

# Welcome to the Wonderful World of Bellringing

## Overview

English-style bellringing is a performance-based activity that uses a unique blend of physical and mental skills. It provides intellectual stimulation, modest physical activity, social contact, identity with a group and a potentially worldwide network of friends. Ringing has evolved over some 400 years into a unique art-form practised by thousands of ringers.

Find out what ringing is, the skills of ringers, the performances and activities in which they participate, and the satisfaction to be had – from the ringing itself and from being a ringer.

## What is ringing?

### Controlling a bell

At its heart, bellringing is a physical activity. The sound is made by bells swinging full circle (mouth up to mouth up). Each bell is controlled to a precise rhythm by the ringer's actions on the end of the bellrope. Bells are quite heavy (typically between the weight of a motorbike and a small car) but the way they are hung means they need only modest effort to control them. Ringing is about technique and finesse, not about brute force. A ringer must learn to feel what the bell is doing and respond to its natural rhythm. The speed of swing can be controlled by swinging the bell slightly higher (slower) or less high (quicker), but it can't be forced, it must be guided. A skilful ringer exerting just the right force at the right times can achieve a precision of a few hundredths of a second.

A key part of a ringer's skill is the ability to adapt to the feel and behaviour of an individual bell. Bells come in all sizes (from kilos to tons) and the skills needed to ring a very light or a very heavy bell are quite distinct. Bells have different sized bell wheels and varying amounts of rope between bell and ringer. Long ropes or bells with quirky behaviour can be challenging. A skilful ringer will learn master all these differences, and ring any bell accurately with a minimum of effort.

### Ringing together – synchronising

Learning to control a bell is the precursor to ringing with other ringers. The key feature is synchronisation, as it is in any activity with multiple performers. Each ringer must know when in the sequence his/her bell should strike, and must control its swing (faster or slower) to make it strike correctly each time.

Accurate timing relies on the ringer having a rhythmic action, working with the bell not against it, and on continually listening to check that the bell strikes correctly, making any corrections if it doesn't. The aim is to correct any rhythmic irregularities before they grow to the point where a listener outside would notice.

### Change ringing

Change ringing is the systematic variation of the order in which the bells sound. The changes may be periodic ('call changes') or continuous ('methods') but the resultant collective rhythm must still be completely even. This requires precise changes in the speed of individual bells to ensure that they are in the right place (position in the sequence) at the right time. The speed changes needed for a pair of bells to swap places are much bigger than the tiny adjustments needed to keep the bell accurately in the same place. Change ringing is more dynamic than ringing in a fixed sequence, and needs correspondingly better bell control.

Methods are rung from memory. Each ringer 'learns the method' – not every sequence but a set of patterns or rules for how individual bells progress through the sequences. They may memorise this in verbal or diagrammatic form, or a combination of both. While ringing the method, each ringer translates these mental descriptions into the required position of his/her bell, and executes the physical actions needed to move it to each successive position.

While ringing, most ringers use 'ropesight' (the ability see what is happening around them from the movement of the other ropes) to confirm what they are doing, and/or to help them to recover from any mistakes.

Ringing performances ('touches') normally include periodic 'calls' (by the conductor, also working from memory) that switch the ringing into a different sequence, from which subsequent sequences then follow according to the rules of the method. By using calls at appropriate points, a performance can be prolonged or shortened. Some ringers specialise in conducting, learning and calling the composition, and taking charge of the ringing.

Routine ringing performances typically last between 5 & 10 minutes, with breaks in between, but much longer set pieces of ringing are also common. Quarter peals typically take  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour and peals typically 3 hours, in both cases continuous, and with everything from memory. Much longer performances have also rung, including a few lasting nearly a day.

### Challenges and rewards of ringing

Like any skilled activity, it takes a while to learn to ring a bell competently, but the rewards for success are correspondingly great. It is often compared with learning to ride a bike, which is a fair analogy for the initial stages, but would need extending to formation cycling for an equivalent of performing with other ringers. In that sense, ringing is more demanding of skill than most cycling, but it is less demanding than playing most musical instruments, where the player is responsible for the pitch and tone of notes, as well as for their timing.

Ringing offers satisfaction from mastering the skills needed to do it, especially when performing at higher levels, but there is no direct equivalent of the unique combination of skills and the corresponding satisfaction. Controlling the bell combines skills similar to controlling a bike (but with more weight), with the dynamic precision of a sport like tennis. The whole body rhythmic experience has similarities with ballroom dancing.

Ringing is a collective performance, like playing in an orchestra. This gives a sense of being 'part of' the music produced by everyone, and creates a sense of mutual responsibility between performers who rely on each other.

Overlaid on the physical/sensory experience, is a unique mental one with no direct equivalent in other music or sport. Memorising methods has some parallel with formation dancing (without a caller), but the complexity in ringing is greater, and translating conceptual position into time of action while ringing is unique.

Having a firm mental grasp of the method, good ropesight to understand what is happening around you, and a rhythmic style of ringing, gives a feeling of effortless control of the whole process.

The methods themselves have an elegance in the way they work. It is driven by the underlying maths, but even non-mathematicians appreciate the resulting patterns and regularity, and the way that what all the bells do fits perfectly together.

Ringing is a healthy activity offering mild physical exercise (especially with an upstairs ringing room) and mental exercise.

## Being a ringer

### Ringing life

Being a ringer can be a rich and varied experience. Most ringers belong to a band that is responsible for ringing at one or more towers. Regular performance and practice form the core of the band's activity, and many bands, teach, coach and help to develop less experienced ringers, as well as developing their own skills and repertoire.

Most bands meet socially as well as to ring, for example drinking together in the pub after practice or holding an annual dinner. Some bands organise many other activities too. Ringers often take part in non-ringing events at the church where they ring, either just as participants (eg barn dances or quizzes) or perhaps as organisers of an event. Ringers who are church members normally attend services as well as ringing, but not all ringers are church members, and even those who are may not be able to attend all the services if they ring at several different churches on a Sunday.

Many bands engage with their local communities, for example by holding tower open days or giving talks about ringing to local groups and schools. Ringing is a subject that non-ringers always find fascinating. Ringers often provide ringing as a backdrop to mark local (and national) events, for example the Jubilee.

In order to function, a band needs some of its members to be officers (several of them in an active band) who will lead, organise, keep records, teach, and so on. Most bands take responsibility for maintaining the bell installation.

Many bands organise a lot of other ringing for their own pleasure. Ringing outings are common, where ringers travel round the countryside ringing in several different villages, as well as enjoying the scenery and local hospitality.

Many bands organise peals and quarter peals for their own enjoyment and/or advancement, often in honour of special events (like anniversaries, birthdays, or personal successes).

### **The ringing community – ‘The Exercise’**

The term ‘The Exercise’ originated in the 18th century when young gentry took up ringing for the exercise it gave them. Bell hanging then was more primitive than it is now, and ringing required much more physical effort than it does with a modern installation.

The ringing community extends beyond the local band. Ringing societies operate in all areas where there are ringers. Typically they cover a county and most are split into districts serving smaller areas with a few dozen ringing towers. The societies are affiliated to the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, which provides national (and international) coordination, and much of the infrastructure on which ringers rely (publications, directories of towers and bells, standards, liaison with government and public bodies, and advice on everything from teaching to bell restoration and PR to fund raising, much of it provided as on-line services).

Becoming a ringer is like joining a huge extended family. Ringers tend to know other ringers across the country, so there is a large informal network that spans geography. Many ringers know each other through ringing together in peals or quarter peals (often travelling quite long distances to do so). Ringers around the world are almost universally welcoming, and invite visiting ringers to ring with them, and often socialise with them.

Ringers enjoy being able to ring at different towers, and with over 6000 towers to choose from even the most avid ‘collector’ of towers will not run out of new bells to ring.

### **Going deeper**

Beyond the ringing itself, ringers have opportunities to exercise many different specialisms on ringing related topics. For example:

Methods and compositions are underpinned by maths, notably Group Theory. Ringing composers use sophisticated software to help them produce and ‘prove’ peals and quarter to ensure they are ‘true’ (contain no repeated sequences) and also have interesting musical properties. One mathematical hypothesis related to ringing was proposed in the late 1600s, and defied generations of mathematicians, before being solved in the 1990s – a longer period than many more famous non-ringing mathematical conjectures.

Although much of ringing technology has traditional roots, it has evolved over the centuries, and continues to do so. In recent

decades several major advances have been made, often by keen ringers rather than by professionals. For example hybrid wooden clappers are being used on big bells where they give a better tone and are less prone to break. Ringing simulators based on computers are used as training aids. The movement of towers in response to swinging bells (in some cases excessive) is better understood. Many ringers take a particular interest in helping to keep ringing installations ancient and modern in good working order.

There are many opportunities to study the history of bells and ringing. Over 600 bell founders having operated in the UK since mediaeval times, and nearly 50,000 of their bells are still in existence. The Central Council website has a collection of biographic records of many hundreds of ringers going back to the early 1800s. Many ringing societies and individual towers have records going back over a century, and some much longer. The scope for historical research, especially at local level, is huge.

### **‘Ringing in hand’**

Change ringing is also performed with handbells, but only rarely is it seen in public. Mostly it is in private, for the ringers’ own pleasure. The methods are the same as those rung in the tower, but the ringing experience is quite distinct. Bell control is easy, and the clearer sound of handbells makes the music more evident, but the mental task is more challenging since each person rings two bells, one in each hand.

### **Challenges and rewards of being a ringer**

Ringing entails a commitment – ringers are expected to take a fair share in their band’s regular ringing, notably for services (whose time is fixed, and may not be the most convenient for the ringers) and at practices (where much of the ringing may be basic, for the benefit of learners).

In return for that commitment, ringers have an engaging hobby, which they can pursue into old age, with virtually free use of bells for recreational ringing.

Bands of ringers are cohesive groups that provide regular social contact and comradeship. The universal acceptance and welcome of ringers provides ‘ready made friends’ for any ringer, when travelling or when moving home.

Ringers are supportive, and help each other to develop, often ‘standing behind’ a less experienced ringer to give advice. Many are motivated by a strong sense of wanting to give something back in return for the enjoyment that ringing has given them.

Ringers can progress their ringing as much or as little as they want beyond basic competence. The scope for learning methods is virtually limitless.

The open nature of ringing gives ringers great flexibility. As well as their own bands, they can ring at other towers (every day of the week if they wish) or they can ring with regular peal or quarter peal bands. They can become deeply absorbed in ringing or it can be ‘just another of their activities’.

Ringers with all manner of wider skills, interests and talents can almost certainly apply them within a ringing context, whether their bent is history, maths, engineering, teaching, fundraising, administration or maintaining a ring of bells, which is a satisfying responsibility for someone with a practical bent,

Ringers share a heritage going back many centuries, and that continues to develop and progress with each new generation of ringers. As the custodians of, and performers on, the loudest and most public musical instruments, they play a special role in public life at times of national rejoicing or sadness. The sound of bells has a special place in the nation’s consciousness, and each generation of ringers ensures that it can be heard.