

RING IN THE NEW

While it's historically been associated in the West as a means of calling the faithful to worship, campanology has also become a sociable way of getting fit

As exercise regimes go, campanology – the art or practice of bell-ringing – is certainly unorthodox. But it's also enjoyable and being embraced by more and more people. And while it may sound like another modern fitness fad, bell-ringing's health benefits were recognised as far back as the 17th century. When James II was on the throne between 1685–1688, campanology became incredibly fashionable, with the aristocracy engaging in the activity for exercise and intellectual stimulation.

Today it is again regarded by growing numbers as a relaxing way to give mind and body a workout. As bellringing.org encourages: 'You've heard of workouts with dumbbells, now try church bells!'

Campanology's renaissance has been given a kickstart in 2000 by the National Lottery Fund. As part of its Ringing in the Millennium project, a £3m grant went towards numerous bell restorations and augmentations.

More than 40,000 people in Britain now ring church bells – often getting into the art by attending open days in church towers, through Sunday Schools and online access to bell-ringing teachers, meaning campanology, unlike Victor Hugo's portrayal in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, has become an incredibly social activity.

Learning the ropes

Graham Nabb, chairman of the Association of Ringing Teachers, told *Breathe*: 'These days, most town churches have a team of bell-ringers that can be a group of anything from six to a dozen or more people. But larger churches with lots of bells might have a team that is, say, 20 to 30 strong. Bell-ringers have good networks, they tend to be a pretty social bunch of people – especially with social networking these days.'

With many more people now bell-ringing, it has again become recognised as an independent activity and sometimes even championed as a sport. Our predecessors considered it as such, as they attempted to beat one another in events called 'striking competitions'. On days of competition the bell-ringing event was followed by a large meal at a local pub and the 'best-performing' ringer would be presented with a 'good hat' or a pair of gloves.

Latter-day ringers insist bell-ringing is more about coordination than strength. Graham says: 'It's much more about learning a skill than being physically aerobic. We have quite wide age ranges: not much younger than 10, though there are one or two who are. And then there are people who are still ringing in their 90s.'

But bell-ringing can still be incredibly hard work. Research commissioned by the Churches Conservation Trust concluded that bell-ringing offers 'improved agility, coordination, reaction time and balance, plus improved muscle endurance and cardiovascular fitness'. For example, swimming burns approximately 80kcal per 10 minutes, but bell-ringing isn't that far behind, burning 50kcal. A full peal at St Paul's Cathedral involves 5,000 ringing combinations and can last more than four hours, so it's no surprise that its ringers have been known to faint.

Steeple power

In Europe the first church bells reportedly pealed in Italy – after their invention in the late 4th Century by St Paulinus, the bishop of Nola in Campania. From then the sound of the bell became firmly entrenched in both the European musical landscape and the collective psyche, evolving into an archetypal means of announcing the time; marking historic events such as the end of wars or the births and deaths of kings and queens; and universal rights of passage including weddings and funerals.

In more Eastern reaches of the globe, bell-ringing has been practised for thousands of years by Buddhist monks for its soothing harmonics and meditative action. According to Tibetan Buddhism the bell represents wisdom, so ringing one is said to purify confusion.

Western campanology can be equally meditative unless you are 'ringing changes'. Change ringing was invented when church bells were re-hung after Henry VIII's Reformation, and is performed using multiple bells in a mathematical sequence to create various permutations of harmonies. Depending on the number of bell-ringers or changes required, this can be a complex operation and requires total concentration, meaning all the day's worries will have to be put on hold while in the belfry.

'Ringing the change' has also permeated popular culture. British musician and composer Brian Eno, for instance, created an album called *Bell Studies for the Clock of the Long Now* for the Long Now Foundation, an organisation that aims to 'provide a counterpoint to what it views as today's "faster/cheaper" mindset and to promote "slower/better" thinking'.

Bell-ringing has also penetrated the world of virtual reality, with ringers using simulators to both teach and practise the craft. 'The simulator is probably a bit crude compared to an aircraft simulator,' admits Graham, 'but it can be done.' Many churches now use this technology



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as it allows the ringers to practise in silence. 'We make external sounds on Sunday and Monday; any other extra practice is done using the simulator.'

As so much in modern life moves online, campanology can be a form of exercise that is also a means of socialising and reinforcing our shared community. While ringing the changes, bell-ringers must work together to create a coherent piece, just like an orchestra. The reward of successfully executing *Kent Treble Bob Maximus* can serve to remind that we are a small, but vital, part of the whole. To find your local bell-ringing group, visit bellringing.org and head to ringingteachers.org for details about tutors.

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SAVED BY THE BELLS

- Can help alleviate depression through the effects of exercise itself as well as the increased social activity
- Increases core strength
- Improved coordination
- Increases concentration
- Improved mental and physical agility
- Increases cardiovascular fitness
- Improved muscle endurance
- Improved reaction time