

Double handed ringing

PT writes - "I read occasionally of people ringing two tower bells, but never HOW they do it. I have tried this and would like to know how the experts do it."

If you have never seen double handed ringing, you might not believe it, but a growing number of ringers can do it very well. We invited Bob Smith to tell us how it is done, but first here is the experience of someone who has tried, but never made it to becoming an expert.

"I don't often ring two bells, only if we are short. Our 2nd and 3rd are close together and each weigh about 6 cwt. It was easier in my previous tower ringing 3 cwt bells. My problem is that I can't completely separate the feel of the two bells. I get a rhythm going in rounds, but if the first bell starts to drop a bit, some of the pull seems to transfer to the other arm, so I end up over-pulling one bell with the other dropping."

Some of you might be inspired by Bob's account to try double handed ringing (but please heed the safety warnings). Others of you might wonder why we include it, since it must seem so far beyond what you and your friends might aspire to. When this column began just over a year ago, its stated intention was to include something for everyone, though with an emphasis on the more basic aspects. *Tail End*

How to do it

To become a competent double-handed tower bell ringer needs extra skill, over and above those of most ringers. Unless one has great natural physical and mental co-ordination this requires a lot of patience and attention to detail but one does not need to be a genius. The more demanding skill is the physical co-ordination required to ring two bells safely.

Handling two tower bells.

Anyone who has taught others to handle a bell, and then to progress to change-ringing, will know that poor bell control is one of the greatest problems to overcome. Telling a learner to ring more quickly can lead to harder pulling, which makes the bell move more slowly. Conversely when asked to 'hold-up' the bell may go out of control if it is not pulled hard enough to lift it to the balance. Bell control must be immaculate when ringing two tower bells - nothing less. Attention to detail is essential to avoid risk of serious injury, since ringing two bells is more dangerous than ringing one. This is not said to discourage anyone. People accept small risks in sports such as hand-gliding, ice-skating or rock climbing, but take precautions to reduce them.

Holding the bell rope

One has to let go of the sally after pulling the bell off at handstroke but keep hold of the tail-end of the rope at backstroke. This presents a problem with only one hand available. The main concern is not to release the tail-end by mistake, which

would be dangerous for everyone present. For this reason many double-handed ringers ring with their hands through the tail-ends of the ropes as shown in figures 1 - 3.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

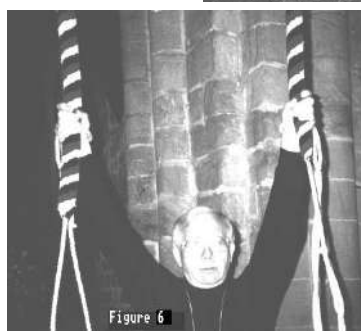


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

This makes losing the tail end very unlikely but creates another hazard as a broken stay could lead to a broken wrist. Shortening the tail-ends so that the bells can only be set by standing on tip-toe (figure 5) will guard against this happening at backstroke, but not handstroke (figure 6) as setting the bell depends on catching the sally in the right place. Tail-ends can be temporarily shortened by tying a "figure-of-eight" knot in the tail-end close to the sally (figure 4). Very long ropes may need a double knot. For longer periods of ringing the tail-end needs to be untied and re-threaded to achieve the required length. To avoid blisters when ringing peals it is necessary to thread a chamois-leather sheath over the bottom loop (see figure 7).

The tail ends can be held in almost the same way as for two-handed ringing. That avoids the risk of injury if a stay should break, but with no free hand to help, there is a risk of losing the tail-end. Using elastic bands to hold the rope against the wrist (see figure 8) will reduce the risk of losing the tail end, and should a stay break, the elastic will merely release the rope without the risk of injury. This is clearly the safer technique, though not everyone uses it.

Getting started 'double-handed'

The first step is to ring one bell at a time, single handed. An experienced ringer should be present in case of a mishap. Graduating to ringing two bells can follow after becoming comfortable with one at a time, again with an experienced ringer present for safety. Ringing two bells, one pulls harder to ensure neither bell will go out of control.

Having mastered control of the two bells the next step is to ring rounds, learning to fit in with the rhythm on 6, 8, 10 or 12 bells. For right-handed ringers the heavier bell is normally on the weaker (left) arm. Ringing call changes helps one learn the different ways to move the body, especially where the bell in the left hand has to strike before the one in the right hand, eg Queens. Ringing with one of the two bells leading and the other at the back (6ths, 8ths, etc) is also an interesting experience.

First steps in change-ringing

Grandsire Triples on 1-2 or 3-4 is a 'good starter' as the bells course with one between for all or most of the time. One does not have to contend with leading and lying at the same time. One need not ring conventional pairs of bells (i.e. 1 & 2 or 3 & 4, etc, as in handbell ringing) - any adjacent pair will do. So a first step in ringing even bell methods could be Plain Bob on 2-3 which course with one bell in between for all the leads except the first. Once comfortable with ringing two bells that course for much of the time it is then a smaller step to ring other pairs.

It is worthwhile assessing how one feels physically, during and after ringing. Discomfort probably indicates the need to improve the style of ringing. Aching forearms usually mean that one has not shortened the tail-ends enough, so instead of the arms being straight up at backstroke they are bent. Backstroke pulls should come from the shoulder, not the elbow.

It is worth mentioning that other people who ring with someone ringing two bells can often become distracted - having dodged with or passed one of the two bells, they forget that the same ringer still has another bell.

Another word of caution

The bells should be in good working order, with no possibility of a stay breaking or a rope slipping wheel. Many years ago I rang two bells at St. Saviours, Leicester, so some ringers could 'grab the tower' before the bells were removed. One rope slipped wheel and neatly dropped in a loop round my neck. Had I not let go of the other rope immediately to push that hand up through the loop I would not be here to tell the tale now. It was good fortune that we met eleven at Leicester Cathedral that morning and I had to ring two again; otherwise I might have given up ringing two bells.

R B Smith

Pun of the week - "A double handed ringer makes an elastic band. You meet only seven, but you can stretch to ring eight."