



## Thinking about bell handling

What do you think about bell handling? Not a lot, you might say. In fact many people don't think much about bell handling. They might worry about it or despair about it, but that is not the same thing.

Of course the lucky ones don't need to think about it - you know, the people who take to ringing like ducks to water. They just do it without thinking, which can be infuriating for the rest who have to struggle.

In fact should we think about it at all? If the people who ring so easily don't think about it, then perhaps that is the secret. Perhaps all you need to do is take a deep breath, empty your mind and launch into the unknown, like a bird flying from the nest and soaring into the sky.

It is a nice image, and there is even a little truth in it. You can certainly stifle a practical skill by thinking too hard about it. Just imagine trying to work out what to do with your body, hands, arms, legs, ankles and feet when you run to catch a ball. Ringing a bell is just as complex. You need very accurate co-ordination of most of your body with what the bell and rope are doing - far too much to think about all the fine detail when it happens so fast.

But just because there is too much to think about doesn't mean you can guarantee success by not thinking. When you see someone handling a bell well, you are seeing the result of lots of the detailed control being built in, so it becomes automatic. A competent ringer isn't thinking about nothing. The person running for a ball is thinking very intensely about the ball, where it is going, and how to move towards it.

The secret lies in knowing what to focus on, and then training yourself to do it. In the days when posture was considered important, there were lots of things we were supposed to do: head up, chin in, arms back, chest out, back straight, and so on. Then someone discovered that if you simply focussed on lifting the back of your neck as high as possible, all the rest would fall into place.

There are some useful ways to apply this idea to bell handling, and this month we consider one of them

## Vertical hand movement

Being able to move your hands vertically is one of the secrets of good bell handling, but some people find it difficult to achieve. If your rope never seems to go where you want it, your hands are probably not moving vertically. Perhaps someone has already told you this, but you don't know what to do about it.

Obviously your arms, wrists, elbows, shoulders and back all need controlling, but if you were to analyse it all, it would be far too complex. But you can learn to move your hands in a straight line.

Most people given a chalk and a blackboard



can produce a passable version of a straight line. To do this, you have to manipulate just as many joints, but you don't think of it like that, you just focus on moving the chalk in a straight line.

When I was at school, my maths master once said "I can draw a straight line on the blackboard, so long as I can see the whole line". He was probably right, because it gave him an overall view of what he was trying to achieve. But that does not help when ringing a bell, because the one thing all instructors tell their pupils is 'not to look up'.

So how can you get an overall 'view' of the vertical movement you are trying to achieve for your hands? As with many aspects of bell handling, the answer is 'by feel'. Once you learn what vertical movement feels like, it is much easier to do it. Some people pick it up without trying, but for the many that don't, there is a simple exercise that can help.

### The hand ring exercise

Untie the rope of a bell that is down and let it hang vertically. Stand in front of it in the normal ringing position and form a ring around the rope with your hands, so that the thumbs and forefingers are touching at the tips. Depending on the size of your hands, they will make a circle of 4" - 6" across, with the rope in the middle.

Slowly move your hands upwards, making sure that they don't touch the rope. Keep going until your arms are at full stretch. If you can't do this without touching the rope, then perhaps you are standing too far from the rope. Check that it is hanging only a couple of hand breadths in front of your nose.

Now move your hands slowly down until they are fully extended, still taking care not to touch the rope. Your hands should now be well below your waist (unless you have very short arms).

When you have got this far, you know that you can move your arms accurately in a vertical

line by concentrating. Now you have to build on that so you can do it without concentrating.

Move your hands back up again to full stretch, then down again. Each time try to move your hands a little faster, but still make sure you don't touch the rope. When you can do it with your hands moving quickly, try closing your eyes.

Keep practising this until you can do it easily, and you still don't touch the rope. You have now taught yourself what vertical hand movement feels like. You probably haven't thought very much (if at all) about your arms, elbows and so on, which proves you didn't need to in the first place.

You can repeat this exercise as often as you need, and you don't even need to be in the tower. You could hang up a long piece of rope or cord at home just as well.

Now you need to translate your newly found skill into normal ringing. Don't be despondent if at first your old habits reappear. It takes time to unlearn things as well as to learn them. When you are ringing, there are many other things to occupy your mind, but keep reminding your body what the vertical movement feels like, and it should gradually become easier.

We will think about how to focus on other aspects of bell handling in future issues.

*The hand ring exercise is one of several exercises that can be done 'off line' described in The Tower Handbook, available from CC Publications. The idea is adapted from one first published in 1957 in Part 1 of The Ringers' Manual of Reference, long out of print.*

Tail End

## Dear Aunt Sally

*I see peals and quarter peals in The Ringing World. Would an 'eighth peal' be recognised?*

Not as such. It would just be considered as a longish 'touch', ie ordinary, everyday ringing. A quarter peal is a widely recognised performance and thousands are rung and published in The Ringing World every year. Half peals are occasionally rung and recorded as such, but they are very rare. Possibly the quarter peal length has become most popular because it fits nicely in for service ringing.

40 - 50 minutes is perhaps a little longer than most service ringing, but not too much so. It gives time to settle down and develop a good rhythm, and one continuous piece of ringing is noticeably different, signalling to those outside listening that the service to follow is probably special.

Many quarter peals are indeed rung by local bands in their own tower for special services.

Of course there is no reason why you should not ring a touch that is an eighth of a peal long. If you are working up to ringing your first quarter peal, a long touch of 20 minutes or so could be a useful stepping stone to build up your confidence. But it would be unusual to publish it. After all, if you ring at a 12 bell tower and ring a plain course of a Surprise maximus, that is 528 changes long and takes about 20 minutes to ring.

Aunt Sally