



When things go wrong

They say that education is a preparation for life and everything that it might throw at us. Part of the preparation is learning to be aware of what might go wrong, and having the presence of mind to act appropriately when it does.

Ringling is a pretty safe activity compared with many other things that we take for granted, but things can go wrong, and on rare occasions they do. Forewarned is forearmed, so what should we teach ringers about safety? You don't want to frighten them, but it is much better to explain what can happen earlier rather than later. Make sure your trainees have your good advice before they need it, not afterwards!

There are two possibilities that ringers should learn about very early, because if they go wrong, things happen very quickly. We might summarise these as 'too high' and 'too low'.

Going too far

The most mentioned ringling mishap is a broken stay - even non ringers know about 'being taken up by the rope'. In fact, most ringers have never experienced it - so it is more dangerous when, out of the blue, it happens.

'Broken stay' is an over simplification - 'failed stay' might be more appropriate, since a straightforward break is not the only failure that causes problems. For example, the slider might jump over the end stop or might have been removed for some reason and absent mindedly not put back. Even if the stay does 'break' it might not need banging to make it do so if it has previously been cracked and weakened.

Often the stay fails in the hands of someone ringling normally, not feeling at risk, rather than being confined to 'stay-benders' and learners.

To understand the effect of stay failure, think first about what normally happens. The bell swings up to the balance, and depending on its weight and the speed of ringling it might go slightly beyond, but not far before you either hold it or bring it back. Within these few inches of the balance point, you only experience a tiny fraction of the bell's weight, because in this position, it is in almost perfect balance. This is what makes it possible to ring a bell that is many times heavier than you are. But if the bell goes beyond the position where it normally rests on the stay, then it moves out of this comfortable area of almost balancing, and the weight you feel on the rope goes up extremely rapidly. Making a few assumptions, even a modest 6cwt bell going about 6" beyond the set position could lift a heavy man off his feet.

Of course, we all know to let go in that situation, but when it happens, many people don't. By the time you realise what is happening, the bell might have gone quite a way beyond the balance, and once you are off the floor, it is very natural to hang onto the only thing that is supporting you - the rope. The longer you leave it, the higher you

go, the harder it is to let go, but worse awaits you if you don't.

Letting go does not solve the whole problem. Most stays fail at handstroke, so even if you smartly let go of the sally, you are still not out of danger. When you let go, the tail end is hanging in a loop below your hands. If you keep hold of the tail end, that too will be ripped out of your hand in a second or so. Even if you let it go at the same time as the sally the tail of the rope is likely to whip as it is pulled upwards. It could catch round your arm or hand. So as well as letting go of both ends of the rope, you should if possible step smartly backwards to reduce the risk of getting caught.

Prevention is better than cure

You can't prevent being on the end of a rope when a stay fails, but you should be able to avoid getting to the point where you can't control the bell and have to let go. That seems a bold claim, but you can take sensible precautions to detect the problem early enough to take control of the situation - providing you train yourself to do the right thing every time.

Start by assuming the worst (just like checking that the bell is down before raising it). When you raise a bell, assume that it might not have a stay on it. Never attempt to set the bell until you have shed all coils - they could tie the rope round your hand if it suddenly went tight. Then when you come to set it, don't just feel it go over the balance and let go. Bring the bell to rest just over the balance while you still have its weight, and then lower it gently, still under control, until you feel the stay. If you don't feel the stay when you expect to, be suspicious. Only let the bell go further if you are sure that you can hold its weight and pull it back. If it starts to get too heavy, then pull it back over the balance, lower it and have someone inspect it.

What if the stay fails (or just falls out) while you are ringling an ordinary touch? The same principle applies. Never drop the bell on the stay. Always stop it, feel the stay and only let go when you can feel the stay taking the weight.

Dropping

Having looked at what should be (and in most towers is) a very rare but dangerous event when the bell goes too far, let us now consider the opposite, and much more common situation, when the bell doesn't go far enough - it starts to drop. This is a different situation in many ways. Being part way down is not 'abnormal' like going over the balance. In most towers it should happen several times a week as the bells are raised and lowered. You have a little longer to think too - you haven't 'lost' if it takes a second or so to decide. Sometimes it takes a few strokes - several seconds - for the problem to develop. Above all, the response is different - the correct action is to keep the rope safe and regain control, rather than to jump ship.

How does the problem arise? It is not what the bell is doing, which is well within the range of 'normal' activity. It is the mismatch between the state of the bell and the state of the rope. You can control a bell safely at any height if you have the correct length of rope - longer for higher and shorter for lower. If the bell drops and you don't correspondingly shorten the rope, then things get floppy and the trouble starts. Push your arms up and the rope goes slack, don't put them up and you can't pull very well - the short pull, and the difficulty of keeping up with the quicker rope

movement tend to make any pull late and ineffective too, so the bell drops even more, in a vicious spiral.

A slack rope goes floppy. A fast moving floppy rope flaps wildly. That is the risk, not the bell, which left alone would ring itself down.

Failed stays strike at random, but floppy ropes inflict themselves on inexperienced ringers (or 'experienced' ringers who never fully mastered bell control). This bias towards the less experienced means that instruction on how to cope must be taught early. It is tempting not to bother at first, since you are there to supervise, but it is the best time to teach basic safety drill. If for any reason you don't include raising and lowering as part of initial tuition, then it is doubly important, since to anyone who has only rung a bell while it is up, a part down bell is in 'unknown territory'.



The basic safety drill

It must be simple and memorable. Explain it before you start and ask your pupil to repeat it at the next few sessions.

- 1 - If the rope pulls upwards out of your hand:
 - Let go of it - **at once**
 - **Never** let yourself be lifted up.
 - Let go the tail end **as well as** the sally
 - **Keep clear** of the rope as it goes up

Explain that the first stage of being lifted up can feel very much as if you are still pulling the bell - except that it is winning!

- 2 - If the rope flaps and thrashes about:
 - **Leave** the sally alone.
 - **Keep hold** of the tail end.
 - **Stand back** slightly.
 - **Shorten** the tail end until you feel the bell

Explain that after taking in rope to 'feel' the bell, both bell and rope are safe, and there is then the option either to take the bell back up or to let it ring down taking in rope as needed.

If a learner has a problem, it is tempting to rush over and grab the rope, but it is better to encourage him or her to bring the rope under control - it helps to build confidence. Obviously stand where you could intervene if necessary.

The above drill is for life, but with a pupil under initial instruction you need to add:

- 3 - If I say 'let go', let go **immediately**

We will return to look at other things we can learn about safety another month.

Tail End