



Coils and things

Last month's *Learning Curve* was about chiming - which most of us associate almost exclusively with the end of lowering in peal. The *Learning Curve* began, in June 1999, with an article about raising and lowering in peal, so perhaps it is time to look again at another problem people often have - making coils.

It is very easy when we teach raising and lowering, to overlook the importance of proper coil handling. We don't intend to overlook it of course, we show our pupils how to make coils (or at least we should) but a quick demonstration at the start is often not enough to avoid later problems.

Coils in perspective

Coils are important, but should not be first thing to explain when teaching someone to lower a bell. To bring a bell down you need to work your hands progressively up the rope from the tail end. The reason is obvious - as the bell swings through a ever smaller angles, the rope travel gets less and less. In order to maintain proper control, you need to reach up with your arms at every stroke, and to keep doing that as the bell comes down, your hands have to work further and further up the rope.

Coils are for the spare rope

We make coils to tidy up the spare rope below the hands and stop it flapping about. As long as you do that, you won't have problems. Unfortunately some people get so engrossed in making the coil that instead of using spare rope hanging below their hands, they make the coil out of the rope above their hands. Just think what that does. Even if the coil is only 4" (100mm) across then it shortens the rope by over a foot (300mm). When you are trying to come down steadily at the same speed as everyone else, taking in that much rope at once is almost certain to drop your bell and leave you struggling to keep it up. This is quite a common problem, so how do you avoid it?

If you think about it, the way to make a coil while ringing a bell down is different from the way most people makes coils prior to raising one. It is also different from the way you coil up almost everything else in life: washing lines, hose-pipes, extension leads, climbing ropes, etc. Most of us learn to do these things before we start ringing, so the habit has become ingrained and we have some important unlearning to do.

If you teach ringers, show them how to make coils correctly, get them to practice doing it with the rope of a bell that is down, and then watch what they do while ringing - not just initially, when lowering a single bell, but later, when learning to lower in peal. The added pressure can lead to relapses in things like coil handling.

Step by step

Making the first coil seems to cause most problems. Before you do so, you should be

working your hands steadily up the rope, progressively feeding more spare rope into the tail, as shown on Figure 1, a, b and c. Don't keep your hands in the same place on the rope, and compensate by ringing with more and more bent arms. If you do that, you will not have proper control of the bell. How long it takes to accumulate enough rope for a coil will depend on how quickly or how slowly the bell is coming down - normally many whole pulls.

The next three steps, d, e and f, all take place very quickly, while the rope is slack after the handstroke. The first, and most important thing to notice is that the upper hand (right hand for most people) should not move up or down the rope. It is the controlling hand, and it must stay in the same position or you will disrupt the smooth movement of the bell. It is the lower hand that looks after tidying up the spare rope.

First the lower hand moves to the end of the rope (d). Holding the end, it moves towards the other hand (e) and completes the coil by getting hold of the rope just below the upper hand (f).

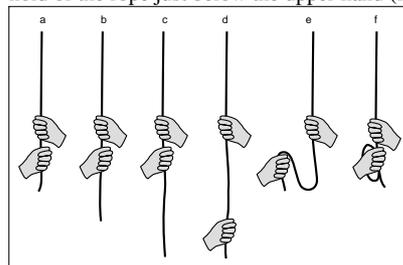


Figure 1: Preparing and in making a coil

You have to do the whole thing in under a second, without looking, while you keep ringing the bell, so you must learn to do it fluently, or you will worry about getting it wrong.

When you first make the coil, it will be quite small around your hand (unless you let the tail end get very long before making it) but it will grow as you feed more rope through your hands.

Making the second coil is very similar to the first, except that the rope you use is in the first coil, rather than hanging free. Wait until the first coil is quite a bit bigger than you want it to be. Making the new coil will use up some of it, and makes it smaller. You don't want to end up with a fist full of tiny coils.

Lowering without coils

As a small digression, it is worth mentioning that you can lower a bell without making any coils at all if you can keep your arm movement smooth enough, so that the loose tail end doesn't flap around too much. That is quite hard, which is why we use coils.

There is a lot to be said for this simple approach when teaching though. You can introduce a new pupil to lowering a bell at the end of the first lesson. Explain what happens as the bell comes down, and about the need to move the hands a few inches up the rope each stroke. Explain also about the need to check the bell (resist the up movement) and not pull it (on the down movement).

Let your pupil practice working the grip up and down the rope of a bell that is down, before doing it on a live bell. Whether your pupil has been ringing both strokes or not during the lesson, once the bell is below the balance, it is better for the instructor to look after the sally and let the pupil concentrate on climbing up the rope and checking (and not pulling). When the loose tail end gets longer than a foot or so, catch it at the tip to stop it

flapping. At first you will need to move the end up and down in time with the bell to make sure it doesn't impede the natural movement of your pupil's arms. From this point on, your pupil simply continues inching up the rope as the bell comes down, and you look after the tail end.

Problems

Anxiety can delay making the first coil. Unfortunately, putting it off makes things worse: more rope flapping, probably ringing with bent arms, the pace getting faster. Make a small coil as soon as possible, while things are fairly sedate, you probably won't need another one until the sally stroke is more or less gone, and rope handling generally much easier.

Another problem is caused by making the coil too slowly. Why does speed matter? Remember that this is happening while the rope is still moving up and down several feet, every few seconds. If thinking about making a coil makes your lower hand hesitate, then it gets left behind, and your hands are pulled apart by the rope. This draws much of the rope out of the coil, so you can easily end with a large number of quite small coils wrapped around your hands.

Overheard

On holiday, I visited a local practice. It was a good practice - several visitors meant the locals could ring things they often couldn't. When we caught hold to lower, the local in charge said 'Close but not touching'. I had not heard this phrase before, but it made an impression. Short and to the point, it was instantly memorable, and its meaning was immediately clear.

As with any snappy saying, one could quibble - for example about how close is close - but that misses the point. The advice is not a substitute for the need to think, nor does it absolve anyone from the need to make judgements about the accuracy of their striking. Instead, it reminds us that the key ingredient of a good lower is for all the bells to get closer to each other - so close in fact that there is a very real risk of adjacent bells clipping unless great care is taken. Of course you can't attempt to give quantitative instructions - that would be naive - but you can help to focus everyone's mind on what matters.

More confusion

Lowering a bell, is all about changing speed, and it is worth mentioning another little bit of confusion, of which most of us are guilty. Have you ever told someone to 'ring quicker' when you really meant 'ring sooner'? In all ringing, and especially when raising and lowering, we need to be aware of two related but different things: position and speed. You need to adjust the position to fit evenly between the adjacent bells, but the speed at which you ring must be exactly the same as everyone else, otherwise you would get further and further out of place with each blow. Experienced ringers learn to do the right thing when ringing their own bells, but unfortunately many of us are less precise when giving advice to others.

Does it matter, if we all know what we mean? If people get used to assuming that 'quicker' means 'sooner', what can you say when you do want someone to change speed? And will it have any effect? After all, speed control, and the ability to fine tune by moving the hands slightly up or down the rope (like raising and lowering but in microcosm) is fundamental to good ringing.

Tail End