach together. He asked another ringer about the award, and a few people were keen to put me forward for it. After nearly 50 years of ringing, I don't really think of myself in that way!

I only found out about the award shortly before it was announced. As a teacher, you're always looking for the strengths in other people, so I never really think that I'm doing anything particularly important myself. It was a lovely surprise. I'm just being me in the tower, and it was wonderful to discover that other people had recognised something in me.

How would you describe your leadership style?

People at school always used to call me the 'bag lady'. The children knew I would always arrive with a bag full of things we could use. Well, in ringing I still have a bag! I've got resources like dice and a tub of bottle tops, and I always have my session plan written out and highlighted.

I write down the focus for each session and share it with the group, so everyone knows what we're working towards. The session keeps moving, there are no gaps, and everything builds as we go along. Everyone is part of it, and nobody has to wait too long for their turn to ring. If the plan isn't working, we'll go off on a sidetrack. I'm not afraid to change things if that's what the group needs. I ask lots of open questions, and everyone knows they can comment and contribute. It's important to me that people feel they're part of what we're doing.

Do you use ART resources and tools?

Oh yes, everything is ART through and through! I love ART because it encourages you to be creative and think outside the box. As schoolteachers, you get used to thinking that way. You have to engage everyone, work out what does and doesn't work, and then adapt. ART gives you the freedom to do that.

I think sometimes people panic when it comes to ART as they can't see how the Foundation Skills fit with ringing a bell. I can see it's all interlinked and you build up so much more bell control. Someone



once said to me, 'We can only ring call changes if you do it this way,' but that's not true. Variety is important.

I particularly like *The Teachers' Guide to Learning the Ropes* and *The Ringers' Guide to Learning the Ropes*, as well as the personal logbooks. They're really useful resources, and I like having something that learners can use to see their own progress.

How do you strike the balance between fun and improvement?

We have open questions in our towers and make space for people to ask us anything. It's important that everyone feels able to speak up and say what they think. We always give feedback, both positive and practical. Usually, we give proactive feedback to the whole group, so everyone

can learn from it. If there's an individual issue, though, we'll make sure we speak to them quietly either straight away or at a more appropriate time, depending on the need.

People need to enjoy ringing, but they also want to feel that they're making progress. If we can create an environment where people feel supported, listened to and able to improve, then the fun follows.

How do you handle negativity in the tower?

As a teacher, if I find myself getting frustrated by someone/something, I'll step out of the circle and let Podge step in to continue the session. The two of us are a bit of a double act... I do come back! Our aim is always to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels comfortable and welcome.

There have been times when we've been aware of some niggles between people. In those situations, I might simply make sure they're not ringing together, or that there's a bell between them. It's about being aware of the dynamics in the tower and making sure everyone feels comfortable enough to enjoy their ringing.

How do you support people when they are going through difficult times?

It's all in the nature of how we do things. I have separate WhatsApp groups for each of the sessions we deliver, and I get in touch with everyone each week to confirm the time and venue, sometimes with a broad idea of what we're planning. Everyone replies to say whether they're coming or not, and it's often through those 'not coming' messages that I get little personal updates that people want to share with the group. I'll then reply privately to them, or they'll contact me directly. It means I'm very much in the loop, while still being able to plan the practice around who will be there and how people might be feeling, whether that's physically or emotionally.

I also keep the structure of our practice sessions fairly consistent. That helps because people know what to expect; there are no surprises!

How do you balance your older and younger learners' needs?

I don't really think differently about people because of their age. We've had teenagers in the tower, and two of them still ring with us. Then we have a range of ages from people in their 40s through to their 70s, but it's really not about age; it's about the individual and what they can do.

Everyone knows that we won't ask them to do something until they're ready, because then it will work! It's the same whether someone is young or old, or whether they've been ringing for a few

Change is possible at any age, if someone is prepared to step up and support

months or many years. It doesn't matter how long someone has been ringing, I'll always give feedback if it's needed. Sometimes people who have been ringing for a long time need to make adjustments to their handling, even when they think they're doing it right.

In my teaching, there's a strong emphasis on bell handling. I want to make sure that people have those foundations right, whatever their age or experience, so that they can progress when they're ready.

What are your tips for improving striking as a band?

Someone has to have the courage to show people the skills and give honest feedback. It doesn't matter if someone has been learning for 50 years, change is possible at any age, if someone is prepared to step up and support them.

I'm proof that change is possible! I handled my bell incorrectly for years and had to relearn the skills. I do notice that if I'm anxious, I can revert to my old style, which is another good reason to create a relaxed and inclusive environment. You need to give people enough time and opportunity to experience different things without putting them under pressure.

Once the band can handle their bells properly, then you can have fun with it. Mix things up; don't make the calls the same every time. Get people to ring facing outwards from the circle to develop their listening skills, or ring as you turn around the rope... 'ring and twirl'! Another one I do is ring five whole-pull rounds and get everybody to listen. I ask them how many were good rows and identify which ones... but we never name and shame!

We entered a striking competition and won. We worked towards it through a series of different activities. The District Master came along to one session, and because he judges competitions, he explained the process and everyone then had a go at judging each other's ringing! That gave everyone ownership of the process, but it also meant that everyone understood what was actually being judged.

What do you love about ringing?

I love teaching! I didn't think I'd be able to teach ringing even after the first ART course, but the support from others helped me. I missed being a teacher, it's one of those things that is in your blood.

I love taking everyone, of all ages, on a journey with me, and I especially love to fight for the little person! There is a place for

everybody in ringing. I enjoy celebrating every little step with each individual, letting them know that they are achieving as they go.

I also love it when I get to share the experience with my family. I had a lovely Grandma moment when we were chiming bells on Ring for The King day; I was with my daughters and grandchildren, and they were chiming the bells that belonged to my childhood church in Hemingstone.

What are you most proud of achieving in ringing so far?

I was over the moon when I achieved ART accredited teacher status. Because of that I now have the practical skills necessary to play my part in teaching our ringers to achieve their 'Learning the Ropes' Level awards. I add the 'me factor' by personalising their ART certificate with a photo relevant to that level's targets and always adding 'Teacher comments' that over-run the space in their Progress Logbook, but can fit on the reverse of their A4 certificate!

The foundations of a good tower

As I left Liz to get back to her chutney making, I reflected on my original question: how important are relationships in the tower?

Liz's passion for teaching is clear to see, so it is no wonder she was nominated for, and won, the award. What struck me, though, was that everything she spoke about came back to making the tower a space that people want to be in.

The bellsashen Teaching Hub is built around getting foundation skills right, particularly bell handling, so that people have the confidence and ability to progress. But Liz's approach shows that those foundations aren't just about how you hold a bell; they are also about creating the right environment for people to learn: one where they feel supported, listened to and valued. Even when I asked Liz about her own achievements, she talked about supporting others.

I know from my own experience that when you're more relaxed, it's easier to ring and make progress. I'm not an expert, but I would say that Liz fully deserved that award, and it was an absolute pleasure to speak to her. Her approach is a good reminder that, alongside all the technical skills we work on in ringing, it is the relationships we build with the people around us that can make such a difference to our experience in the tower.

Celebrating our Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather

We were always told that our Welsh grandmother Ethel Toy had Cornish roots, and a chance discussion on the 2025 ASCY Australia tour with Kathryn Arkless, who is quite a Cornish family history expert, led us to investigate further. As a consequence, my husband Phil discovered that we had at least five generations of "Toy" hailing from Constantine. We thus set our sights on visiting this small Cornish village, a mere 30 miles from Land's End, and visiting local churchyards, museums and archives alongside possibly ringing the bells that our ancestors would have heard centuries before. Fortunately, Constantine has a delightful ring of six (7-2-14) and by chance the tower captain is Kath's husband Toby!

A date for the trip was arranged, just prior to Toby and Kathy's trip to Mexico for a Pasty Festival (you couldn't make it up!),



The band, clockwise from bottom right (photo Barbara Clements)

and we rang a quarter peal in the morning and later that evening we joined the local band practice. Many thanks to the Arklesses and the Constantine ringers for making us so welcome.

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Constantine, Corn. 6 Oct, 1320 Cambridge S Minor: Toby Arkless 1, Richard J Clements (C) 2, Kathryn Arkless 3, Elizabeth A Orme 4, Michael G Clements 5, Phillip M Orme 6. Celebrating the 300th anniversary this year of the birth of Christopher Toy of Constantine, the Great Great Great Great Grandfather of 2,4 & 5.

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