



Ropesight

Ropesight is a word that you won't find in a dictionary. It is peculiar to ringing, and there can be few ringers who haven't heard of it. Everyone says it is 'a good thing', but they don't always agree what it means. Some ringers acquire it effortlessly, while others struggle. That's not surprising since many people get little or no advice on how to develop ropesight, and may not even be given a clear idea of what exactly it entails. For many aspiring ringers, there is a mystique surrounding ropesight – it is a magic skill providing access to an inner sanctum of ringers, which they somehow hope will one day be revealed to them.

In August 2006, *The Learning Curve* discussed where people look when ringing, but only briefly mentioned ropesight.

What is ropesight?

The best way to think about it is as a skill that enables you to pick out useful information from what you see when you look at the other ropes. It plays a major role for ringers in what researchers call 'situation awareness'. This is the subject of much research, but the Wikipedia entry includes a very good layman's definition: 'knowing what is going on so you can figure out what to do'. Ringers with good ropesight are aware of what is happening around them, and as a result can ring much more confidently.

Ropesight is about seeing the big picture – making sense of all the ropes – as well as the more the more focused picture – relationships between individual ropes, including your own. (You don't see your own rope, but you can feel what it is doing.) If you just look narrowly at individual ropes, you are less likely to see the important relationships, and occasionally, you won't be looking at ropes that are significant.

Widen your view

Unless you have already developed the habit, you might think it impossible to look at all the ropes at once, because they are spread out to your left and right. The secret is **how** you use your eyes. If you look at an individual rope, then that is what you will see. You might notice the ones alongside it, but not much more, because your attention is focused on one place. When you concentrate like that, your brain tends not to process your whole field of view, which is about 180° with peripheral vision. (Figure 1 is a head and shoulders view from above). So you only take in part of the picture. And if you turn your head towards one rope, then others may be completely outside your field of view.

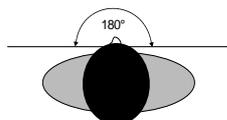


Figure 1: Field of view while ringing

The best strategy is to face so that the ropes extend equally to your left and right, to resist the temptation to **look** at individual ropes, and to stare

ahead. With normal eyesight, you will be able to see all of the ropes moving up and down.

When you can take in the whole picture, ropesight becomes much easier. You can still focus mentally on parts of it, but the whole is always there to ensure you don't miss anything.

Think of a swimming race, with swimmers moving up and down their separate lanes. You see who is in the lead and who is second. You can also see who is just ahead of the swimmer in blue. You can still see this even though some of the swimmers have turned round at the ends and are going opposite ways to each other.

Now replace swimmers with ropes, make the lanes much shorter, and arrange them vertically round the room. Speed up the swimmers to a couple of seconds per length, and let them do lots of overtaking, so that most either overtake or are overtaken on every length. Finally, note that your hands are one of the 'swimmers'. You know where they are, even when out of sight.

Seeing the bells you change with

This is one of the most useful ways to exploit ropesight, because the essence of change ringing is that adjacent pairs of bells continually swap places. So every time you move, you swap either with the bell striking immediately after you or with the bell striking immediately before you. These are the bells with which you actually work blow by blow, and fortunately they are also easier to spot than some of the others. You still need all the ropes in view, but you pick out and concentrate on just a few.

If someone asked you to explain how you could see whether swimmer A was ahead of swimmer B, then your description would almost certainly refer to some sort of imaginary line across the pool. In the tower too, an imaginary line across the ropes enables you to compare the position of ropes that are not next to each other.

When your bell is near the balance, your rope moves relatively slowly, as we saw last month. The ropes of the bells striking closest to yours are also moving slowly. So, across your view of the ropes, you should see two other slow moving ropes, one just ahead of yours and one just behind it. The remaining ropes will be moving more rapidly, as well as being 'further away'. Keep your gaze at eye level, and don't be tempted to follow the sallies up at backstroke. Looking at the ringers' hands is just as good, and their faces can give you extra clues about what is going on. You can still see the whole rope movement in peripheral vision.

You may have been advised when hunting up to 'follow the bell that follows you'. That relies on being able to pick out the one following you in the first place. It is one of your 'easy to spot' neighbours. Less often do you hear the converse about hunting down: 'ring in front of the bell that you just followed', but it is just as good for seeing how you move through the other bells. Of course, you can't wait for the other bell and then ring under it, but you shouldn't rely on seeing another rope before placing your next blow anyway.

The picture evolves

Look at the big picture all the time, and you should also become aware that some ropes are 'before' you and 'after'. As the pattern evolves, you can anticipate where the next rope 'near you' will come from. When hunting up, you expect the next rope to emerge from the 'above' group, but turn to hunt down (even for a blow, as in Cambridge places) and the bell you swap with

will have come from the 'below' group.

Seeing the front and back

Now let's think about the whole picture. It can be useful to see where the front and the back are, and to judge roughly where your bell fits in between. Everyone gets lost from time to time, and if you suddenly wake up and don't know what you are doing, let alone what you should be doing, then you need some way to get your bearings rapidly. Knowing where you really are is an essential first step before you can even start to sort yourself out. Someone once said that it was forgivable not to know where you should be, but unforgivable not to know where you are. If you can see where the front and back are (the position of the first and last 'swimmer') relative to you, then it gives you a pretty good idea of your own position. So if someone says 'lead now', and you can see that you in the middle, then you know to pull in more sharply than if you were in 2nd place. Similarly, if you can see that you are near the back, then you know you are unlikely to get to lead in one go, and will probably need to 'meet yourself coming the other way'.

Seeing other bells

When you can reliably see the bells striking near you, and where the front and back are, you can start to think about seeing other bells. You can often use another bell as a sign post for what you are doing. There are various ways that you can do that, so let's just look at two.

If you go awry in a simple method like Plain Bob, someone might tell you 'follow bell X down to lead'. (Strictly they should say 'course' the bell, rather than 'follow', but nobody ever does.) You need to strike two places after it (with the intermediate places occupied by the bells hunting up past you). For this to work, you must be able to see when you are two places after another bell, which is harder than just seeing the one next in front of you, but if you can do it, you can latch onto your correct position much sooner than if you had to wait until you were supposed to be leading. Also, the person giving the advice doesn't need to tell you exactly which place you are in at which stroke, because the advice remains valid for several strokes. Here too, you need to see where the front is, since when the bell you are coursing gets to the front, then you catch it up and lead.

If you can see where the Treble is, and especially when it leads, then if you know how the method works, you can often put yourself right again after a trip.

Ropesight and other skills

Ropesight is only one of the skills you need to ring well, and it needs to be complemented by other skills, each of which has a role to play. Using a skill for the wrong purpose leads to a worse result. Ropesight is very good for seeing what is happening around you, for working out how you fit in, for reminding yourself what you are doing, and so on. It can be used to get you to roughly the right place in a mix-up, but it is not good for trying to strike your bell accurately. For that you need a combination of rhythm and listening. There isn't space to discuss them here, but *Ringling Skills* explains the different skills and how they complement each other.

Tail End

Ringling Skills is available from: CC Publications.