

The Learning Curve



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Call changes

Some while ago, there was an e-mail discussion about the merits of call changes in those towers where method ringing is the norm. Some dismissed call changes as a necessity to be accepted when method ringing was not possible. In fact some went as far as to suggest that it was better just to ring rounds if you couldn't ring methods. Extreme comments always emerge in such discussions. More interesting were the ideas of those people who felt call changes had a positive role to play in helping to develop later method ringing skills, though even they had some doubts about how well it worked in practice.

Why ring call changes

Learning to ring (in methods) involves more than just 'moving your bell around'. You must also learn to hear your bell amongst others and correlate what you see with what you hear. Call changes can give opportunities for both. In this sense, the learning experience comes not so much from the moment when bells change position but from the time in between while things are settling down. With a proficient band there should be no period of settling down, but in many cases there is, especially with one or more learners ringing.

Ringing in succession after different bells provides opportunities to see how the visual distance between the fall of ropes varies quite markedly when accurately following larger bells, smaller bells or odd struck bells.

Another important skill needed to get from 'becoming safe' to ringing competently with others, is learning to ring your bell not going up to the balance, so you can ring it accurately and rhythmically at normal speeds. This can be a bigger step than most people realise. To master it fully you need to ring a lot of rounds on a lot of different bells. Call changes can help by removing the boredom of interminable rounds. That might not sound important, but the alternatives are either losing people through lack of interest, or keeping their interest by pushing them into method ringing before their basic rhythm is secure.

It is hard to maintain concentration when only ringing rounds. Even experienced ringers find this and after a while the striking often deteriorates. In any case, people often make best progress when pushed to try something a little harder and then brought back a notch, rather than trying to do exactly the same thing until it is perfect.

The Learning Curve for September 1999 listed some 'small steps' on the way to plain hunting, including covering and hunting on small numbers of bells (starting with the front two). Call changes provide yet further steps between these and rounds, by signalling when each change is to take place, and by providing intervals between changes to allow for any settling down and re-orientation.

Getting the benefit

To provide an effective stepping stone on the way towards method ringing and consolidation of the basic skills needed to control a bell, call changes need to be positively taught. It is easy not to do so, partly because (to experienced ringers) it all seems so trivial, and partly because the way we call changes, in terms of bell numbers, is alien to the way almost everyone rings methods.

Two things can help. One is to encourage call changes to be rung well - not just that ringers follow the right bell (eventually) but that changes are accurately executed every time.

The second is to explain things properly, not just to tell people who to follow and assume they will eventually work out what is happening. The Tower Handbook suggests explaining these points before people ring call changes.

• *What happens at the change*

Two bells swap places. One speeds up for a blow and the other slows down, but only when the change is made. Once in their new positions they carry on ringing at the same speed as before. The other bells stay in the same places and ring at the same speed throughout.

• *When the call is made and when the change is made*

The call is made at one handstroke and the affected bells change place at the following handstroke.

• *Which bells change places and which stay put*

How you explain this depends on which calling method you are teaching. In all but calling down, the bells mentioned change place. See section 13.6.d-e [see below].

• *What to do to make the bell change place*

Good bell control is essential to make a clean move. In addition, realise that the change in position is much bigger than normal corrections (should be) when ringing rounds. Prepare a blow ahead of the change (by pulling a little less or more). Check or hold up to make the change. Apply compensation on the blow after the change (to prevent over shooting the mark). Try to learn what the change in rhythm feels like.

• *What bells to look for*

Knowing the two bells in front and the bell behind is sufficient to cope with any calling method.

• *What not to look for*

The one that got away. If the bell that should be in front is not there (or you don't see it) then it is best to keep going for a couple of blows by rhythm alone while picking up who to follow (or until it finds its way into the right place).

Notice that this description does not start with a list of rules for who to follow in what circumstances. If people don't understand what is happening, then a string of rules alone is likely to be hard to remember and difficult to put into effect. In fact following this explanation, the student should be able to work out the rules as an exercise, and to check the understanding.

You will also notice that the language used in the explanation is akin to the language used in method ringing. It talks about places, changes in speed and seeing what other bells around you are doing.



Calling up or calling down?

Calling styles

The descriptions above referred to the hotly argued question of different ways to call the changes. 'Calling up' and 'calling down' advocates can get quite heated on this topic.

The 'up versus down' debate probably stems from the fact that they sound like each other - an obvious source of confusion when you move between towers - whereas the others sound different. Perhaps the calling method with most to commend it as a stepping stone to method ringing is calling the pair that change (eg '2 and 3' to get 132456 from rounds) since it says precisely what happens and it is easy to work out whether you have to move, if so which way, and whether any of the bells next to you are moving.

This method is closest to 'calling up' ('2 to 3' for the example above) which also mentions the moving bells, unlike 'calling down' ('3 to 1' for the same example) which does not, but its main benefit is that it says what happens, rather than just telling (one of the bells) who to follow. All calling styles need some interpretation unless you spell out everything, which is such a mouthful it is hard to unscramble anyway! The Tower Handbook (section 11.7.e) lists pros and cons of seven styles of calling.

You can add variety to your call changes by introducing dodging (eg '3 and 4 dodge') or place making (as a dodge but changing every whole pull). Both of these help to build the bridge towards method ringing as well as sounding interesting.

On a lighter note, have you ever tried calling changes by places? It is an interesting exercise worth trying, but it is quite hard because most of us are not normally aware what place we are in while ringing call changes. Also for light relief, some bands occasionally call changes by name. That is fine so long as there are not too many Johns in your band.

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