

The Learning Curve

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To move or not to move?

Should you hold up if the bell in front of you rings wide? This old chestnut emerged briefly recently on the RingingEducationNet e-mail list.

The ideal and the reality

In ideal ringing successive blows are evenly spaced (apart from the open handstroke lead that counts as an extra blow). In rounds all the bells ring at exactly the same speed and in changes, the different speeds exactly match to maintain the same even pattern.

We should all try to get as close as possible to this ideal, but many bands find it impossible, (even the best don't always manage it). Some people ring unsteadily and some make mistakes. We should all be able to cope with other people's imperfections, but how best can we do so? Conditions differ but there are some general principles that should help.

Different problems

The particular case when 'the bell in front rings wide' is only one aspect of the imperfection you might face. Sometimes the same problem repeats, with a bell ringing consistently in the wrong place (too wide, too close, or opposite ways at back and hand). At other times there is no such pattern, with the position erratic and unpredictable. Then again, the problem might be with a single bell or a general malaise affecting several bells.

The basic 'should I move' question hides several others. Should you pull in over a bell that is quick as well as holding up over one that is wide? Is it better to crash with the bell behind you or the one in front? Should you respond to sudden moves or only steady errors? What about trying to 'smooth things out'?

The case for moving

It is undesirable for two bells to clash. If another bell moves into your place and you stay there, you will clash with it. In fact, it would be more accurate to say it clashes with you, but the effect is still the same. Those who advocate moving want to avoid this happening.

To refine the question, we might debate how close to you the other bell must come before it warrants evasive action. What is a clash, rather than a clip, or merely too small a gap?

The problems with moving

Evasive action is not without its side effects, most of them undesirable, so we need to understand them. We will look at four in turn:

- Knock-on
- Confusion
- Manoeuvrability
- Stability

Knock-on

Knock-on effects are the most direct, as shown in Figure 1. If the 4th moves to avoid the errant 3rd, it then invades the space of the 5th and creates another problem. To avoid that the 5th must also move, causing a problem for the 6th, and so on.

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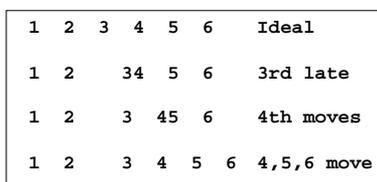


Figure 1

In fact even this understates the problem - the row 1-6 is not an isolated entity, but part of a continuous flow of sound, as shown in Figure 2, so what looks like a solution at the bottom of Figure 1, actually propagates the problem into the following row, as shown in figure 3.



Figure 2

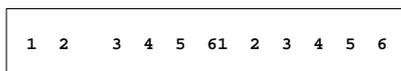


Figure 3

Confusion

All the time you are ringing, you should be listening to the gaps between your bell and those before and after it to check that you are in the right place. If your handling is not very steady, you are likely to hear quite a lot of errors, each of which needs correcting, but if you hear no errors, then know that you are in the right place - as long as the others are in their right places.

If the other bells are not in their right places, things get much harder. As well as more clatter going on, you no longer have a clear reference against which to judge your own striking. If you don't know whether you are right or wrong, it is a fair bet that you soon will be wrong. If the bells striking next to yours move whenever you make a mistake, it deprives you of the vital clues about how you are fitting in, and what correction you need, if any.

Manoeuvrability

Ringers don't use this word but it is pretty appropriate. Bells are large heavy objects and getting them from one 'place' to another, whether in changes or to correct an error, needs great accuracy. The 'manoeuvrability' of the bell is critical to being able to do this, but the hard fact is that bells in general are not all that manoeuvrable. The rules of called changes and method ringing are built around this fact, which is why all normal methods never require you to move further than the adjacent place in one go.

Called changes give warning of moves, and when ringing a method you know which way your bell will move ahead of time, so you can plan ahead to make all moves smoothly and accurately. Trying to jump out of the way if the bell in front erratically rings wide (or the bell behind is about to clip you by striking too early) means making sudden, last-minute corrections (like trying to ring a method that you haven't learnt properly). This is error prone, and sometimes you will over shoot, giving the person behind an even bigger last-minute correction problem.

Stability

Stability is another word used by too few ringers. Something that can resist small disturbances and return to its steady state is stable.

If it can't, it is unstable.

If we all ring to the best of our ability, smoothly, rhythmically and steadily in the right place, then the inevitable disturbances when people make trips or strike bad blows have limited effect - everyone relies strongly on the underlying rhythm (even if it is imperfect).

If at every blow, everyone makes last minute adjustments, not to smooth out their own imperfections but to copy someone else's mistakes, then disturbances tend to grow, and spread through the whole band. Everyone tries to get out of the way of someone else, the speed keeps varying and there is no underlying rhythm, so even those members of the band who are trying to ring steadily find it harder.

Different bells

Heavy bells are less manoeuvrable - you must think further ahead for planned moves. Trying to track an erratic bell is unrealistic, and likely to be badly executed even if attempted.

You can move light bells more rapidly, but an easily moved bell needs more discipline to ring steadily, so there is a greater danger of instability in the overall rhythm.

Repeated errors in rounds

If in rounds (or called changes) someone rings steadily in the wrong place, the others can adapt to it without the problems of instability. One bell has an abnormal gap in front of it and the others evenly share out the remaining time. It sounds wrong but better than continual clashes. While it is possible, one has to question the point of doing it. If the ringer causing the problem is capable of ringing steadily and reliably in the same (wrong) place, would it not be better to give him or her advice to move slightly and ring steadily in the right place? It would sound much better.

Errors in methods

Repeated errors in methods (eg close hunting up and wide hunting down) require great skill to work around without the rhythm falling apart.

The commonest method errors are erratic. Trying to jump out of the way destabilises the ringing and makes things worse. You can best help by trying to provide a stable framework within which the errant ringer(s) might be able to settle down and find their correct places.

Figure 4 is reproduced from *The Follow on Book*. It speaks for itself!

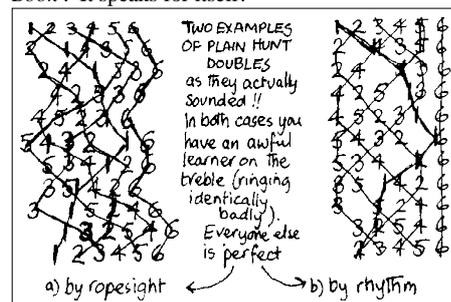


Figure 4

Tail End

The Follow on Book is available from Pam Copson, 40 Hammerton Way, Wellesbourne, WARWICK, CV35 9NT, price £5 for 8 books. See <http://www.btinternet.com/~copson>

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