Don’t Look Up!

or

Notes on the teaching of bell handling

by Karl Grave

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Introduction

The teaching of one ringer to teach another is really a practical exercise but it does no harm to know the theory too.

The following notes were prepared at the request of the newly trained band at Mytholmroyd in spring 1998 in order to assist with the future training of recruits. I hope they go some way to make the team self-sufficient in the future.

Karl Grave
Bingley, March 1998.

P.S. Some references to the ropes may be confusing to those not familiar with Yorkshire Tails.

P.P.S. (October 2005) A strange thing has happened: this article, which was written to assist those teaching bell-handling, has been used mainly by those learning the art! …and why not if it helps?
These notes are intensive! They are meant as a reference for those embarking on the task of training others to handle a church bell. It is assumed that the instructor is competent handler. Not every pupil will have every problem but I hope you will find solutions to most of the common pitfalls here.

Good luck!

**General**

My general principle is:

**TELL-SHOW-DO**

➔ I TELL the learner what we are about to do.

➔ Then I demonstrate it being done.

➔ Finally the learner does it.

Always try to give an air of confidence, even when you are as terrified as your learner!

They will do much better if they are protected from all possible dangers. You can easily lose pupils if you allow them to burn their hands badly on the rope or to be lifted off the ground by breaking a stay.

**Before you start**

➔ Choose which bell you are to use. Too heavy a bell makes ringing up hard work. Too light a bell makes loosing control much more likely and more rapid. You might eventually wish to leave this bell as the only one with a repairable stay¹ and train all newcomers on it.

➔ Ask whether right or left handed. Right handers should hold the tail end in the left hand and vice versa. (Yes I know some people break that rule but let's keep life as simple as possible). All the notes below are written for a right-hander.

➔ Have a tall box available for you to stand on.

➔ Decide which camp you want to belong to:

**Start them off with the bell up or down?**

I am firmly in favour of starting down. My reason is simple: When it's the very first time you have pulled a bell rope the action of the rope when the bell is up is frightening and potentially dangerous. Starting with the bell down is a gentle and safe introduction which builds confidence. (Safer for you, the teacher, too!)

The rest of these notes assume starting with the bell down. Don't move on a stage if there are still problems with the present stage. This will just compound the difficulties.

**Stage 1: Ringing up the backstroke.**

Begin with this gentle introduction each time. But before you start, ring the bell up yourself to check the length at backstroke. When the bell is set at back the pupil should be just able to grip the end standing on tip toe! Adjust as necessary before going further.
Position the learner correctly in front of the rope. So that the forehead is two hands widths back from the rope. Keep watching this position during the lesson. Most learners step back with fear which encourages the rope to be thrown away from them and then leap back in the face. Ask them to come forward under the rope again.

- Help them to correctly take up about 3 coils.
- ENSURE THEY REACH RIGHT UP to grip the sally with the left hand.
- Make sure the right hand then grips above the left.
- The hands must be kept together, touching one above the other, at all times during this exercise.
- As the bell goes up you take full charge of the developing handstroke.

Problems:

- Lifting arms too early (Put your hand gently on theirs to prevent them rising too early).
- Letting too much rope out so the hands don't reach high above the head.
- Letting the hands separate so the pull is from two different points on the rope.
- Not doing a follow through, causing the rope to snake. (Remind them that their thumbs should end up pointing down at the floor).
- Throwing the rope away from the body so it leaps back at the face.
- Make sure they have the tail in the correct hand. (Also that it's the right way up!)

Stage 2: Ring backstroke at a set pull

Keep your hand also on the tailend at first to ensure a follow through, then try without to see if the pupil can pull long and straight.

Problems:

- Not following through. (Rope wobbles and snakes).
- Looking up for the rope. Stress they should look 'through the rope' straight ahead & see it move up & down in front of their eye-level.
- Holding the tailend too low allowing the bell to go over the balance at backstroke. (Tell them to 'climb their hands' up the tailend until arms are at full stretch when the bell is on the balance). A knot may be needed for a tall ringer as a temporary measure until the Steeple Keeper can take up the rope.

Stage 3: Pull off the handstroke.

You ring the backstroke AND catch the sally high above their hands (stand on a BIG box!).

Problems:

- Not letting go soon enough! (potentially very frightening for a learner. Stress that the hands let go and follow through down to the sides. Also your hand on the sally comes down above theirs and pushes the learner’s hands off in time. If they do
retard the bell it will start to ring down so you will have to pull hard at backstroke and perhaps take over for a couple of pulls to get the bell back up.

➔ Looking up for the sally. Stop this common bad habit immediately! Ringers who look up NEVER progress.

➔ Remind them of the title of this article!

➔ Make sure they are pulling handstroke enough so that your backstroke reaches the balance. They won't be! so stress this or they will have problems later with both strokes.

➔ Have they got all eight fingers around the sally?

**Stage 4: Pulling off the Handstroke and reaching up to catch the next one**

Many learners will do this instinctively at stage 3.

You still ring the backstroke.

**Problems:**

➔ Missing the sally: doesn't matter at this stage as you will always catch it above them. But you must get this perfect before the next stage.

➔ Catching the sally too late and too low so that the bell hits the stay before the arms are at full stretch.

It's important to stress that the sally is caught at such a height that when the arms rise to full stretch, the bell is on the balance. When this is achieved there can be no possibility of bumping the stay. With some learners I find it helpful to tie a piece of red ribbon around the sally at about the height where they have to catch it.

**Stage 5: Ringing both strokes together.**

Some people advocate the use of a dummy tailend first. I don't find this is necessary.

Ask the pupil to ring as slowly as possible, going right up to the balance at each stroke. It makes the whole procedure much easier

**Problems:**

In the panic of doing every thing at once four problems recur:

➔ In an attempt to anticipate the arrival of the sally at handstroke, they stop pulling the backstroke half way down. This allows the rope to snake and weave wildly making the sally difficult to catch! FOLLOW THROUGH WITH THE BACKSTROKES Tell them it doesn't matter if they are too late for the sally as you will ALWAYS catch it. This takes the pressure off and allows them to do a good backstroke follow through and cure the problem.

➔ They fail to pull the handstroke firmly with ALL the fingers of BOTH hands around the sally. So the bell doesn't go up at back and starts to ring down.
Missing the sally. Following a long, firmly pulled backstroke this is where the stay is at risk! It's your duty to spot this heavy backstroke pull and anticipate them missing the sally. You must be up on your box and you must catch the sally above their hands EVERY time. You should take pride in the fact that a learner will never break a stay whilst the sally is also being caught by you. (Repairable stays are a different matter as they are so weak).

Sliding the right hand down from the sally to the tail should be stopped if seen.

**Stage 6: Ring to the balance at both ends and change speed.**

Pull the handstrokes with both hands!

Ring as slowly as possible. Make sure they discover the feel of the balance point at hand and back.

Practice setting hand and back ten times in a row.

Practice holding the bell on the balance.

Teach how to ring faster by catching the sally higher (but also compensating for this short pull by pulling HARD so only the one blow is fast).

Practice following another bell.

Only at this late stage, when you are SURE that they will not miss catching the sally, stop catching it with them.

At this point I also think it's important to practice ringing up dealing with both strokes (see below) because if the learner can easily handle the sally with one hand the 'Panic Position' (see below) will be a breeze!

**Stage 7: Confidence.**

At this stage the learner is correct to be frightened of the rope if they have not been taught how to control it if the bell starts to ring down. This is why I teach my 'Panic Position'!

The mantra is: 'One hand, one coil, ring up'.

If everything goes wrong this is the fallback position. Catch the sally with one hand only. If the bell has dropped a lot and you need to do so, take in one coil (miss the sally whilst you do, there's no danger of breaking the stay now) and ring it back up ASAP. This always seems so difficult to practice but if, one time when the learner is confidently ringing up and has reached the last coil stage, you gently point out to them that they are in fact happily ringing in the Panic Position! Rather than complete the ring up, have them continue ringing in this position, neither up nor down for an extended period until they are very happy with it. As a practice they could then let the coil out, take the bell up to the balance and then return down to the Panic Position with a coil again. Having done this most difficult manoeuvre several times they will never panic again! Now they really have mastered the bell.

**Finally:**

At last make a point of standing back to see the bigger picture and check for any handling
faults – are they:

➔ Sliding the hand down the rope?
➔ Looking up?
➔ Pulling with hands separated on the tuft at either end?
➔ Throwing the rope away from the body?
➔ Failing to get EVERY finger around the sally at handstroke?

If you do see any of these faults or others come down hard on them now. It’s so difficult to say anything later when they’re considered to be established ringers.

**Special notes on ringing down**

This is the most difficult aspect of bellhandling, especially taking in that first coil!

The fear seems to be centred on the consequences of missing the sally and the worst problems I have seen stem from this. Of course it's a groundless fear because as soon as the bell is brought below the balance there is no danger of breaking the stay and no absolute need to catch the sally at all if the backstrokes are pulled correctly. If they don’t believe you demonstrate a bell just below the balance, with perfect backstrokes there’s no need to touch the sally!

I suggest you ask the learner to ring at a set pull, then to allow the bell to fall and commence catching the sally with only one hand. Emphasise all the time that they must still go through the motions of a long straight backstroke pull with thumbs pointing to the floor and an occasional missed sally doesn’t matter.

**Concentrate on the backstrokes when ringing down!**

If you don’t, the following may well happen:

When told to catch the sally with only the right hand, the left hand (and with it the tailend) doesn’t know what to do and tends to hover up in front of the chest wanting to reach for the sally! This means that no backstroke is being rung at all. The consequence is yards of snaking, coiling rope everywhere and an unpredictable sally which is difficult to catch; very frightening and dangerous.

**FOLLOW THROUGH THE BACKSTROKES!**

The learner must continue to ring immaculate backstrokes with the thumbs pointing to the ground at the end of each stroke. This gives the falling rope direction and it will spill straight down in front of the learner onto the floor. If they fail to do this place your hand on their left hand and guide it down correctly.

Once you have stabilised them in this position the bell will still be coming down because it's impossible to pull a backstroke hard when the hands rise no higher than the waist. Now the sally can be ignored and the coil(s) taken in so the arms rise high above the head and normal ringing down can continue.

**That’s All!**

Teaching someone to handle a church bell can be very rewarding for you, the teacher.

How proud you will be when your students progress to be fully fledged ringers and assets
to the Exercise!

NOTES

1. Repairable stays.
I don’t generally think these should be necessary as stays should not be broken if you are assisting the learner correctly! However under certain circumstances a stay which is hinged, breaks easily but can be repaired in seconds has proved very useful. You can see a design for one in the articles section of the Society’s website.

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