The Learning Curve

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Small is beautiful

Last month we looked at ringing heavy bells. This month we do the opposite.

Most of us experience a limited range of weights in our normal ringing, with 90% of tenors between 5 and 20 cwt. But recent years have seen the spread of very light 'mini rings' that take most of us out of the comfortable style of ringing we have developed on 'normal' bells. They challenge our ability to adapt our handling technique and ring them accurately.

At the upper end of mini rings (say around a hundredweight) things look like scaled down versions of what we are used to, though normally without stays. But many look and sound rather different, with tenors weighing only a few pounds.

This is not a technical treatise. Our main interest is how to ring them (and how not to). Many people only try for a few minutes, which can be fun, even if you make a mess of it. But the people who build and own mini rings do so for serious ringing. For regular ringing you want the striking to be good, regardless of the weight of the bells. If not, then there is little pleasure once the novelty wears off.

Here are the experiences of several people who ring, and in some cases built, light bells.

Phil and Rowena Gay

Over the last ten years we have hung, rehung and rung a set of small bells (Keele, Woodlands, 8, 0-3-19). The tenor weighs just under a hundredweight and the relative weights of the others are about the same as in a full-size ring. The fittings are almost exactly a half-size replica of what would be typical for a 7 cwt tenor, so the rope travel is also be half as long as with full size bells. We adjusted the garter hole position to lengthen the handstroke pull and shorten the backstroke. That makes a big difference to the handling.

Half size wheels and an eighth of the weight means greater relative leverage. The wheels are relatively light, so the bells accelerate and slow down in much the same way as full size ones, in contrast to some smaller rings where heavy wheels give a significant flywheel effect.

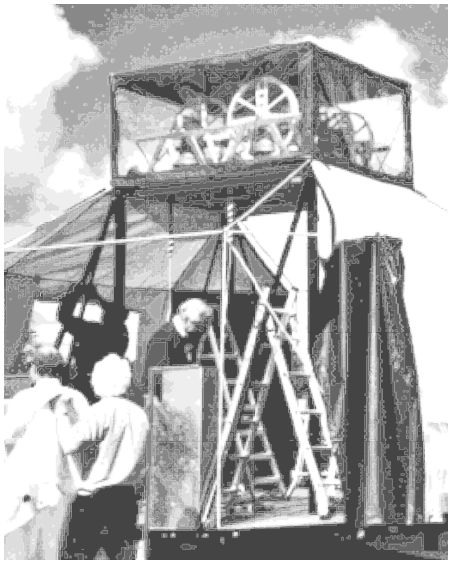
This all affects the way the bells handle. Ringing speed is less than twice as fast as full size (our peal times typically range from 1.55 to 2.20), so the ropes do not move much faster, but you do have to move your hands quickly because the rope isn't there for as long.

You don't have to pull very hard, and how hard you pull can affect the speed at which the bell turns. There are no stays, so you can slow the bell down by letting it go well over the balance. This also lengthens the pull and makes the bell feel heavier, but it does make it harder to get a good rhythm, especially if some bells are going further over than others.

The advice we give to newcomers is to pull the sally harder than the tail end, and don't let the bell go too far over (this also applies to small tower bells).

Mostly we ring with two hands at each stroke, but some people are more comfortable with only one. New-comers often ring with two hands on the tail and one on the sally.

Keeping a tight rope is important, but you need a light touch - the bell is too light to lift your arms against much resistance. We set the ropes fairly low, so that most of the movement is in the forearms with the elbows fairly stationary, and the whole weight of the arms is not on the rope. We find most ringers quickly adapt and enjoy ringing our bells, although many experienced ringers say they find the level of concentration needed for the handling doesn't leave as much for the method as they are used to. What really pleases us is that many people want to ring on the bells more than once.



The Lichfield Diocesan Mobile Belfry (seen here during erection at the Ringing World Road Show) has bells of similar size to Woodlands, and hung in the same way.

Tom Chapman

Margaret and I had rung on most small rings prior to '95. They were fun but very hard to ring and couldn't really be taken seriously with peal ringing in mind. We had come back to peal ringing after 25 years. To celebrate our 60th birthdays we decided to build our own ring (Marston Bigot, Pig-le-Tower, 8, 0-0-21).

I reasoned that the biggest problem was not the weight but the wheel size. I worked out a minimum draw needed at handstroke which gave me the diameter for the treble wheel. I kept the wheels light to avoid them acting as flywheels and making the ringing ponderous. The bells are hung well out to give more 'feel' and make it easier for beginners. Matthew Higby and I had a lot of fun perfecting them and ended up with bells that most ringers can ring straight off, once we have explained the slightly different technique we find works best.

You can ring them with two hands at both strokes if you wish, but we find using the left hand for backstroke and the right hand for handstroke works best. Then if you miss the sally (as some people do when they over-pull) the bell will not go over if you have kept your left hand down.

Excessive pulling on any stroke just makes the bell go faster and achieves nothing as there is very little mass. You mainly achieve control by limiting the up-strokes.

Well over 500 ringers have visited and rung the bells. Since Feb 1996 119 different people have rung peals on them. Children play on them and they are safe.

The complete ringer should be competent on bells of all sizes, large or small.

David Salter

I ring regularly on Frank Price's bells (Newmarket, Mindinho-le-Tower, 10, 0-0-9). Mostly we ring peals, but we reckon to teach a youngster to handle in 3 minutes and adults in 5. This is starting from scratch with non ringers! Only one person has had problems and he overcame his fear and went on to ring a peal.

We ring the bells 'alternate handed' with the tail end over the left wrist and right hand holding the top of the sally. We all ring this way to avoid clashing body parts in the restricted space. No one has a problem, even those who are right handed tail ringers in the tower.

Gentle downward movement of the sally takes the bell up to the backstroke. You must stop and hold the sally in front of your nose. This helps everyone to see what is happening. Letting the sally go up too far takes the bell right over so it strikes twice which confuses everyone.

Small bells must be handled differently from tower bells but timing and balance are equally important. You need very little pull, just fingertip control and guiding the rope. Jerky movements can drop the bell straight down and stop the ringing.

At a fast speed, you can only place the bells accurately by listening. Using ropesight (if you believe in it) does not work. If you all ring at a consistent pace with the same rhythm and speed, you produce a structure within which it is easy to move the bell and ring methods accurately.

Problems to avoid:

- Not standing under the hole
- Two hands on the rope (too much power)
- Not catching the sally at the right level
- Not relaxing (more likely to lose control)
- Jerky movements and over correction

Small bells are less tolerant. Ringers with very good handling in the tower are least likely to have problems. Ringers with problems tend to have a jerky, 'half pull' style, rely on power to get out of trouble in the tower (which doesn't work on a mini ring) or think they know better and don't listen to the instructions.

If you are new to mini ringing, listen to the advice of more experienced ringers, watch what they do, copy their style and then adapt.

In conclusion

We suspect some mini rings are harder to ring than others, just like 'normal' rings. These accounts show that many people can ring them. though they are less forgiving then tower bells. The secret seems to be the ability to adapt your style. But note Tom Chapman's words: "The complete ringer should be competent on bells of all sizes, large or small"

Tail End

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