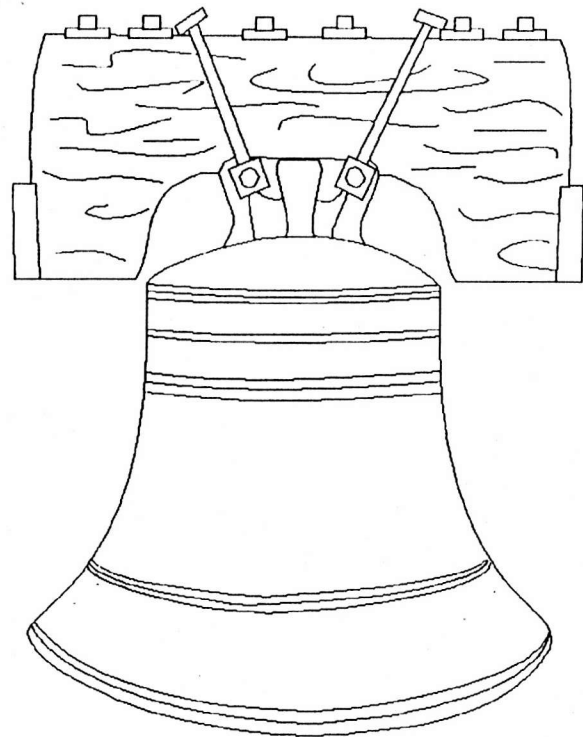


THE ESSENCE OF GOOD STRIKING



Preface

When Amersham (Bucks) bells were augmented from 8 to 12, Alan Ainsworth wanted to tackle not only the quantum leap for his band from eight to twelve, but also the overall quality of the band's striking.

As old friends and knowing my keen interest in the subject of striking, Alan asked me to put together some notes; he would do the same and we would collaborate and produce a "paper".

It so happened that our teaching tour in Australia was coming along (Spring 1997), so there was a double incentive to do it. As with all ringing material, one hopes there is no copyright, so please feel free to use it and quote from it. Do ask if anything is unclear. I hope you will find it useful both as participant and instructor. Diana and I left copies of it for the twenty or more towers we visited Down Under.

GWP

Introduction:

The ultimate aim in ringing is surely striking as near perfection as possible. John Chilcott once said it should be like running a walking stick along iron-railings! Or, put another way, to strike well is essential to good ringing.

In order to strike well you must:

Handle well - there are exceptions; people who are poor handlers/stylists who do strike well, but they are very much the exception. You have a far better chance of striking well if you are in total control of the bell (at both strokes!), and good style is important. Don't be afraid to attempt to improve your handling - it's never too late.

Listen to every change.

Hear your own bell in every change.

Be prepared to modify your striking according to what you hear.

Good striking can only occur when every member of the band does this for every change.

Good striking is not easy

Unfortunately, this is so. Good strikers have to work hard at striking well, and the more ringing they do, the more effort they put into it. Sometimes in periods of longer ringing, in a peal for instance, when every single member of a band is striking well, the rhythm itself may take over, and it may then feel effortless to be carried along with the flow. Ringers can become euphoric about such episodes. But, most of the time, to strike well involves hard work, especially if the bells are odd-struck - yours, or others individually, or the whole ring.

So, why bother?

Most people will acknowledge the importance of the sound of the bells for Sunday services and for weddings, but on practice nights, perhaps with the shutters closed, when you're struggling with bell-handling and ropesight and at the same time trying to remember a new method, it seems reasonable not to bother to listen as well. It is just irritating to be told that you will understand its importance when you have more experience. There are reasons of self-interest, however, why it is better to combine the skills of looking and listening from the beginning.

If you strike out of place, you can finish out of place. As an example, a common ringing error in learners is to be slow at hunting down from the back. (You need to ask yourself why coming down from back needs to be marginally quicker.) If you fail to hear that you are leaving gaps, you won't be anywhere near the front when, in due course, you need to lead. This is likely to confuse you and everyone else.

Ropesight, anyway, only works when most of those ringing are striking close to the correct position; if two bells clash, how can anyone know where either is supposed to be? This is why a learner needs a strong band around him or her, i.e., one where all strike accurately and without mistakes. It may seem unfair that on practice night those who need most practice get fewest attempts, while those who can ring well may ring every time, but this is actually the most efficient way for learners to make progress.

So, if your striking is wildly erratic, you will be a liability, who makes things difficult (or impossible) for other learners. If you want to be asked to ring more often, improve your striking.

You won't always be able to hear your bell when struggling with a new method, but every effort you make to hear and place your bell accurately in any ringing, however simple the method, will help in establishing steady, rhythmic habits of striking. This alone will keep you in roughly the correct place in more difficult ringing.

Finally, you may not want to listen to the sound of the bells, but you can't ring alone, and other ringers do listen. At the very least, if you strike badly, they will assume you are still struggling with the method, so they will not invite you to ring anything new and more interesting. Conversely, there is nothing more satisfying than a piece of ringing well struck all round.

How to strike well

There are three parts to good striking:

Listening for and hearing each change clearly.

Noting the position of your own bell in each change.

Modifying your striking accordingly - again odd-struckness, the time of the swing of trebles and tenors etc., impinge on this.

How can you hear each change ?

With the rare exceptions of Cartwheel ringing - indigenous to the Barnsley area of Yorkshire and the Devon style of call-change ringing, there should be a gap at handstroke following the final backstroke of the change completed. It is approximately equal to the time interval between the bells in each change. Always listen for this and note it.

When ringing on odd numbers, e.g., Grandsire Triples or Grandsire Caters, the tenor always rings last and therefore marks the end of each change.

If the ringing becomes confused, or you yourself become confused, you may need to look at the ropes to note the end of the change, which occurs when all the ropes have come down at one stroke.

You must always know when each change begins. Make a habit of listening to the eights in major or triples or tens in royal or caters and counting the 8-beat or 10-beat to yourself. Further on we speak of 'adjustment Compensation' and ringing on the higher numbers which does affect spacing and the feel of rhythm.

How can you hear your own bell?

There are several things which help you hear your own bell.

your pull: the bell always strikes at a certain interval after the pull.

your bell's note: some ringers hear their bell by listening for the musical interval between their bell and the one they are following. If you have perfect pitch you can always identify the sound of your bell among the other bells, but this ability is very unusual. Everyone, however, should be able to at least recognise the highest note (treble) and the lowest note (tenor).

your bell's position in the change: in the middle of a row this is not always easy, but you should always be able to hear your own bell when leading or when lying at the back. It should also be fairly easy at lead-plus-one and at the back-minus-one. And of course in rounds and call changes you should have enough time to count out which is your bell and immediately work on adjustment.

combinations of the above: are you immediately before or after the treble or the tenor? Is your bell going to be a high-pitched note amongst several low notes? If you are working near the front with smaller bells, your bell will be the one that is low-pitched, and so on.

Always try to listen for your own bell, however hard it may seem.

Sometimes, it helps to focus your attention mainly on the part of the change where you know you should be, either the front half or the back half.

Listen to the striking when you are sitting out. This is splendid practice. Try to decide who is the cause of any gaps or clipping. Or pick out one individual and see if you can hear his or her bell in every change. Notice what happens if someone is very slow at leading. Is anyone striking well at handstroke, but badly at backstroke? What happens if someone leaves a gap - does everyone slow down, or is there a clash? Don't be afraid to ask (or share observations with) the Tower Captain or Conductor. Let it be known you are listening and keen to improve your own performance.

Criticising the striking of other ringers is a satisfying pastime! You will find that almost all ringers think themselves the only ones to strike well. This is because you only strike well as long as you are aware of the striking. The moment you stop, your striking deteriorates, but of course you don't notice because you're not concentrating on it. So the learner observer may happily chuckle at the smuggest of us as we hand out gratuitous advice like this about good striking!

Whichever way you use to hear your bell, it does not come easily, and it needs practice, so keep trying.

Listen to every change.

Listen to backstroke as well as handstroke. Dropped backstrokes are like dropped arches - painful.

Listen to rounds - very important to get these right - from the word go, this applies to any piece of ringing. In orchestral terms it is called 'attack' - aim to strike the opening rounds 'on the dot'.

What do you do if you can't hear your own bell part of the time?

You just hope for the best and keep on ringing and keep on listening. There are a few things you can try however, because if you can't hear your own bell it may be that you are clashing with another bell.

1. If you can't hear your bell when ringing around the heavy bells, try leaving a bigger gap as you ring over them. On some rings, the heavier bells have extremely large wheels so that the little bells have to pull off a long time after the back bells in order to strike properly, and it may be that your bell is clashing with the back bells and that its sound is being engulfed by the sound of the tenor.

2. If you can hear your bell at one stroke, say handstroke, but not at the other stroke, there are two possible causes. This may be because the backstroke sound is faint, but you should have been able to hear this in rounds at the beginning. Alternatively, the bell may be oddstruck, so that, instead of being pulled smoothly and evenly, the bell requires to be pulled in sooner at one stroke and held up at the opposite stroke. This can be tested out when you are leading and your bell can be clearly heard. Carry on ringing smoothly and observe how your bell strikes at the lead. If you find your bell seems to be leaving a gap at, say, the backstroke lead, then your bell is probably odd-struck and will need to be pulled in at every backstroke. Again, this skill comes with experience and patience.

How can you modify your striking according to what you hear?

Strangely enough, you don't need to do very much. If you can hold a regular tap tap tapping in your mind, and if you can hear exactly how your bell fails to accord with that ideal tapping, then your brain can eventually make the subtle adjustments necessary.

Catching a ball is another ferociously complex skill. Your brain has to estimate velocity, force and angle to compute where a ball will arrive, as well as move you into position to catch it. But every time you try to catch a ball, you can't fail to be aware of the result: you catch the ball or you miss it. In ringing, your brain can equally make the calculations, but only if you are aware of the result: whether you hit the spot, strike too soon, too late, clip, clash, leave a gap, or whatever.

Good striking is more precise than just striking your bell in a gap, avoiding the bells before and after yours. In your mind should be a regular tap:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 etc. (on 8 bells)

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and your aim should be to place your bell precisely on one of those beats. You should monitor every change to ensure that your bell hits the correct spot.

In rounds or call changes you can experiment if your bell is not spot on the beat: pull a bit harder at handstroke, or at backstroke; try pulling less hard; trying pulling off closer to the rope in front of you, or leaving a bigger gap; keep modifying your handling to see how the sound is affected. Your brain needs all the data it can get in order to make the complex calculations. And make no mistake - in the matter of spot on striking we are dealing in MICRO-SECONDS, so there is considerable skill here.

How do you know what speed the beat should be?

If you always rang with immaculate strikers, there would be no doubt what speed and rhythm to aim for. However, much practice ringing is less than perfect. If there is irregularity in the ringing, the usual instruction is to take the speed from the tenor. If the tenor is floundering, listen for the rhythm of the majority of the band. As a general rule (and this is where band placement is so important) the 2nd sets the beat so the Tenor sets the 'Compass'.

In ringing, everyone listens to and responds to the ringing of the rest of the band. In some towers it is usual always to leave a wide gap at the hand-stroke lead; in other areas they ring with close handstroke leads. Ringing may speed up in one course, slow down the next. Who decides?

In fact the ringing is always a compromise between the inclinations of all the band, with the tenors having a weighted effect and the Trebles a key role. A good ringer will adjust to the majority, but there may be the odd occasion when someone of considerable experience can and should influence the ringing himself. See below.

How should you adjust to bad striking?

In very irregular ringing, it may be possible to hang onto a majority beat in your mind, but you find that keeping to the beat would involve clashing with other bells. What should you do?

This is not easy and there are two schools of thought. One says you should keep to the beat regardless of aberrant bells, indeed, especially when there are floundering bells. This should maintain and reinforce the regular beat, making it clearer to struggling ringers what to aim for.

The other school of thought says that this encourages overconfidence and lazy striking habits. Moreover it makes for an almighty noise, and for the sake of innocent members of the public, you should hold up your bell to avoid clashing with any other bell.

The question is always debatable. Perhaps for Sunday service ringing the avoidance of clashes is more important, whereas in a quarter peal or peal, it is more important to establish a beat. In any event, anyone ringing a bell which is very heavy for them will be unable to make adjustments and thus the tenors are more likely to keep to the beat.

Common errors of striking

Worst of all are trips in ringing the method. After every trip, it takes several changes for the striking to settle down and for the rhythm to be regained. So the clarion call is concentrate and keep to the line!

Almost as bad is incorrect leading. There should be a gap at handstroke, no gap at backstroke. The size of the handstroke gap, whatever it is, should be the same for all the band, and will vary from tower to tower (regional 'styles') and for numbers of bells. A common fault, particularly on higher numbers, is to leave too wide a gap.

Striking correctly at one stroke, handstroke say, but failing to listen to and correctly position the backstroke is another common fault. Both changes should be listened to carefully, for perfect striking of equal importance but the handstroke is marginally the influencer.

People who learn on 5 or 6 bells often tend to pull their backstrokes in too much when they start to ring on higher numbers.

Those who are uncertain about their ringing often prefer to ring slowly because it gives them more time to think, and are inclined to stick to a slow speed when all the rest of the band are ringing fast. Bad handling, too, can contribute to laborious or sloppy striking.

Some positions in the change seem to be particularly vulnerable to bad striking. The lead has already been mentioned. Often, in rounds on 8, the 7th is rung too close, thus:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 and the second is wayward 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 12 3 4 5 6 7 8

After leading hand and back, the first blow in 2nds place is often struck wide, perhaps because the previous backstroke has been pulled in too strongly. To lead is actually to make a place in 1sts, it is not a continuation of hunting down. Note also that in more advanced methods - Stedman, London where 'wrong' leading (backstroke leading) occurs, special care must be taken in 1-2.

It is also common to hang up at the back, especially at backstroke. Again, lying at the back (on 8) means making a place in 8ths, and is not a continuation of hunting up. These last two examples show the advantage of listening to your bell from the beginning, in order to avoid trailing behind and losing your place. Trailing behind, and therefore having to heave your bell in to lead makes for non-rhythmic and jerky striking habits.

Striking well on higher numbers

Striking well on 12 bells, especially in Maximus, is extremely difficult and until the last 30 years was very rare indeed. There are so many bells to be out of place, so many almost indistinguishable middle bells to confuse and so much difference between treble and tenor, that it is remarkable there is any good striking on 12.

The little bells have to be held on the balance and then placed, so the physical rhythm of pulling the bells gives no help. The heavy bells have to pull off before the little bells, so can't wait to respond to them. This all means that the ringers have to let themselves be driven by internal rhythms matched to the rhythms they are hearing, and these internal rhythms need to have been developed on 6, 8 and 10 bells by smooth, regular, rhythmic ringing, with every stroke kept to the beat by careful listening. It is not surprising that winning teams in the National 12 Bell Striking Competition have usually participated in thousands of peals between them.

To improve, each ringer must listen and be self-critical. A willingness to recognise and to discuss these issues will play an important part in each ringer's understanding of how improvements can be made.

Striking competitions

One last word on competition ringing. Almost every Guild or District enjoys (or at least holds!) striking competitions. These are the points to watch:

If there is no 'set piece' choose something your band rings well.

Place the band carefully - this is not a platform for 'Tenor Kings'!

Practice well with the band in those positions (if possible arrange a practice at the Tower beforehand).

The key bells are Treble, 2nd and Tenor. As stated above, the Tenor is essential for maintaining the compass - a bit like a metronome; the Treble needs to be crisp and clear, and the 2nd in the opening rounds setting the beat and maintaining it, especially when working with the other little bells.

Get the opening rounds right.

Use lead ends, course ends, and roll-ups to good effect and if the ringing has been a trifle wayward these are the changes to bring it back on stream.

The conductor quietly but FIRMLY 'adjusts the Tiller' as the ringing proceeds - the touch should be improving all the time (leaving the Judges wanting more).

In the trial rounds don't be afraid to adjust your rope - you need to be comfortable.

100% concentration on the blue line -
NO MISTAKES - NONE!

