



Thinking about bellhandling - Feeling the bell

This topic was sparked off by a perceptive remark on the *RinginEducationNet*¹ discussion list, in response to April's Learning Curve (RW p 396). "In my experience beginners worry a lot about the rope length, knots, and boxes, when the skill they're after is 'what the bell feels like on the end of the rope.'"

Most accomplished ringers would agree that good ringing depends heavily on feeling what the bell is doing, but this remark also recognised something else, that we might lose the message amidst detailed teaching about the nuts and bolts of doing this, that or the other. So I thought it might be interesting to see what the 'experts' who wrote the books had to say on the subject of feeling. And since ideas about how to teach have probably changed over the years, I looked at books published some while ago, as well as more recent ones.

What the books say

Over a century ago Jasper Snowdon, in *Ropesight*, mentions feeling the bell four times in his few pages on bell handling. He says little about learning how to feel, but concludes with "A man should be able to pull off his bell and ... ring it with his eyes shut ... as soon as possible." To do that, you have to ring by feel!

Between the wars, ES & M Powell's *Ringers' Handbook* mentions feeling twice in the few pages on bellhandling, though the first is almost by accident. It justifies exercises like setting the bell at every stroke for "The power of control and feel of balance that the exercise affords".

In mid-century, Albert York-Bramble does not mention 'feel' at all in his rather mechanistic *Ringers Manual of Reference*, but he includes some useful exercises to help ringers learn what the bell feels like near the balance, and what vertical movement of the arms feels like.

In *The Tutor's Handbook*, written in the '70s and recently updated, Wilf Moreton talks about "feeling...by body rhythm...when the bell should strike". He does not use the word 'feel' extensively, but describes exercises that help develop a better feel. He describes the need 'to move the arms at the same speed as the rope', which is very much about feel, and the importance of tautness in the muscles before lifting the bell, necessary to feel it near the balance. Rather oddly, the comprehensive list of 41 handling faults and how to correct them does not include over pulling, one of the main barriers to feeling what the bell is doing.

A decade later, Norman Chaddock's *Manual of Bell Control* mentions feeling once. It too includes balancing exercises and puts great emphasis on the need to be able to pause the bell just over the balance while ringing, something that

can only be done by feel. This is one of the few books that describes teaching handling starting with the bell down, because it helps to develop "a natural cycle of operations".

Peter Hurcombe's *Tower Captain and the Training of Ringers* mentions feeling four times, eg: adjusting the rope to be able to feel the bell going past the balance, catching the sally earlier for a "better opportunity to feel the weight and movement of the bell". It warns that the instructor's pull "masks the feel of ... the bell".

In the early '90s, in *Ringin Skills* John Harrison provocatively says that the main purpose of the rope is not to pull the bell but to feel what the bell is doing. He emphasises the need to feel how the bell swings "blending arm movements to the rhythm of the bell", and to feel the different intervals when hunting.

In the late '90s, Peter Wenham's *Bellringing by Instalments* talks about the need to feel the bell through the rope, with great emphasis on the need to avoid tenseness and over pulling

Richard Pargeter's *One Way to Teach Bell Handling* mentions feeling four times just describing teaching the backstroke, and the word GENTLY springs from the page. He says "one of the most important things you are trying to teach him at this stage is the feel of the bell" and he concludes with "remember you are trying to cultivate that cool, calm and unflappable air".

Finally, *The Tower Handbook* mentions feeling over twenty times in the section on teaching bell handling, a dozen times in the section on learning bell handling, and several times more in sections on teaching raising and lowering, and teaching speed control.

So what?

Overall, the experts think feeling is important. Earlier writers talked about it, but gave few clues about how to develop it. Later writers give more information about the methods and techniques. Recent writers discuss feeling more fully, and giving advice on techniques.

How do you learn to feel the bell?

To the lucky ones 'it just comes', but the rest can do several things to make it easier.

- Don't overpull
- Ring rhythmically
- Learn what you expect it to feel like
- Feel what your bell is doing *all* the time

Not over-pulling is essential. If you are pulling hard, and especially if you pull jerkily, all you will feel is your own pull. It is especially important to feel the bell as it rises towards the balance. If faster than you intended, then you need to check a little more and earlier than you would have done, if slower then check a little less.

Once you start over pulling, you get into one of two vicious circles. In the commonest you continually fight to stop the bell going over the balance. Because you pulled too hard (on the down stroke) the bell rushes up to the next stroke and you have to check hard. When your arms are tense, it is harder to switch the force on and off, and you end up pulling hard on the down stroke too. And so it goes on.

The other vicious circle affects people ringing big bells with larger wheels than they are used to. The bigger wheel means the rope should rise quite a long way, but you catch the sally too soon and tense your arms ready for the big pull. By starting to pull before the bell gets to the top of its swing,

you stop it getting there. So it keeps dropping, and you manfully keep pulling.

If instead of pulling so soon, you felt the rope rise and only pulled when it got to the top of the swing, you might be surprised just how far it would rise. You might also be surprised how light it feels as it nears the top - and that makes the point. You must develop a delicate touch or you won't feel what the bell is doing.

A rhythmic style of ringing means that the sense of rhythm within you helps you to 'aim for' the next blow based on what has gone before, rather than 'waiting for a rope to follow'. The bell cannot respond instantly, so you must anticipate what to do next. Rhythmic ringing gives you a feel for what to expect next.

Learning what to expect is not as difficult as it sounds. You already have an expectation about how the rope will move, and if it deviated widely from that you would notice. So it is a case of refining what you have to detect more subtle changes. You must also be aware of how what you do to the bell will affect it.

This all takes practice, and won't happen overnight. So you need to make an effort all the time to detect what the bell is doing by feel.

What about rope length?

Ringin with a rope too long or too short undermines all this and makes feeling more difficult. How do you know the right rope length? - by feel. If your shoulders are pulled out of their sockets it is too short. If everything feels floppy and your hands never go very high, then it is too long.

The best length will vary with the bell, the speed of ringing, you, and how you are feeling. Looking at where your hands are before they start won't tell you this. You must feel how it is while you are ringing and adjust it as you go along. On a bell of any weight you need to adjust it between hunting up and down too.

The reward

There is a virtuous spiral waiting for you. Learn to feel the bell, and you will be more comfortable with it, and get earlier feedback of any handling inaccuracies (much quicker than ropesight or listening) so you can correct them more quickly. Sometimes this can be almost before they happen - ringing with long steady strokes, you can detect and correct before the bell rises to the balance. With handling inaccuracies smoothed out, your ringing will become smoother, more relaxed, confident and predictable. This in turn will help you feel more accurately what the bell is doing.

Tail End

There is a bibliography of ringing books, including those mentioned, at <http://cccbr.org.uk/bibliography/> with an index at <http://cccbr.org.uk/bibliography/index/>

¹ RinginEducationNet was an e-mail discussion list for people interested in ringing teaching and learning.

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