



Bob Doubles – The Holy Grail?

If you came from another planet and surveyed the available methods, it would be unlikely that Plain Bob Doubles would catch your attention as anything special. It is simple, but Bastow has fewer types of work and is less than half as long. So what is so special about Plain Bob Doubles?

This question was prompted by a chance remark during a discussion between members of the NRT (Network for Ringing Training). After listing several techniques to help early development, someone said that Plain Bob Doubles was quite popular in his area, but he found that some learners were put off by it. Someone asked why, and during the discussion, it was suggested that some ringers, and learners, see Plain Bob Doubles as a kind of Holy Grail.

It's a colourful metaphor. In mythology, the grail is associated with quests – lengthy journeys beset by obstacles to find the fabled grail with magical properties. More prosaically, modern culture sees a 'holy grail' as a distant, all-but-unobtainable ultimate goal. Wikipedia quotes anti-gravity as an example. How does this relate to Plain Bob Doubles: a long journey, obstacles, magical properties, unattainable?

There is only one true grail (despite the many relics around the world claiming to be it). Is Plain Bob Doubles the one true method, or just one of many? It is one of many, but if you look and listen around the Exercise, it seems to be given a special status. Many learners are taught it as a first step beyond plain hunting. Quite a few get no further. A key teaching text is even called *Teaching from Rounds to Bob Doubles*.

In the old days

Strong views about which methods to teach people are not new. Many years ago, when *Tail End* was a lad learning to ring in a five bell tower, we were warned of the dire consequences of learning Grandsire Doubles, because it was a 'dead end method', and unlike Plain Bob it 'didn't lead anywhere'. We happily repeated this tabloid wisdom of 'Grandsire bad; Plain Bob good'. We were weaned on Plain Bob Minimus, but we happily learnt Grandsire, which was in the regular diet of the tower where we went to get most of our practice, and we went on to learn a host of other methods (Doubles, Minor or Major) that we thought we would get a chance to ring at towers we visited. The anti-Grandsire sentiment was probably an over reaction to the fact that there were towers where they rang nothing but Grandsire. Even so, it seems the pendulum has swung well and truly in a different direction now, with so many towers concentrating on Plain Bob Doubles.

Good teaching method(s)?

Aside from fashion, what makes, or doesn't make, a method good for introducing a learner to method ringing?

- How easy is it to learn? Easy learning, leaves

Reprinted from *The Ringing World* 2 September 2005. To subscribe, see www.ringingworld.co.uk/ or call 01264 366620

Collections of monthly *Learning Curve* articles from 1999 are available from CC Publications www.cccbr.org.uk/pubs/ See advertisements in *The Ringing World*.

more mental capacity for ringing it. People learn differently of course, so any method will be harder for some than others.

- How easy is it to ring? Having learnt the method as a mental exercise, it must then be translated into the required actions. Success in the execution phase depends on overcoming the difficulty of both the theoretical learning and the practical translation.

- How much of what is learnt can be carried forward? As one progresses, each step requires new things to be mastered. It helps if this builds on what has been learnt in previous steps. But it is not a simple question. For example, a method that introduces very little that is new might be good because it is a small step, but if not much new is learnt, then there is not a lot to carry forward. Perhaps we should turn the question round and ask what must be thrown away in order to move on. That too is problematic, because it depends on what the next step is. At a deeper level too, it depends on how you look at the method. For example the step progressing from Plain Bob Minimus to Grandsire Doubles is either very small (because the blue line is the same, but slightly magnified) or very large (because all the dodges and places are made on opposite strokes and in different places).

- Have we got the resources to support it? At a numbers level, this practical constraint will dominate. For example, with only three ringers present as well as the learner, you don't need even to debate whether Minimus is more appropriate than Doubles or Minor. But when it comes to method type, this can become self-perpetuating, if by avoiding something that the supporting ringers can't ring well, you ensure that they never learn to ring it well enough to provide useful support.

With these questions in mind, we can think about options for early methods.

Minimus, Doubles or Minor

Quite apart from the method family, there is the question of how many bells to ring it on. Most simple methods exist at multiple stages: Plain Bob and Bastow from Minimus upwards, Grandsire from Doubles upwards, Little Bob from Minor upwards, and so on. 90% of towers have six or more bells, and aren't constrained by having too few bells. So what are the pros and cons of different numbers?

For simplicity, ring fewer bells – it means fewer ropes to find your way amongst. So for Plain Bob, start with Minimus (or for Grandsire, start with Doubles) and then progress upwards.

As well as simplicity, ringing four bells has other benefits for the beginner. The bells are well separated, so even if the placing isn't quite accurate, it is easier for the learner to hear his or her bell among the others. It is also easier to get the bell in the right slot (ie between the right pair) because the gaps are wider.

Of course, wider gaps require correspondingly larger speed changes to move the bell between successive places. Some people think this is a disadvantage for a beginner 'because it is harder work'. That shouldn't really be an issue at this stage, except for a very small learner ringing quite large bells. By the time the learner moves on to ringing methods, he or she should be fluent in hunting (and ideally dodging and place making, as for example taught in the Kaleidoscope system). If the learner has not properly mastered the fundamental skill of making the bell change speed at this stage, then it is better to show up the

problem by ringing on four, so it can be dealt with, than to be sweep it under the carpet by ringing more.

You can reduce the physical effort, while still keeping the simplicity of a four bell method, by adding several covers in order to ring it with a six bell (or eight) bell rhythm. Of course that requires greater precision on the learner's part.

Another reason for starting with Plain Bob Minimus rather than Doubles, is that it does not contain 4 blows behind, which is an added complexity for the first method, and a bit of an oddity anyway in the Plain Bob family.

Minimus also avoids the need to make places back-hand as well as hand-back. This is an added complexity (and an alien factor for even bell ringing). A learner who has mastered hunting on 3, 4, 5 and 6 should not have any problems with this, but it does cause problems for some learners, and becoming accustomed to doing it as the norm could create a habit to be un-learnt when eventually moving on to Minor.

Covered or uncovered?

As noted above, several covers can pad out a method to ring it with the rhythm of more bells, but a single 'Tenor behind' is much more common. Is having a Tenor cover a help or a hindrance for learning methods below it? Many say it helps because (a) it provides some stability and (b) it provides a known bell to lead off. These are true statements, but both things are 'props', like stabiliser wheels on a bike. There might be a case for them when learning to hunt, but by the stage of learning methods, should we still be relying on the safety wheels? In a six bell tower the aim should be to ring a diet including six bell methods. Is it helpful to develop new ringers who don't feel comfortable ringing changes on six, which can be the result of an excessive diet of covered Doubles?

So which to use?

Thinking about the pros and cons of various methods for early teaching should help you to consider whether the methods you currently use best meet the needs of your learners. Few things are black and white of course – just different shades of grey. And don't neglect plain old treble dodging as a very simple way to teach dodging integrated with hunting.

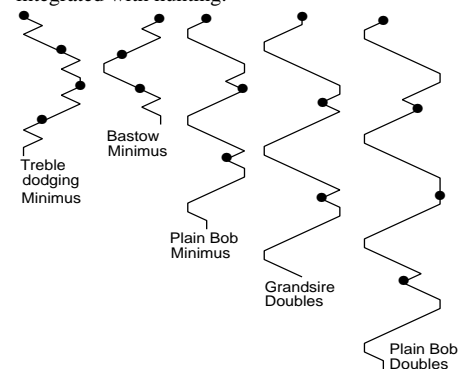


Figure 1: Various simple methods

Tail End

For information about Network for Ringing Training (NRT) see CC Education Committee website www.cccbr.org.uk/edc/nrt/nrt.php

Kaleidoscope Ringing – A Change Ringer's Alternative to Called Changes is available from: CC Publications.