

# **Towards Better Striking**

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## What Is Good Striking?

Most of us have been in a tower when the conductor has shouted "listen to it:" or some other such equally unhelpful comment. But what is this "it" which we are supposed to listen to, and what is the use of listening more carefully if we don't know what to do to improve that jangling mess of sound coming from up above? Whilst such comments as "Listen to it!" are often examples of "Belfrymanship", this same conductor may well be privately thinking "I know it's not much good but I haven't a clue what is really wrong!" Nevertheless an important factor has been grasped. This is that bellringing is an aural art and not a visual one. The people outside can't tell - and they probably don't much care either - whether the ropes are in the right place, but they do care very much if the sounds are not.

Our main purpose in ringing, then, is to make a pleasant and melodious noise for the consumption of the general public, which does not have an on/off switch for the local Church bells. We are in charge of the loudest noise made to the Glory of God. If we make an unpleasant sound it reflects badly not only on us but on the Church as a whole. Bells rung well can have an evangelising effect upon a community but rung badly they can make the Church appear shabby and run-down, even indifferent or dead. It is therefore not just desirable but our duty to improve our striking.

Good striking is what sounds good to the hearers and that is clean and rhythmic evenly spaced sounds, without gaps or clipping. Put like that it sounds easy, but it is not: These notes will give some pointers to the attainment of good striking, but the main way to learn is careful and considered practice. This is something you should be conscious of from the day you first handle a bell.

It is worth mentioning here that from the point of view of striking, the simpler the method the better. The people outside don't much care if it's Plain Bob or Spliced Surprise. Some of the best striking that can be heard is call-changes in the West Country, where, because they ring this way, they can concentrate entirely on their striking. Let us save our complicated methods for practices, meetings or peals and ring something which we are confident about for Divine Service. Against this, however, we must balance the fact that ringing the same old methods all the time gets very boring and that can reduce our enjoyment and sometimes the quality of striking too.

It is also worth remembering that careless and indifferent ringing by experienced ringers in a touch for learners can set a bad example and may even then delay the learner from reaching the higher standard we are looking for.

# Mechanical Difficulties

It would be bad enough getting a bell to strike in the correct place if all bells rang at the instant we pulled the rope, but there is a long delay between making a decision to pull and the moment when the bell actually speaks, because the bell first has to turn almost a full circle. To complicate it even further this delay varies with the weight of the bell, whether it is odd-struck and sometimes, it seems, even the weather: Even new rings of bells are occasionally installed with some which are odd-struck, that is, bells which do not ring at the exact expected time relative to the position of their ropes.

So is the problem insurmountable? No, luckily there are ways to overcome the problems of even the most difficult of bells. Let us consider first what may be called the four stages of accomplishment in striking and then give some pointers to the most common faults.

## Stages 1 & 2 - Visual Only

Stage 1 is the elementary one where the ringer watches the rope of the bell which is to be followed : a downwards movement of hands and rope, the same amount whichever bell precedes you, is allowed to go before you follow. Of course this is usually an inadequate guide because of the difference between bells as described earlier, and because of the difference in distance between ropes, which may affect your visual judgment.

Stage 2 is an extension of the above, with the distance after each bell varied as indicated by more experienced ringers. This is an improvement but it is still not possible to strike accurately using this method, especially when ringing different bells or in different towers. And how much you are missing if you can't hear your own bell !

## Stage 3 - Aural/Visual

The method used at least part of the time by most experienced ringers involves the use of both the ears and the eyes. You set out by ringing the expected distance after each bell, but you note whether that distance is correct when the bell actually rings. If it is not correct, next time you ring after that bell you ring quicker or slower, as appropriate, to compensate.

Now, to do this successfully it is necessary to know which bell is yours from amongst the jumble of sound up above. If you are not musical, don't worry, all is not lost! You must learn where the rope and your arms are when the bell actually speaks, and listen for it at that time. As an extra help you can sometimes feel a slight jerk on the rope when the clapper strikes. If this is a problem for you (and many quite experienced ringers do have this problem), ring a

bell on its own until you get the feel of it. It is important for you to be able to identify your own bell.

It is also essential to know which place you are in, i.e. your position in each row. If you know in which place you should be, you can count the notes in the row until you hear the one which should be yours. You should then be able to recognise whether that one is struck cleanly and in good rhythm. It has to be admitted that this becomes more difficult on higher numbers.

This method of striking, by itself, has drawbacks, a major one of which is the difficulty in leading accurately. Therefore the experienced ringer combines it with Stage 4.

## Stage 4 - Aural/Rhythmic

Stage 4 is the one for which we should all be aiming. It is possible by listening alone, to keep a bell in its correct place. The key is RHYTHM, that is, learning to ring at a steady and consistent pace. By careful listening you can determine at what pace to ring in order to stay in the same place, and how to vary your pace to change position up or down. You don't need to worry if other bells are odd-struck, because if they are rung correctly their sounds will still be in the right place. The only bell you make corrections for is your own and so it should be possible (with a good deal of practice:) to strike almost any bell competently after only a few blows, during which you can discover its peculiarities.

Some ringers look at the floor the whole time whilst ringing. The reason, which may not be immediately evident, is that it is sometimes easier to ring with a steady rhythm if you are not being distracted by ropes flying up and down or by the peculiar expressions on the faces of some of your fellow Ringers! Here it should be emphasized that ringing without looking at other ringers or their ropes is only desirable with a competent band. Many trips and slips in ringing are avoided by a 'nod and a wink' and for teaching learners, who are really up against it anyway, a ringer who apparently stares disinterestedly only at the floor could be the last straw in making them decide to give up the whole thing!

When ringing larger bells, especially tenors, it is even more important to ring in this rhythmical way. This is because, firstly, it can be extremely hard work to keep changing pace with a big bell. Secondly, the larger bells play a more prominent part than the smaller ones in setting the overall rhythm and this is something which non-ringers will notice.

A useful suggestion (for practice nights only, and in order to get used to the idea of ringing rhythmically!) is to try ringing with your back to the circle. Try rounds and call-changes first and then progress to a simple method. This means you will use your ears entirely instead of

your eyes. It really is possible and it should liven up your practice no end! Another way is to set alternate bells at handstroke and backstroke and attempt to ring a simple method. Once again, this should be reserved for practice night!

## Common Faults In Striking

One of the most frequent errors in striking occurs as a result of too much reliance being placed on the visual aspect and not enough on rhythmic striking. If the bell you are to follow is hopelessly slow (and the rhythm of your own bell should indicate this to you) what do you do? Do you wait for him or her or go at your own pace? You might be tempted always to go at your own pace, clipping if necessary; frustration often urges you to do so; but this is not really sensible. Perhaps the best advice is to do this only with a reasonably competent band and hope the offender will rapidly take the hint, and rather to use your own discretion with a band which is less competent. The point is that ringing will always lack rhythm whilst the individual ringers are not ringing rhythmically. This is why ringing is such a total team activity. If you wait for a slow bell and the bells following you do so as well, the whole sound becomes disjointed and rough, indeed can pile up like a rail crash, whereas a slight clip and a rhythm which is still basically maintained usually sounds better. On the bigger bells it is best that you always ring at a steady pace except with a band of beginners. Remember, the larger bells should set the rhythm and the pace.

Of course, if the bell you are following is too quick, you should always go at your correct pace, leaving an extra gap to maintain the basic rhythm and this should apply under all circumstances.

The second common striking error occurs when leading and usually this is a result of the handstroke lead coming too close. Perhaps after the enormous strain of going up to the back and then down to the front again you heave a sigh of relief and drop in the handstroke, glad for a rest before the next epic journey! There should be a gap of one beat before handstroke and no gap at backstroke. If you are plain hunting down to lead at a steady pace the handstroke lead should be at the same pace, not faster or slower.

Lastly, for those who are not yet in the more advanced stages of ringing, there are some pointers to the gaps to leave over different bells. Big bells swing more slowly than little ones and the result is that you must leave an apparently larger gap over a big bell than a small one. Indeed, in some towers with heavy rings of bells the tenors pull before the trebles and still speak after them. A very disconcerting experience at first! Conversely, if you are ringing a larger bell than you are used to, leave much smaller gaps, especially over the small bells. A common error when first ringing a big bell, perhaps 'drumming' a tenor after changes on the rest of the bells, is to ring too wide.

## Don't Despair

Maybe much of what has been written is all too complicated, but don't despair! It should come in time: indeed experience has shown that it will, with constant care and concentration. Don't expect to progress through these stages just one at a time. There is bound to be some overlap, and even when at Stage 2 you will be using some of Stage 4.

It is worth mentioning that there are now available several records which have been made to provide examples of good striking. Try to get hold of one of these and listen to it from time to time. It can be a salutary lesson to all ringers to do this occasionally.

Finally it must be stressed again that the key to good striking is practice, and more practice, and still more practice. When you finally achieve good striking you will discover, as many have done before you, that it really has been worth all the effort. Perhaps then your team will avoid the cutting remark addressed to one tower captain after service ringing: "Why do you always include so many dotted notes when you ring!"

Good luck!