



Introduction.

This series of notes has been compiled over several years to help learners, but it must be said that ringing cannot be learnt just “from the book”. Ringing requires practical skills. Written material can help in teaching you what to do but the skill required can only come from practice, generally a lot of practice. This is especially true of the “Plain Hunt” stages where much time may be spent without much apparent progress. But, when the breakthrough does happen, it’s all worthwhile. So be prepared for this.

It is doubtful whether any material written today about learning to ring can be considered truly new except in its presentation because there is little new in learning to ring except perhaps the computerised simulator. But teaching methods and styles of presentation change with time.

In a sense much of the content of these notes is not mine, but rather a composite of the many people who have taught me over many years, whether from personal tuition, from books, by explanations in the pub - or just from watching what goes on at many different practice sessions. Therefore my sincere thanks and acknowledgements to all who have contributed in various ways.

Thanks also to John Gough for the use of his artwork of bells “up” and “down”, and to Sally Thompson for her indefatigable proof reading and learner’s comments on earlier drafts, also for organising the printing.

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1996.



First lessons - (1). Things you should know.

It has been said that learning to ring is rather like learning to ride a bike; there are many different things to think about and, until you get them all right at the same time, you don't succeed. Most people need quite a lot of practice before it all comes together.

SAFETY: Until you can ring unaided never catch hold of a rope unless your tutor has told you what to do and is standing with you. (You wouldn't try to drive a car without having proper lessons!)

The diagrams on page 3 will help you to learn what is meant by bells being “Down” or “Up”, also the names of the various bits of bell mechanism, and if you can be shown this on the actual bells it is easier to understand.

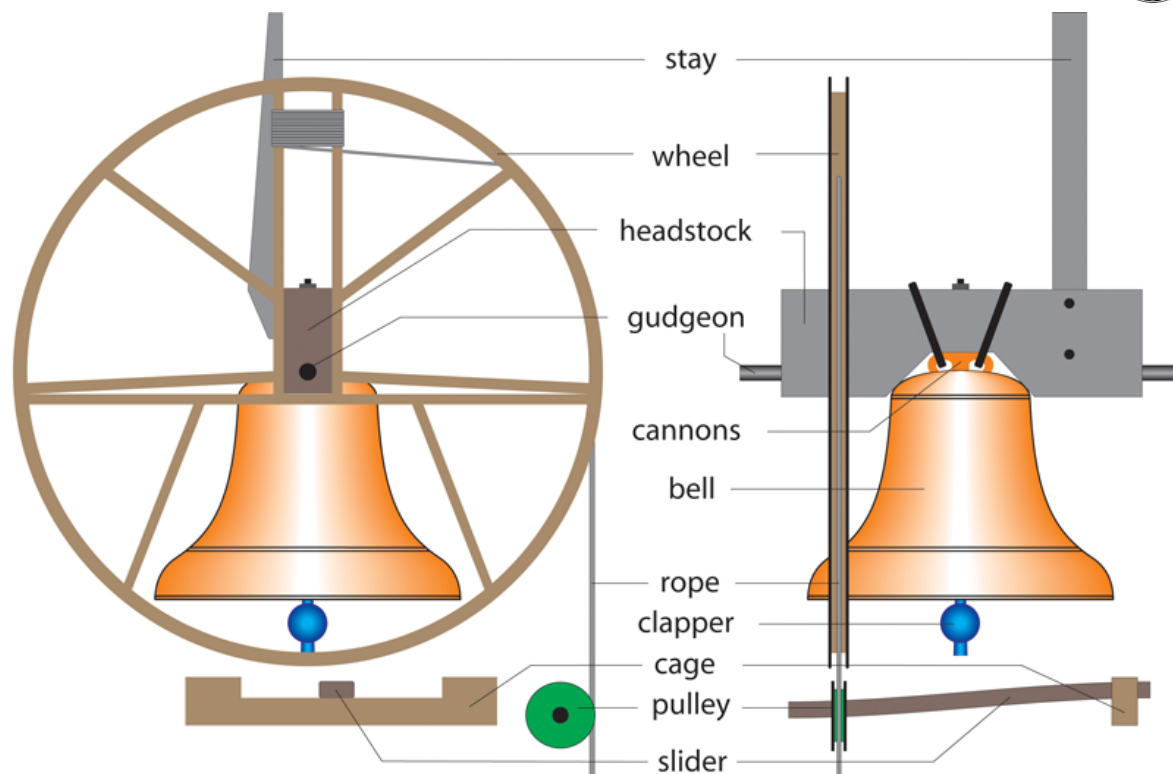
One of the first things we learn about ringing is that the bell swings “full circle”, which is fairly easy to understand if you have seen a bell being rung or have seen a demonstration with a model bell. You will also learn, quite early on, that to control the bell it is necessary to hold it “on the balance”, mouth upward. When a bell swings full circle it swings completely round from a mouth-up position to where it is mouth-up again. (We call this the “Balance point”.) At this moment one of two things might happen:

1. It doesn't quite reach the mouth-up position and falls back. If this happens you can't stop it because you can't push on a rope. Or:
2. It swings “over the balance” and, if nothing else happened, it would fall down on the other side. If we stop it swinging when it is just over the balance the weight of the bell is pulling slightly on the rope and we can hold the bell in this position as long as required, before sending it swinging back the other way.

For practical reasons we have a “stay” to hold the bell at rest “over the balance” as shown in the “Bells up” diagrams, but a skilled ringer does not let the bell “bump the stay” during ringing. When a bell is resting on the stay it is said to be “set”.

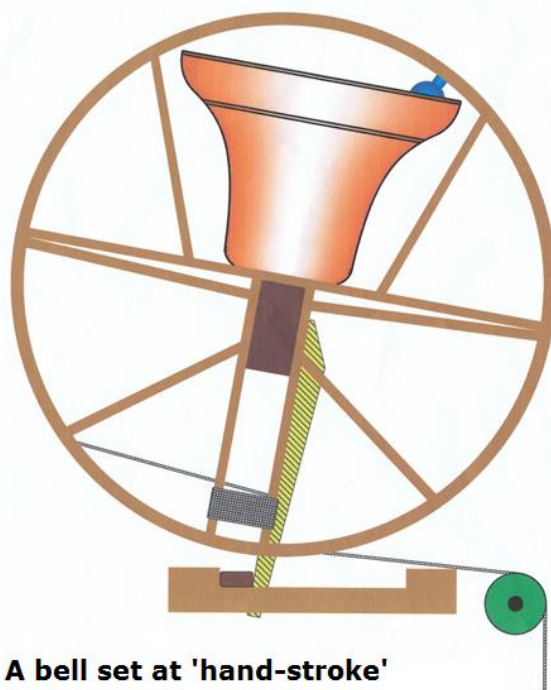
Our objective in the first sessions is to swing the bell and hold it balanced so that there is a slight tension (or “pull”) on the rope, allowing us to control the bell and send it easily in to its next swing. You probably know that the lower end of the rope is called the “Tail end” and that the woolly tufting is called the “Sally”. Pulling on the sally is called “Handstroke”, while pulling on the tail end is called “Backstroke”.

Usually your first session is to learn to control the bell at backstroke.



A BELL IN THE "DOWN" POSITION

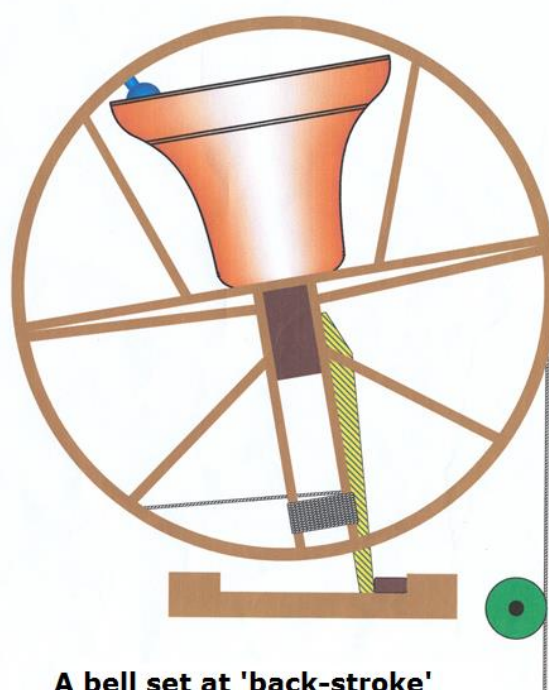
Illustration by John Gough



A bell set at 'hand-stroke'

The stay holds the bell upright, with the slider blocked at the left. The rope goes over the pulley and along the bottom of the wheel and is tied through the wheel at '8 o'clock'. The striped sally will be within the reach of the bell ringer below

Diagrams by John Gough of Napton.



A bell set at 'back-stroke'

The stay now holds the bell upright, with the slider blocked at the right. The rope goes straight past the pulley and around the top of the wheel and is still tied to the wheel at '8 o'clock'. The sally will now be at ceiling height, beyond the reach of the bell ringer



First lessons - (2). Ringing at backstroke.

To ring a bell at “backstroke” you have hold of the “tail end” whilst your tutor takes care of the “sally” or “handstroke. Firstly your tutor will ensure that the rope length is suitable for you and will show you what you are required to do.

Hold the tail end with both hands, right hand over left hand, and let your arms relax fully down; your hands should be where a Scotsman wears his sporrán. Your tutor will pull on the sally, which will move down, then move rapidly upwards as the bell swings round, taking your hands up over your head; keep your arms relaxed - your tutor will be guiding your hands. Don't look up to see where the rope has gone - **keep looking straight ahead!** The objective now is to “hold the bell on the balance” until you are ready to set it swinging back the other way.

To control the bell you need to stop it moving when it is just over the balance, when its weight starts to pull slightly on the rope. Two things can make this difficult: tensed arms or a slack rope (or both!).

You are holding the tail-end to control the bell at backstroke; as the sally flies upward start to lift your hands slowly so that the rope “overtakes” them; this will lift your relaxed arms. The rope lifting your arms puts a little tension on the rope and you can feel what is happening at the other end, but if you lift your arms too quickly and the rope is slack you can't feel anything. If your arms are tensed the rope will just jerk them upwards and, again, you have no control.

Feel how the bell slows as it reaches the top of its swing; stop it when you judge that it is just over the balance. If you don't get this right one of two things can happen:

1. The bell will fall back - you've stopped it too soon. Or:
 2. You feel a bump as the stay hits the slider - you've left it too late..
- (Of course at this stage your tutor will make corrections if you go wrong.)

As an alternative to (2), you may not feel a bump, but the bell feels heavy on the rope. This is also a sign that you have let the bell go too far over the balance; the further a bell goes over the heavier it feels.

Ideally, when you stop the bell swinging you should feel a slight pull on the rope; the bell is now balanced ready for the return swing.

It helps to get this right if, when the bell is balanced, your arms are at a comfortable full stretch over your head. If you find that you are bumping the stay then take in an inch or two of rope so that your arms are lifted higher; if the bell is falling back despite your reaching up then let out a little rope. Feeling the bell on to the balance is our objective; having your arms at full stretch gives you a reference point. (Ringing with your arms fully stretched also gives you better control over the bell, and this is discussed later.)

Bell Ringing by Instalments

Written by Peter D Wenham

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When you pull on the rope to return the bell to handstroke, pull all the way down and pull straight. Pulling all the way down involves accelerating your hands to keep a slight tension on the rope until your hands are fully down in front of your imaginary sporrán. To pull straight think of sliding your hands down a broom handle that is just in front of your body; to do this you need to bring your elbows back slightly as your hands come down. A common mistake is to swing your hands outward as you pull; this makes the rope fly outward and catching the sally becomes difficult.

All this can seem difficult until you get the knack of it, but with practice you will be able to swing and balance a bell without having to think about it, like keeping your balance on a bicycle. Practice is everything.

When you can control your bell at backstroke it is good practice to ring it in rounds with your tutor still controlling the handstroke. This will start to give you a sense of rhythm which is very important in ringing. It is also important to start listening for your own bell. If you are ringing (say) the third, listen to the bells sounding while counting "One, two, THREE, four, five, six - One, two, THREE, etc. This helps you keep your bell in its place with the others.

When you have control of the bell at backstroke it's time to look at the handstroke.



First Lessons - (3). Ringing at Handstroke.

When learning to control the handstroke much of the previous session still applies; we must balance the bell as before. To do this we need a little tension in the rope to feel what is happening and it helps if the arms are at full stretch as the bell comes up to the balance. Usually you will be shown what to do first.

For this session you will be holding the sally (handstroke) while your tutor looks after the backstroke; however your tutor will also be helping you with the handstroke at first.

To find the right place to catch the sally; with the bell set at handstroke reach as high as you can, taking hold of the sally right hand over left hand. This is about where you should catch the sally when it returns.

With your tutor assisting, pull on the sally and lift the bell from its “set” position so that it is lightly balanced. Now pull down on the sally **and remember to let go** when your hands reach waist level. The sally will fly upward (but don’t look up!); your tutor will take care of the backstroke and will catch the sally as it returns. For the moment you can concentrate on pulling the sally (handstroke) and letting go at the right time.

The next thing to master is catching the sally. When the bell is pulled from the backstroke the sally comes down to somewhere round waist level and then rises. The objective is to catch the sally, with both hands close together (right over left) just as it starts to rise. When you have pulled the bell at handstroke let your hands and arms go right down - the sporan again! – wait, and start to lift them to meet the rising sally. This takes a bit of practice and your tutor will help you with the timing. Also, you need to catch the sally in the right place to hold the bell balanced as your arms come to full stretch.

A few tips:

- Let your hands go right down with arms relaxed after pulling the sally; a common fault is to lift your hands up to chest level waiting for the sally. This doesn’t work!
- Lift your hands in time with the rising sally as you catch it - this makes for a smooth catch.
- If the bell bumps against the stay, catch the sally a little higher; your hands will be taken higher and this will stop the bell sooner.
- If the bell falls back despite you reaching up, catch the sally a little lower; you are now able to let the bell swing higher.

Remember that the objective is to hold the bell balanced with your arms at a comfortable full stretch. **This stage can often require a lot of practice to get it right, so don’t get disheartened.**

When you can keep control of the bell at handstroke it is good practice to ring it “handstroke only” in rounds. Get used to the rhythm, listen for your own bell and count your places as before.



First lessons - (4). Combining Handstroke and Backstroke.

When you can control a bell at backstroke and at handstroke separately you will need to combine these two actions. The next important thing to learn is how to hold the tail-end correctly in the left hand. This is well illustrated on page 8 of the “Beginners Handbook”, one of many Central Council publications available for learners at various stages. Using only the thumb to hold the rope in your palm leaves **all** the fingers free to grip the sally as shown on page 10 of the same booklet. The most common fault is to fold the third and fourth fingers over the rope - **don't do it!** If you get into this bad habit now it can take ages to get rid of it later.

Before you start combining handstroke with backstroke it is useful to ring handstroke only while holding a “dummy” tail-end. This gives you confidence for holding the real tail end later, also you can practice the arm movement from handstroke to backstroke and then to handstroke again by “following through” the action in time with your tutor. It is important to practice the timing for this because, once you set the bell swinging, it isn't going to wait for you!

Normally your tutor will show you the actions before you try; study this with the description in the “Beginners Handbook” -

“Down - Away - Together - Up”

Taking these in turn, starting at handstroke, grasp the sally and tail-end together, lift the bell off the stay and - -

- DOWN:** Pull down on the sally as you have been doing.
- AWAY:** Let go of the sally, keep hold of the tail end with your left hand, gripping with all your fingers
- TOGETHER:** Bring your **right** hand to your **left** hand, grasp the tail end right hand over left hand.
- UP:** As the sally rises start lifting your hands, follow-through to backstroke and balance your bell.

Now use the same key words to return to the handstroke:

- DOWN:** Pull down as normal for backstroke.
- AWAY:** Open **all** the fingers of both hands, holding the tail end with your left thumb only. Let your arms go right down (to the “sporrán”), relaxed, ready to catch the sally.
- TOGETHER:** Catch the sally, in the right place, with **all** your fingers round it.

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UP: Lift your hands with the sally, follow through to balance the bell at handstroke -

and start again from the beginning.

When you become more familiar with this sequence try to relax your arms as much as possible. The more you can relax the less effort you need to ring a bell, thus the easier it becomes. Keep practising, because when you start to ring in rounds there are other things to think about, so you shouldn't be thinking too much about controlling the bell.

Watch other ringers; you will see a variety of styles, but you can soon pick out the ringers who make it "look easy", and they are usually the ones to imitate.

There is always something to learn by watching others ringing, no matter what stage you are at.

In the next session we shall look at ringing rounds.



First Lessons - (5). Ringing Rounds.

When you start to ring rounds you need to:

- Control your bell.
- Watch the rope of the bell you are following; if you are ringing the third you will be “following the second”.
- Count your place as your bell strikes; if you are ringing the third count “One, two, THREE, four, five six - - -”.
- Listening for your own bell.

Taking these in turn:

Controlling your bell.

Once you start thinking about other things there is a natural tendency to over-pull, to keep the bell in its place by force. Try to avoid this; it is tiring and makes it difficult to place your bell correctly. Try to keep relaxed, especially the arms, ring the bell with an easy swing, **to a rhythm**. Remember that each time you pull too hard you also waste energy stopping the bell at the end of each swing.

Watching the bell you are following:

Your basic guide of when to pull is by watching the rope of the bell “in front” of you; start moving your hands when his/her hands have just started to move. At first you might find it difficult to watch another rope and catch your own sally. As you become used to watching other bells you will find that you can catch the sally by rhythm; this comes with practice. At this stage try to keep watching the rope you are following as much as possible.

Counting your place.

If you are ringing the third to rounds you should be “in thirds place”, you are the third bell to sound. So by counting One, two, THREE - - etc. you are “counting your place”. You will have noticed that the bell doesn’t sound as soon as you pull, but almost at the end of its swing, as your hands are moving up past your face, so this is when you should be counting “THREE”.

Listening for your bell:

Counting helps you to hear your own bell; now you should time your pull so that your bell sounds “central” between the bells sounding before you and after you. Try to avoid gaps or clashes. This, like many other things in ringing, comes with practice. However, one of the great pleasures of ringing is when all the bells are “well struck”, that is, sounding with an even rhythm. You will recognise good striking when you hear it - it just sounds right and, if you are ringing yourself, you will feel the rhythm that goes with good striking.



First Lessons - (6). Striking and other things.

When you can ring rounds without help it is up to you always to do your best. Good striking was mentioned in the last session but, no matter how good any individual ringer is, **everyone** in the band has to strike well if the ringing is to sound right.

There are always things to work at to improve your ringing; at this stage striking is perhaps the most important, followed by your style of ringing.

Listen for good striking:

Hopefully you have been learning on a bell which is easy to ring, but not all bells are easy. Always listen for your own bell because sooner or later you will be ringing a bell which is “odd-struck”, that is, it strikes sooner on one stroke than on the other. Therefore, to get the striking sounding right, we have to “hold up” on one stroke and “pull in” or “check” the bell on the other stroke.

(“Holding up” means holding the bell balanced a fraction longer - it does **not** mean letting it go further over the balance! “Checking” means stopping the bell a little sooner so as to swing it back sooner. When you check a bell you also have to pull a little harder if you want to balance it again on the next stroke.)

When you ring an odd-struck bell it may not “look” right, but always remember that:

**WHAT YOU HEAR
IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN
WHAT YOU SEE!**

So always listen and adjust your ringing to get your bell sounding in the right place; a lot of people outside can also hear you.

Develop your “Style”.

While not perhaps essential, a good style in ringing makes for less effort. Ringing with arms at a comfortable full stretch has already been recommended; this gives you the greatest distance upward in which to control the bell, also the greatest distance through which you can pull next time. Both of these items are important when ringing a bell that doesn’t “go” easily.

Catch and release the sally smoothly and keep relaxed. Keep your hands close together as you change your grip from handstroke to backstroke and vice versa. Watch other ringers, you will see a variety of styles - and it might not be wise to comment further!

Keep working at your bell control and your striking; good rounds are the foundation on which change ringing is built. The better you can ring rounds the easier it is to progress. The next step is to ring the treble, the “leading bell”.



First Lessons - (7). Leading.

Watch the treble ringer when rounds are rung. The usual call to start ringing is, “Look to - Treble’s going - treble’s gone!” To explain this further:

Look to:

As well as being a call to the other ringers this should remind you to look all round yourself, to see that all ringers have hold of their ropes - and that every rope has a ringer attached to it.

Treble’s going:

On this call each ringer **should** ease the bell off the stay and up to the balance, ready for a smooth pull into rounds. Unfortunately this is often ignored; ringers pull off from the set position, which can cause the first few rounds to be a bit lumpy. Develop good habits now.

Treble’s gone!

On this call the treble is pulled over the balance into rounds.

(Always leave enough time between “Treble’s going” and “Treble’s gone!” for the rest of the band to follow the calls.)

The treble now has to follow the tenor - it is “leading off the tenor”. Watch this before you try to do it and you will see that the treble is ringing “opposite stroke” to the tenor. When the treble pulls at handstroke it is following the tenor’s backstroke, while at backstroke it is following the tenor’s handstroke. **But that’s not all.** Small bells swing quickly, while big bells swing slowly. When you are ringing the treble, the smallest (and quickest) bell, and following the tenor, the largest (and slowest) bell, you must let the tenor get much further into its swing before you pull. In fact as a rough guide you should be pulling at handstroke when the tenor ringer is about to catch the sally from the previous backstroke, and pulling at backstroke as the tenor ringer is releasing the sally after pulling at handstroke. Watch all this carefully and, when you ring treble, listen for your own bell; the tendency at first is to clash with the tenor because you are pulling too soon, so delay your pull until it **sounds** right.

In rounds the treble as leading bell is responsible for setting the “open lead”, the slight pause at every handstroke lead. This pause or gap is usually described as “enough for another bell to fit in”. As treble ringer you have to make this pause, which makes the handstroke pull=seem later still.

All in all, ringing the treble demands really good bell control. As it is the lightest bell you need to “hold up” on the balance more than with any other bell to keep in time with the others. Always remember when ringing a small bell you must control its pace to suit the big bells - it can’t be done the other way round! For now, keep practising to ring smoothly, to ring with minimum effort, and -

KEEP LISTENING!



First Lessons - (8). Covering.

Some change ringing is done with a “covering tenor”, meaning that the tenor rings last every time. Ringing the cover bell requires different skills and has its own fascination. Most importantly, when changes are rung with the tenor covering, the tenor sets the rhythm for everyone.

As with most things in ringing, it is a good idea to watch someone else ringing something before you try it, so take any opportunity to watch anyone ringing a cover bell.

You need to watch all the other ropes and follow the last one down each time. If you can learn to ring with a steady rhythm it will be easier to see the last rope down and it also helps you set a steady “beat” for the rest of the band. Practice in watching all the other ropes will also be useful when you start learning change ringing.

This is a good time to talk about ringing heavier bells because a different technique is needed. In earlier sessions you learnt how to hold a bell balanced, a skill essential for ringing lighter bells. But heavier bells, unless you are ringing very slowly, do not quite reach the balance. The trick now is to swing the bell to a height (near to the balance point and sometimes called the “Pause Zone”) where the bell comes to a stop just as you need to pull for the next stroke. If you tend to clash with the bell in front then pull slightly harder to raise the bell more; if you are striking wide then let the bell fall a little to quicken its swing. With bells in good order, especially if they are on ball-bearings, it does not take a lot of strength to ring rounds at the heavy end, in fact “wide” striking can be caused by over-pulling. It is worth experimenting to find out how **little** you need to pull, and this can save a lot of energy. But, if you are ringing a bell short of the balance, remember to pull a bit harder on the last backstroke when “Stand” has been called or you will fail to set the bell.

When you are ringing cover bell you will, of course, strike over all the other bells in turn. Little bells swing quickly, big bells swing slowly so, when ringing the tenor, you must pull close to the little bells to keep the striking right. If you are ringing with a steady rhythm you will find that this happens naturally.

Good covering is a skill; there’s more to it than just “banging the drum”. The rest of the band rely on you for a steady rhythm and it’s all good practice to improve striking and bell control, ready for an introduction to change ringing.