The Learning Curve

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Knowing your place

This isn't a treatise on Victorian social structures, but a look at an aspect of learning methods that some of us take for granted, while others never use. Different people's minds work in slightly different ways (so there is not one 'right' way to learn methods) but one aspect – the concept of a place bell – is more useful than many people realise. *The Learning Curve* has often referred to place bells, but not discussed them in their own right.

What is a place bell?

There are two different meanings, but they are closely connected. Literally, '3rds place bell' means the bell in 3rd place at a lead head. In case you have forgotten the difference between a lead head and a lead end, the lead head occurs on the Treble's second blow at lead. The first lead head is the Rounds from which the method starts. So initially, 3 is 3rd place bell (etc for the others). The next lead head comes a lead later, at which point a different bell will be in 3rd place, when it becomes 3rd place bell. In a normal method, by the end of the course every working bell has in some order or other been each place bell.

The other meaning relates to the work done by the place bell during the subsequent lead. From *The Tower Handbook* glossary:

'A way of naming different portions of the work of a method in terms of the bell that does that work during the first lead of a plain course. Thus if you are '3rds place bell' you are doing (or about to do) the work which the 3rd does at the start of the method.'

Place bells and learning

Most people when first learning methods start by looking for the overall pattern in the blue line. Generally there is an end to end symmetry when you find the pivot points, ie the points about which the line can be folded back on itself to make a mirror image. In many methods there are other patterns too, for example the regular progression of dodges between front and back in methods like Plain Bob and Grandsire, the way 3-4 places come either side of the slow work in Kent Treble Bob, or the way dodges are omitted before or after places in Yorkshire Surprise.

Learning a method like this is for many people the line of least resistance, but it gives few clues about where to start when you come to ring it. How often has a method been called, and people ask to ring particular bells because they don't know it from any other bell. If they know the method, they know all the work, which every bell does, but what they lack is knowledge of where each bell starts.

Even if you learn a method in this holistic way, it should not be too much extra work to learn where on the line each bell starts. In Plain Bob this is easy to do, because all the dodges come at the lead, and so the place bells all start at the reverse snap of a dodge. Look at the line, and you will see there is only one in each place! Some methods are less helpful, but there are often other clues to help you, especially if you know a little about the structure, as described in *The Learning Curve* in June.

Going one step further, it is a good habit to get into adding the place bells into your mental sequence when you rehearse the work to yourself. For example: '... dodge 3-4, become 4ths place bell, lead, ...'.

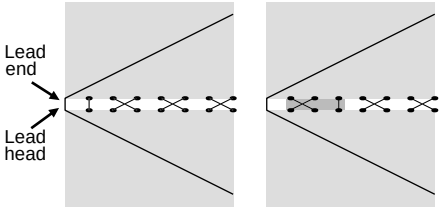
Some people prefer to take the ultimate step and learn the work of each place bell as a distinct chunk of work in its own right. This is harder, because there is often less pattern, and you tend to be less aware of symmetries and progressions. But once you do know each place bell 'off by heart' you should be able to produce it easily, in the same way that when you have learnt your tables, you don't have to stop and think what 7 x 9 is, you just say 63.

Place bells and calls

When ringing a plain course of a method, you can get by with only knowing where one bell starts, and then relax once you get going, following the line you have learnt. In a touch you can't do that, because at any point a call might switch you off your nice comfortable path, onto a different track. Many people cater for that by learning for each affected position 'what to do next time' as well as what to do at the calls. That works quite well for Plain Bob, where most of the lead is just plain hunting (and where two of the affected bells simply defer what they would have done had they not run in or out at the bob). But even with Plain Bob, when you move from Doubles to Minor you have to learn a different rule for what the bell making 4ths does next time.

With that approach to learning the effect of calls, you will in general have to learn a new set of rules about what to do this time and what to do next time, for every method you learn. That's a lot of effort and complication, especially since for many methods, the lead end change is affected by the calls in exactly the same way as in Plain Bob. The 'what you do next time' depends both on what the call does to you at the lead (which is special) and also on what you do in the method between that lead and the next (which is just 'ringing the method', but starting from a different place).

In most methods (but not Grandsire, which is different) calls affect the change while the Treble is leading, and put the affected bells in different places at the lead head from those where they would have been, ie it makes each become a different place bell.



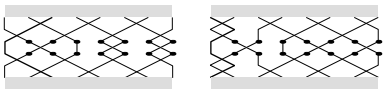
(a) Plain lead *(b) Bob lead*

Figure 1:What changes at a call

Figure 1 represents this graphically. The black line is the Treble. The dots represent the positions of the other bells at the lead end and the lead head. The grey areas above and below these are 'the rest of the method', which could be anything. The bit that changes at the call is in the white strip. Figure 1(a) shows what happens at a plain lead of Plain Bob (and a host of others), while Figure 1(b) shows what happens at a bob. Comparing the two, you can see that only three bells are affected – those in the dark grey area. For example, at a bob, the bell in 2nd place at the lead end, which at a plain lead would have remained in 2nd place for the lead head, moves to 3rd place instead. In other words, instead of becoming 2nd place bell, it becomes 3rd place bell.

The above applies to all methods like Plain Bob, with 2nd place made at a plain lead, and 4th place made at a bob. So if you know the method, and place bells, you can ring the calls.

Of course, if you roll back the grey blanket a little to reveal the work of the method either side of the lead, then the overall picture, including the common change, will be different. For example, in Figure 2 the lead end change is the same as in Figure 1(b), but the place bell work either side of it is different, giving rise to what appears to be quite disparate work, for example 4ths place made from the front in Figure 2(a) versus 4ths place made from the back in Figure 2(b). It is useful to know that such things will happen, in order not to be caught out, but you don't have to learn everything afresh. It is all constructed by joining the place bell work with the single change of the call.



(a) Plain Bob *(b) London Surprise*

Figure 2:The bob change in context

Most methods have either a 2nd place lead (like Plain Bob) or a last place lead (6th, 8th, etc depending on how many bells there are). At a bob, the place is normally either 4th or two from the back (eg 6th for Major). In many (but not all) cases 4th place bobs go with 2nd place leads, and vice versa. When learning a method you need to learn this. Singles have three places made, corresponding to where the bob place is (ie 234 or eg 678 in Major). This is still a lot less than learning whole work sequences.

Once you can do this for calls, you can use the same principle to 'learn' some new methods. For example, Primrose Surprise is the same as Cambridge Surprise, but with last place (6th, 8th, ...) made at the lead end. So if you can ring Cambridge, and know the place bells, just imagine an '8th place call' every lead to ring it.

Place bells and splicing

Awareness of place bells really pays off when ringing methods spliced together, because at any lead, and in any place, you can be pitched at a couple of seconds notice into a different method, and you must know what to do.

Place bells and mistakes

If you go wrong, and you are lucky, someone else may know what you should be doing and be able to correct you. More likely, the conductor may know what place bell you should be, but can't tell you blow by blow what to do. If you know what the place bell does, then you can use this advice. At worst, you should know what place bell you become at the next lead, and can sort yourself out there if not before.

Tail End

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