The Learning Curve

A regular feature sponsored by the Central Council Education Committee
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Leading

The Learning Curve in December caused some discussion in the letters page of *The Ringing World*, in particular about coming down to lead. So this month we look at leading.

Why is leading special?

Ideally ringing bells follow one another in a continuous flow of sound. In some places they ring 'closed lead', which is literally a continuous flow, but in most parts of the ringing world we ring 'open leads', so the sound is punctuated by a small pause every two rows, as in Figure 1. All intervals should be identical, except the extra gap of the open lead. It gives the sound a structure, a bit like verses in a hymn.

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...456  123456123456  123456123456  123456123456  123...
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Figure 1: Continuous flow with open leads

In theory the pause represents one missing blow, so (on six bells) everyone's handstrokes and backstrokes account for beats 1 to 12 of a 13 beats rhythm, with the 13th beat being the gap. In practice, the length of the gap varies a little in different places, but probably less than people imagine. If you generate the sound automatically, and vary the gap, both a half beat gap and a beat and a half gap sound very odd.

The pattern looks simple on paper, but there are hidden complexities. What you hear as a continuous flow of sound is made up of bells striking at both handstroke and backstroke, which we see differently in the tower. The ringers' hands, are with or without sallies. The sallies themselves are either at head level or up in the air. Either way, things look a bit disjointed, and Figure 2 is intended to illustrate this disjointedness.

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...456          123456          123456
      123456          123456          123...
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Figure 2: Continuous flow of hand and back

It is much harder to see this as a continuous flow, and even harder to discern where the extra gaps are (at the left, centre and right of Figure 2). Of course, you don't see rows of numbers floating high and low across the ringing chamber, but it illustrates the difficulty you can have if you try to lead by eye alone.

Leading or following

The lead bell is at the edge of all this discontinuity, which is what makes leading hard. But it is important to realise that leading is not 'out at the front' forging a path, like the leader of a column of marching soldiers. Although this is a convenient way to write things down on paper, ringing isn't like that. Each row does not run in a straight line, with a start and end. The ringing goes round in a continuous cycle, as shown in Figure 3.

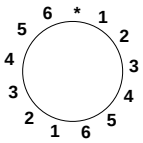

Figure 3: Rounds as a continuous cycle

How to lead

Your goal when leading is the same as when ringing any other bell - to fit into the continuous flow of sound. To do this accurately you must rely heavily on rhythm, and you must check that the sound of your bell (not the rope) is striking in the right place. But before you can engage this accurate process, you need to be in roughly the right place. It's a bit like driving - you steer between the kerb and the white line, but first you must find the right street.

Getting into the right street in ringing (say within a place) relies more on visual cues, and it is here that leading is different, because you can't just aim to pull a few inches after the rope of the bell in front. People are taught several guides to leading in the right place.

• Follow the Tenor on the opposite stroke, but a bit wider (to compensate for the fact that small bells strike more quickly compared to the movement of their ropes than big ones).

• Time your sally's down stroke just before the Tenor's sally rises. This relies on rhythm, as your down stroke starts before getting to where you check.

• Time the bottom of your stroke to coincide with the Tenor striking. This too relies on rhythm, and assumes you can pick out the Tenor by ear, which is easier than picking out the Treble if it is in the wrong place.

These methods are a start, but you must aim to be able to lead by where your bell sounds in relation to the Tenor.

Fitting in

The lead bell needs to fit into the overall pattern, like everyone else, and the handstroke gap is part of this pattern. If you leave too wide a gap, as in Figure 4, it breaks up the flow, with a jerky, uneven sound. Even if everyone else manages to absorb the lost time, as in (a) the gaps will break up the rhythm. More likely, as in (b) the front bells will ring wider to get out of the way, causing an ugly bunch further back.

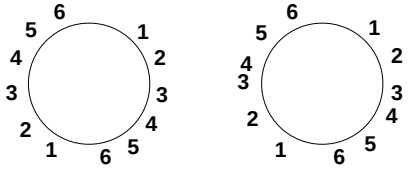

Figure 4: Effect of leading too wide

Misleading cues

Visual methods of leading (or ringing in any other place) are approximate and visual cues can mislead you, especially with odd struck bells. Even when ringing mostly by rhythm and listening, what you see can still affect you. We are visual animals, and visual cues tend to dominate (unless you are blind or ring with your eyes shut).

When you lead, the the disjoint effects make visual cues more confusing, so being rhythmic and listening are even more important.

Listening

Listen to the whole sound, and focus on how your bell fits in. That seems hard at first, but like anything else, it gets easier with practice. Always listen, even when you are not ringing. Concentrate especially on the sound of the Tenor and the lead bell. Learn to feel what an even rhythm sounds like, and how the open handstroke gap fits into the pattern. Listen to some really good ringing. If you can't find it locally, there are plenty of records. Find a tower fitted with a simulator and practice ringing with it. If you have not rung with one before start ringing as the Tenor, and then move on to leading. You will find it takes more will power to launch your bell out ahead of the sound, with nothing to look at, but when you get used to it, you will find it a huge confidence boost. Practice with listening teaching aids such as the tapes/CDs *Listen to Ringing* and *Listen to Ringing - Live*.

Listening when leading is harder because the handstroke gap presents an aural discontinuity. It is harder to check whether the sound fits into an even sequence with a double sized gap in front of the blow you are listening to. Ringing the Treble adds to the discontinuity with the jump from low notes to high ones, which can mask small position errors.

Static and dynamic leading

In a method, your time at lead is brief and transient, which brings extra complications, as discussed in December. David Wilcox (RW 19) thought that moving from 4ths place to 3rds was the same as moving from 2nds to 1st. While hunting down, the move from backstroke to handstroke should be the same, whichever place you are in, which of course it should. But to ring a tower bell accurately, especially one of any weight, you can't just ring one move at a time. As well as placing 'this' blow, you must prepare the bell for what it will do on the following stroke. In that sense, moving to lead is different, because it precedes the change of speed on the following blow. Jim Heading (RW 115) described this rather nicely by comparing it to the need for a pilot to 'round out' when landing an airliner. Many inexperienced ringers coming down to lead don't round out. It is just as well that they are not flying airliners, or there would be a lot of broken under carriages around, and a big bill for repairing runways.

JH felt that if leading in rounds were no different from ringing in any other position, then we would not need to spend so much effort teaching learners to hold up at handstroke. He felt that successive bells following the Treble progressively absorbed the difference between handstroke and backstroke, removing the difference for the back bells. That does sometimes happen but it shouldn't. The intervals between successive blows should be even, as in Figure 3. Count the spaces between handstroke and backstroke for each bell. The interval going from back to hand is one space longer than it is going from hand to back, for every bell, as DW points out.

In summary

Leading is difficult, but it gets easier with practice, providing you know the pitfalls. There is more to it than meets the eye (literally) and it is worth the effort to get it right. The quality of leading has a disproportionate effect on the quality of ringing, especially when one or two bells spend a long time on the front, as in St Clements or Kent. Make sure the rhythm is good while you are on the front!

Tail End

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