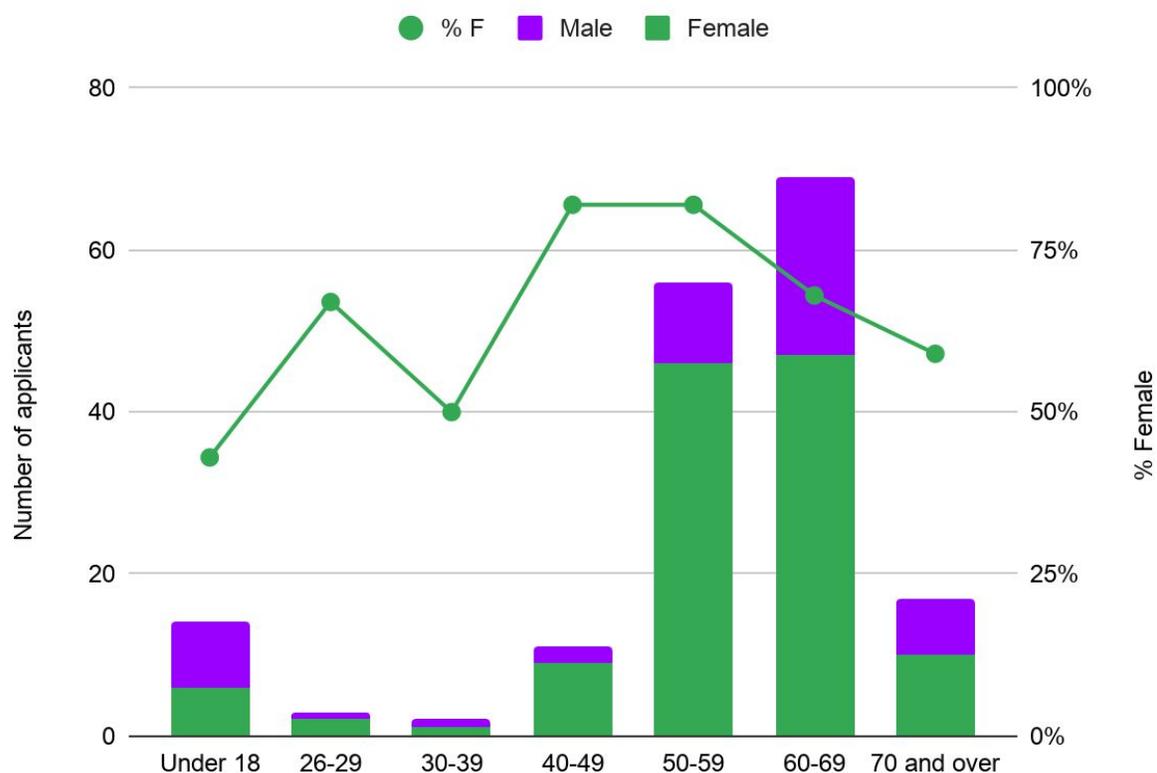


Inexperienced Middle-aged Females

In recent weeks, we've looked at several places in ringing where women are underrepresented. This time we have an example of where there are more women than men. The data comes from the 2019 Bradfield course. This is a Thursday to Sunday residential course run in August based at a private school in Berkshire. They make use of almost all of the ringable towers within a twenty-mile radius of Bradfield College, including towers in Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey. Students apply to work on particular methods, there are theory and practical sessions, plus optional extra sessions and socialising. Each group has a tutor and a set of helpers to provide a strong framework for each learner to get the most out of the course. It's very popular, applicants outnumber places by around 3 to 1. I would like to thank Jonathan Cresshull and the Bradfield Organising Committee for providing the data.

Bradfield data

Bradfield Student Applicants 2019 by Age Group



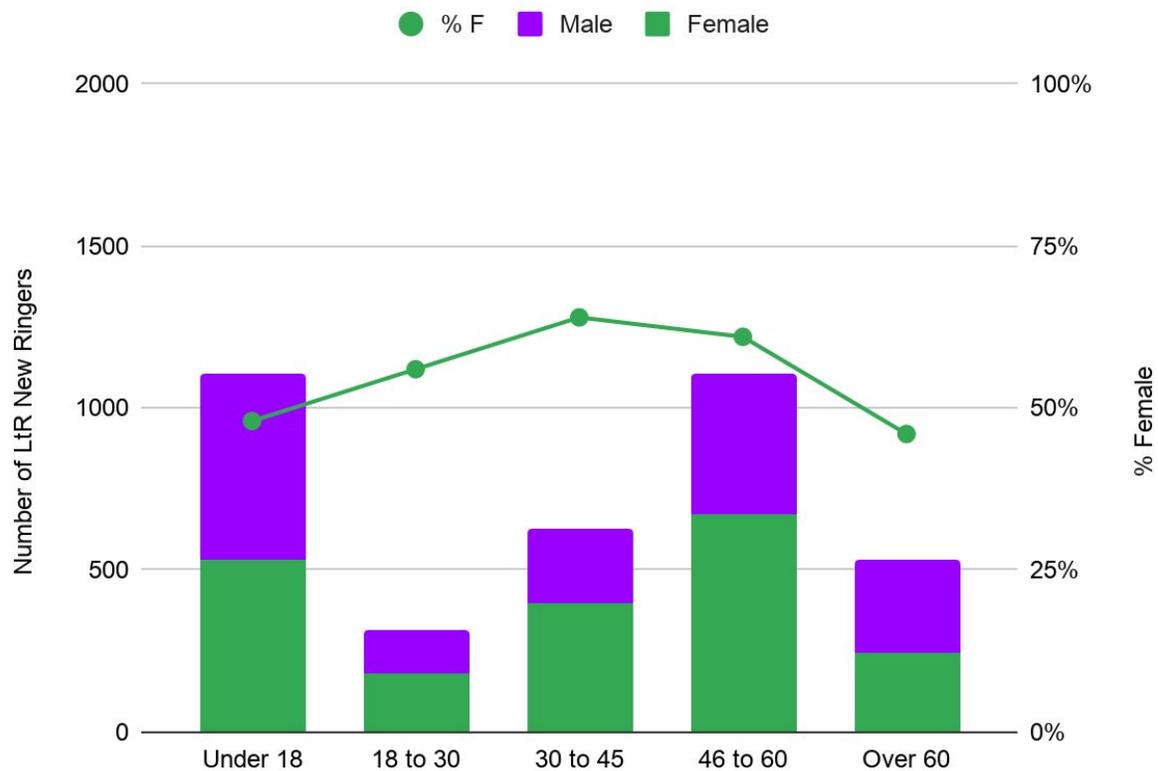
71% of the applicants to the Bradfield Course in 2019 were women. Just over half the applicants of the course were women aged 50 to 69, 18% were men in the same age bracket. In the age group 40 to 59, 82% were women. Males only outnumbered females in the under 18 age group, and that was only 8 to 6. Data is not collected on the age of the helpers, so we can't compare

their age profile directly. However, from observation the helpers are a more mixed age demographic, with active recruitment of a younger profile. Many people go back year after year (including me), whether they enjoy the Late Lounge or Cocoa & Chat. Some students graduate into helpers to keep the Bradfield vibe going.

It's perhaps not too surprising that the people who choose to spend their money and their holidays to improve at their hobby are generally older. It can feel a little self indulgent to take time off from a young family and use precious days of annual leave and school holidays for your own improvement. Conversely, if you've already been there and done that, the freedom of choosing to do something for yourself can be enormously liberating.

It could also be that a structured course, with guaranteed opportunities to be supported by a tutor and a strong band of helpers works well for older learners, and particularly for older women. The social aspect of a residential course can also be a great way to make new friends and widen your ringing opportunities.

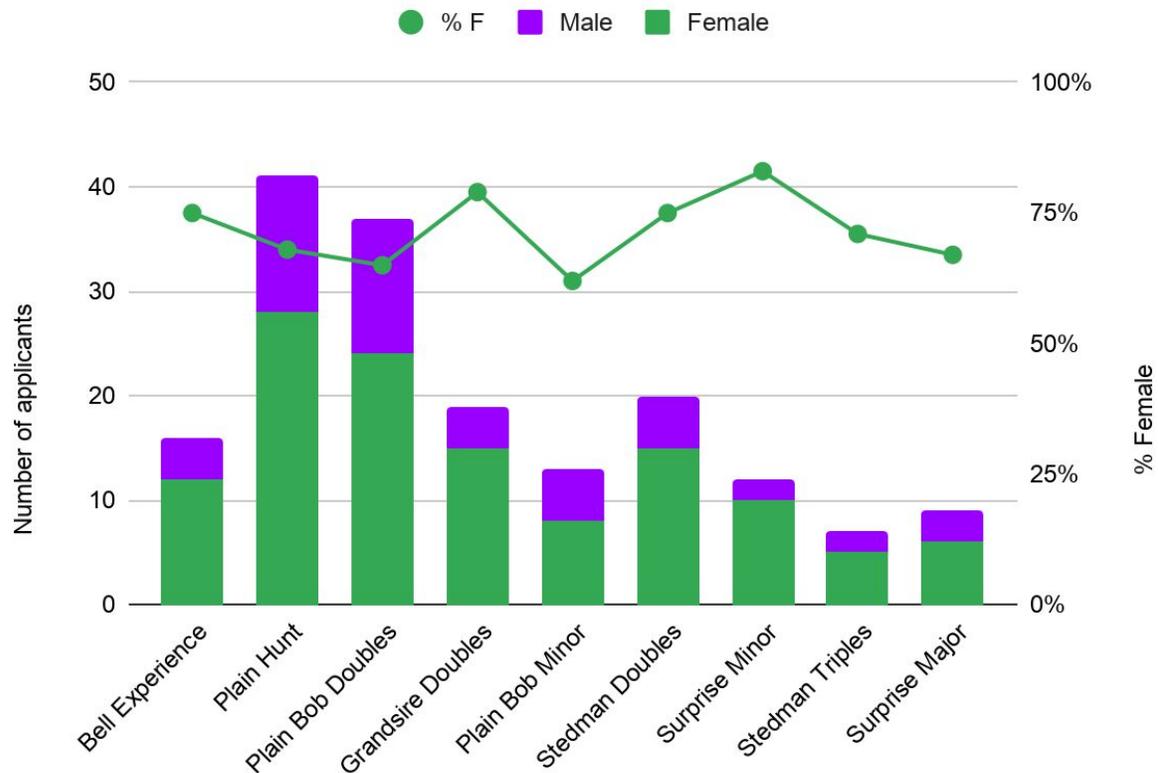
LtR New Ringers



To put this in context, I asked Lesley Belcher for comparable data for Learning the Ropes. In the chart I have applied the age and gender percentages Lesley gave me to recently published numbers of new ringers by age group. We've already seen that 54% of LtR learners are women. Not all ringers give their age, and reporting rates are unlikely to be evenly split by age and

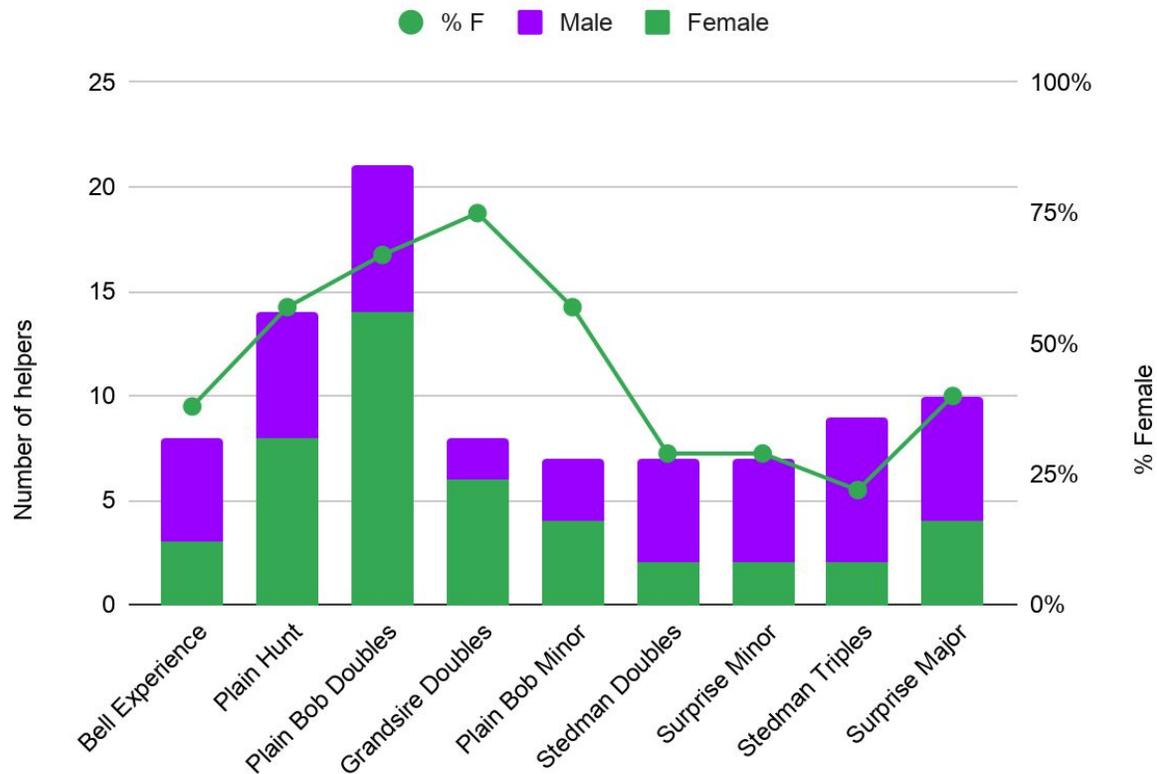
gender. Under 18s will be highly likely to tick the age group box for safeguarding reasons, older age groups are more likely to be coy. Of 30 to 60 year olds 62% were women, making up 29% of new ringers. So this is a big constituency, and of that group, a higher proportion of women apply to Bradfield. Anecdotally, other day and residential courses are also popular with older women, and more of the participants fit this demographic.

Bradfield Student Applicants 2019 by Method



Bradfield offers a variety of courses from Bell Experience to Stedman Triples and Surprise Major. Women applicants are fairly evenly distributed across the levels, so there is no evidence that women are more concentrated on earlier stages of ringing. Plain Hunt and Bob Doubles are the most popular groups, but in fact there's a slightly lower proportion of women applying to these.

Bradfield Helpers 2019 by Method



Overall 45 of the 91 helpers were female. The distribution by gender among the groups was less even for the helpers, with Plain Hunt to Plain Bob Minor having more women, while Stedman and Surprise had more men. The distribution of helpers to groups is a non-trivial exercise, balancing skills, ability, age, gender, personalities and preferences. A popular pastime for the helpers is to try to ring every bell in each tower and shout bingo on WhatsApp when they have done it. I know the women helpers in the surprise groups enjoyed the opportunity to ring heavy bells at some of the more challenging towers. However, there's an opportunity for next time to see if a more even gender distribution can be achieved.

Stories

So why might older female ringers be particularly drawn to ringing courses? Between the stories we've collected on our website www.womeninringing.info, feedback on Facebook and private conversations, there are mixed experiences for our older women learners. There are many people who say they have been well supported, enjoyed following the ART LtR scheme, found opportunities to develop on ringing courses, and who have not felt that they have been affected by gender bias. There are however other women who feel that their progress has been inhibited because of their gender and their age. If you don't feel that you are learning fast enough, or simply want to progress as fast as you can, ringing courses are an excellent way to get concentrated learning opportunities, rope time and a supportive atmosphere away from other

distractions. People who have benefitted from going on ringing courses tend to be strong advocates, and encourage others to apply, giving confidence and allaying fears.

What makes the difference between women who feel the effects of discrimination and bias and those that don't? Perhaps whether the ringer's ambitions align with the expectations of the people around her is important. Stretching beyond other people's boundaries can come at a cost.

To quote one of the stories on the website:

"I think that a lot of women are really ambitious in ringing but simultaneously they are terrified of mucking something up or being seen as pushy and difficult. In a culture where the higher levels are only accessible by invitation, this isn't just a paranoid fantasy, it is critical to *stay on the right side* of the more advanced ringers in one's own locality."

You can read the full version of this excellent piece at

<https://www.womeninringing.info/gender-balance>.

Where there is a mix of age and gender among learners, middle aged women can miss out on getting a fair share of opportunities unless the ringing master is paying attention and avoiding unconscious bias. The reticence that many women feel, and many men don't feel, plays into this. Youngsters are likely to progress quickly and often get a lot of rope time and encouragement. Allowances may be made for the older male learner, he may confidently grab hold. An older woman may not be confident in her own ability, she may be fearful of making a mess of things and may need to be asked and given some notice. In some cases, older women aren't given opportunities, so they make slow progress, which makes them unhappy, so they stop ringing. As a result people may have lower expectations of older women, see a lack of progression and therefore withhold opportunities. It can be a vicious circle. However, when women do ask to ring back bells or call touches, to go beyond what's expected of them, they often meet resistance. Many of the stories people have contributed have told of derogatory remarks when women have caught hold of the tenor.

Here is illustrative story from the website:

"I had not been ringing very long but was very keen. At a branch practice I attempted to ring a heavier bell than I was used to in a method. I didn't completely mess up but it certainly left lots of room for improvement. Afterwards a few of the "kindly" men present said things like "that was a bit too big for you". I felt a bit embarrassed and decided I would stick to the light bells. That was until later in the same practice when a man who was also fairly inexperienced rang it and made a complete mess of it. The eye opener for me was the comments he received: "well done - a few more goes and you'll have it" and "have another try later - nearly there". It was a defining moment for me. It encouraged me to seek out practices where wanting to improve was encouraged and I now ring with incredibly supportive men and women."

A contributor summed it up:

“I don’t think that when men who are learning a new skill make errors they receive the impression “well, we let him try, but we did not think that he could do it”. You have to be very confident (or at least act as if you are very confident) to keep on trying as a woman.”

Another goes further:

“The dynamic in most towers rewards selfish, ambitious, confident people. Anyone who is shy or unconfident needs an advocate or they are going to lose out on opportunities. This hurts unconfident people of all genders, but it disproportionately affects women.”

The flip side is that the success of ringing courses in attracting older female learners can be emulated. It’s really important to have a safe space to learn. To be able to make mistakes along the way, to be ok with being bad at first, with the expectation of being good in the end. Developing and maintaining skills takes practice and rope time. Generating positive experiences can build much needed confidence. A supportive learning atmosphere is key, where everyone can make progress even if their rate of progress is varied. A variety of focus practices and structured courses can fulfill the needs of different learners. Avoiding pigeonholing women is possible.

Women ringers who learn in later life have a lot to offer, bringing life skills, professional experience and determination. They deserve to have opportunities to progress on their own terms and the encouragement to do so.

If you have any experiences, observations or thoughts you would like to share on this topic, please visit <https://www.womeninringing.info/> and share your story. Both you and any ringers mentioned in your submission will be anonymous when published, and there is an option to share your story with the gender working group without it being published.

Written by Dorothy Hall

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