Ringing Back Bells

On 20th March, David Bagley (Master of Tewkesbury Branch) was kind enough to spare some of his time to teach us how we should ring heavier bells. His points apply equally well to the back end of lighter rings too, such as Leckhampton. A summary of what David taught follows, both a reminder for those who were present, and an indication of what was missed by those who were not.

Teamwork

Rhythm: it is so much easier to ring a big bell well if the whole band is able to ring by rhythm. This prevents the length of each change varying too much (if at all) and helps the heavy bells to **anticipate** (see later) and then ring more **efficiently** (see later).

Speed: the particular team currently ringing and the 'go' of the bells determine the 'correct' speed. Generally, heavier bells 'go' slower so do not ring too fast that the tenor cannot manage to dodge accurately. Ambitious tenor ringers can push the pace too fast, especially on lighter rings, leaving the front bell behind. But fast ringing is not always the tenor's fault! Little bells can push the pace just as much. Avoid changing speed, ring by **rhythm**. This is often caused by bells holding up too much (ringing too slowly maybe for only a few strokes) and is often the little bells together at the back of the change (who may not notice the effect as they are not having to **anticipate** nearly as much as the back bells).

Band Placement: To achieve good ringing, especially on Sunday, it is often beneficial to place the band. Practice nights are for practicing new techniques. Avoid ringing a bell that you know is too heavy for you to ring well.

Choice of Method: Choose something to ring that is suitable for the size of the bigger bells, and can be managed by the rest of the band too.

Working Together: 'Heaps' versus 'teams'. A heap of ringers does not change much if you gain or loose people and the arrangement of the band is irrelevant. The members of a heap do not function together and are unlikely to make much progress. With a team of ringers, changes in its membership are noticed. Band placement is beneficial and the members work constructively together. Teams will benefit from specialists or 'stars' such as a good rhythmic tenor ringer or an accurate treble ringer who understands how to work with the back bells so that they strike accurately. A team of stars may not work well if they cannot agree to cooperate. A star will only be beneficial if they help the weaker members of the team, and the team responds. A 'team within a team' can exist when for example two back bell ringers know each other's style well and compliment each other. Ultimately, the team will only work well if it can agree on what they are aiming for and then teams will achieve results.

Fitness

Strength: some bells are difficult and do require strength and stamina, e.g. Worcester (49 cwt), Exeter (72 cwt) and Liverpool (82 cwt) Cathedrals. By comparison, Tewkesbury Abbey bells are very easy going for their weight (27 cwt).

Fitness: even so, it helps to be fairly fit because you do have nearly a ton and a half of metal swinging about over your head. A good **technique** will minimise the need for brute force and will also reduce the risk of doing yourself an injury.

Build: You should consider whether you have the physical build to ring something large. However, there are several 'slight' people who can do it very well because they have the best possible ringing style.

'Mental fitness' & Concentration: Make sure you know your methods *VERY* well. Due to the additional effort it takes to change the speed of a heavy bell, late changes of mind about where to ring it next will usually result in an unsuccessful placement of it. As a result of mistakes you will tire out more physically due to the increase in effort required to control the bell. You must concentrate all the time so you don't fall off your blue line. A trip on a back bell is noticed far more than one on a little bell.

Handling Technique

This is the showstopper! A good style means:

- Long pulls, so reach up with straight arms when the bell is on the hand-stroke balance. You can increase the length of your pull by bending your knees to add your body weight to the strength of the pull.
- Don't bend your back, as it will hurt afterwards!
- Correct stance, you need to be able to bend your knees and not fall over.
- Keep the rope about 6" from your nose and pull straight downwards to the floor, not outwards at all.
- Place the tail end round the correct side of the sally in order to ensure a good grip on it.

Anticipation

It is very important to be able to predict changes of speed. When hunting down from the back, you need not pull so hard if you do not require the bell to rise so far to the balance. However, if you are going to do a dodge on the way down, you need to increase the strength of the pull prior to the

slow pull of the dodge to prevent the bell from plummeting or 'crunching' the dodge. Additionally, when ringing heavy bells over light bells, you will need to ring closer than over other heavy bells in order to strike your bell correctly. This increases the need for **anticipation**.

You will also benefit from changing the length of the tail end and catching the sally at different heights in order to change the speed of the bell. The three speeds of ringing (slow, medium and fast) each have an associated length of tail end and sally catching height. 'Take in' or shorten the tail end when ringing faster to stop the bell rising so close to the balance. Lengthen, or 'let tail end out' to ring more slowly so the bell does rise to the balance. The equivalent applies to the hand-strokes. Note that you will need to adjust the tail end length immediately prior to the backstroke it applies to, which will require **anticipation**. In complicated methods, you will find it can get quite busy due to changing the tail end length frequently.

Efficiency

This is important if you are to be able to get to the end of a touch, quarter or peal. Do not over pull. This includes, pull less hard at the previous stroke when you **anticipate** that you will need to ring quickly at the next stroke. It is much easier to ring efficiently when the band settles to a **rhythm** that enables the back bell ringers to correctly predict how hard they will need to pull to change the speed of their bell. Unsettled ringing tends to require back bell ringers to over pull a little in order to have some reserve when it becomes obvious that to ring obstinately by rhythm could further disrupt the ringing.

Summary

Ringing back bells is not:

- A one man act
- Big and 'Macho'
- Bullying
- Trying to look cool
- All about speed
- Elitist

Ringing heavy bells is:

- Teamwork
- Being fit for the job
- Sensitive and aware
- Supporting
- Doing the job properly
- Ringing at a speed that suits the band
- Pursuit of excellence

Based on David Bagley's course notes written up by Philip Abbey.

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The talk was about 45 minutes followed by a chance for attendees to have a go at a bell heavier than they would normally ring with supervision. Several people turned the tenor (22 cwt) of the back six into plain hunt and discovered first hand the importance of choosing the right speed and the need for anticipation. David then gave a demonstration of the taught techniques in use with a plain course of London Minor on the back six. Several attendees commented on his correct use of taking in and letting out the rope in order to effect the change of speed required by the method.