

The Learning Curve



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Taking the lead

Raising and lowering the bells in peal at the start and end of ringing sessions gives a fine start and end to ringing, and the ability to do it well is a good test of bell control and striking. In some towers bells are left permanently up, though this is declining. Some raise and lower their bells, but struggle to do it in peal. The very first *Learning Curve* (Volume 1, Chapter 1) gave advice on learning to do it well. Of course someone must be competent to lead up and down, and that is this month's topic.

Leading or following?

'Leading' is only partly true. Much of the time, you 'follow' the Tenor. The back bells are less able to move than the Treble, so take your cue for rate of descent or ascent from them. Only rarely should you enforce your own speed of rise or fall. If you lock onto the sound of the Tenor, a natural speed should emerge, with the back bells moving down or up at a comfortable rate – providing that the others progressively close in or spread out to fit properly in the space between you and the Tenor.

Keep an eye on the bells behind you. If they are struggling, you might be moving too fast for them. If some bells can't keep with you, it makes the sound confusing, and harder for everyone. You might be able to 'bend' things a little for an inexperienced person, providing the others are all on the ball, but don't get distracted and wander off track yourself. It is more important to keep the majority together as a group in more or less the right place.

By default, you are 'in charge' (unless agreed otherwise) so any general advice must come from you – 'space them out', 'keep the back bells together', 'close the gaps', 'keep them all striking', and so on. Only do it when necessary though, if the problem won't sort itself out.

Leading up

You can't follow the Tenor at the start, because it is not striking, so you must judge the initial speed of rise. It should be fairly brisk, in order to get everyone to a speed where the Tenor can fit in. A brisk rise also pushes the front and middle bells together, helping to make a space for the second stroke to develop. If you don't do this, and the bells spread out filling all the space with one stroke, an extended period of confused sound when the two strokes overlap, means people are likely to drift out of place.

If you judge the initial ascent right, you should arrive with your emergent back stroke sounding just after the Tenor, and your handstroke after where the Tenor's (inaudible) backstroke would be. Fill in the missing sounds in your mind, to hear the whole rhythm as it will be. Getting quickly to a sound rhythm whose ends 'fit' makes everyone feel more confident, even if it is a bit ragged in the middle.

Once the sound of your bell is correctly locked

onto the Tenor's tail, it should be fairly straightforward to follow up at the Tenor's speed. Listen intently to the gap between the Tenor and you, because it is very easy to drift. Get too wide and it sounds hesitant and congested. Get too close and the overlap sounds confused. If you do drift, get back as quickly as possible, before the wrong rhythm gets established. Try not to cause a disturbance that might destabilise the bells behind you. Make your correction smooth, and don't overshoot.

The main part of the rise should happen naturally, driven by everyone's expectation of rising and spreading out, but it can run out of steam before the top, especially on fewer bells. If the spacing gets comfortable, people can switch off and stop spreading out. An extra-wide blow might make the others rise a bit further, but it's simpler to say 'spread them out'.

Before finishing, you need to see that the Tenor is ringing near the balance (unless the custom in your tower is for the Tenor to call stand). Wait for good striking, to give a tidy finish. If the rise has been a bit rough, some people get to accept irregular striking, but with the bells fully up, there is no excuse for that, and you should remind them what is expected.

Leading down

To give everyone the best chance of a tidy descent, always wait until the Rounds is steady before calling 'downwards' (or your local variant). The descent should then begin automatically, driven by everyone's expectation, so just close your handstroke gap and follow the Tenor gently down.

Try to be as steady as possible – even more so than when raising. If you reverse direction and go up again, even a bit, the bells behind you might start to 'float', which leaves them vulnerable to handling errors, and getting out of place. If everyone stays evenly spaced, the descent should be at a natural, comfortable rate. Don't try to force the pace either way. As the bells get lower and closer the margins for error get smaller, and it is harder to hear individual bells, especially if the striking is not quite even.

Your critical decision is when to stop following the Tenor, and initiate the pull-in. If you do it too soon you will unleash a horrible scramble, and the Tenors might not get down quickly enough. But if you leave it too late, and the bells get clogged together making it difficult to hear them, then the slightest thing can make it fall apart. You need to judge the best point, and that gets easier with experience. If things do start to wobble while you are waiting, then starting the pull-in will apply a bit of downward pressure that often helps to stabilise things (and even if not, it at least shortens the period of confusion).

When you start the pull-in, you relinquish the security of being on the Tenor's tail. You are now on your own, and you must judge the rate of descent. Doing it steadily and evenly on a little bell is hard, because it is so easy to move your bell too much. Nibbling in a fixed amount of rope at each stroke, and trying to keep a uniform arm movement, should help you descend evenly, but keep an eye on the other bells to make sure they can keep with you. Ideally you will stretch them out, widening the spaces between them, as you make the transition from double to single stroke ringing (every bell striking twice per swing to every bell striking once per swing). During the pull-in, you progressively 'overtake' each bell in

turn, until you have 'lapped' them all, and you are following the Tenor on the same stroke (but the previous swing). The heavier bells will stop double clapping, and eventually all will.

As you catch up the Tenor, make sure that you don't overshoot, because trying to hold up at this stage will send ripples of confusion to those behind you. Make sure you fit in neatly, with the Treble striking just after the Tenor.

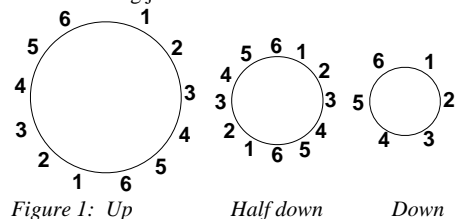


Figure 1: Up Half down Down

Things are easier now that you can again take your cue from the Tenor, but don't lose concentration. Everyone should now be chiming, and the back bells will come down to the point where they are moving very little. The lighter bells will swing further to get the right speed, so your rope will be moving a lot faster than the Tenor's, which can be off putting.

Many ringers don't get a lot of practice chiming, so it is worth waiting until the chiming is really even for a good finish. If the band know it is expected, they are less likely to give up and stop trying. If the striking is variable, choose a good patch in which to finish. You might be surprised that making this decision, and saying "Rounds after three", can disrupt your concentration, so if necessary wait a few more blows for things to settle again, and then clearly call out on successive strokes "One", "Two", "Three", "Miss", "Catch and hold" (the detailed calls differ from place to place). Whatever you do, don't hesitate once you start!

Dealing with problems

Your main role is to be a steadying influence, but if you see something going wrong, a timely word from you can help.

A common problem is one or more ringers keeping the gap in front of them constant, when it should be changing. This breaks up the rhythm and can retard progress.

Another is a bell getting too high or too low, so the speed is wrong. The best advice is "get higher" or "much lower". Unless you have a very steady band, you can't do much else for a wayward bell – you must keep a steady pace to help the others stay together.

The Treble's nightmare is an inexperienced Tenor ringer who suddenly starts to ring erratically. Should you try to follow? Despite the general rule of sticking with the Tenor, if the other bells are together in a steady formation, then trying to chase the Tenor would probably make everything fall apart. So keep the others moving ahead as a group, and try to join in with the Tenor later. This is more likely on a light ring of bells, where the Tenor is able to change more rapidly. Above all **Don't panic!**

Tail End

The Learning Curve, Vol 1 - 1999-2001 and *Raising & Lowering in Peal* are available from: CC Publications.

Raising & Lowering is available from Profile.