

First lessons

Things you should know

It has been said that learning to ring is rather like learning to ride a bike; there are many different things to think about and, until you get them all right at the same time, you don't succeed. Most people need quite a lot of practice before it all comes together.

SAFETY: Until you can ring unaided never catch hold of a rope unless your tutor has told you what to do and is standing with you. (You wouldn't try to drive a car without having proper lessons!)

The diagrams on pages 2 and 3 will help you to learn what is meant by bells being “Down” or “Up”, also the names of the various bits of bell mechanism, and if you can be shown this on the actual bells it is easier to understand.

One of the first things we learn about ringing is that the bell swings “full circle”, which is fairly easy to understand if you have seen a bell being rung or have seen a demonstration with a model bell. You will also learn, quite early on, that to control the bell it is necessary to hold it “on the balance”, mouth upward. When a bell swings full circle it swings completely round from a mouth-up position to where it is mouth-up again. (We call this the “Balance point”.) At this moment one of two things might happen:

1. It doesn't quite reach the mouth-up position and falls back. If this happens you can't stop it because you can't push on a rope. Or:
2. It swings “over the balance” and, if nothing else happened, it would fall down on the other side. If we stop it swinging when it is just over the balance the weight of the bell is pulling slightly on the rope and we can hold the bell in this position as long as required, before sending it swinging back the other way.

For practical reasons we have a “stay” to hold the bell at rest “over the balance” as shown in the “Bells up” diagrams, but a skilled ringer does not let the bell “bump the stay” during ringing. When a bell is resting on the stay it is said to be “set”.

Our objective in the first sessions is to swing the bell and hold it balanced so that there is a slight tension (or “pull”) on the rope, allowing us to control the bell and send it easily in to its next swing. You probably know that the lower end of the rope is called the “Tail end” and that the woolly tufting is called the “Sally”. Pulling on the sally is called “Handstroke”, while pulling on the tail end is called “Backstroke”.

Usually your first session is to learn to control the bell at backstroke.

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Ringling at backstroke

To ring a bell at “backstroke” you have hold of the “tail end” whilst your tutor takes care of the “sally” or “handstroke. Firstly your tutor will ensure that the rope length is suitable for you and will show you what you are required to do.

Hold the tail end with both hands, right hand over left hand, and let your arms relax fully down; your hands should be where a Scotsman wears his sporrán. Your tutor will pull on the sally, which will move down, then move rapidly upwards as the bell swings round, taking your hands up over your head; keep your arms relaxed - your tutor will be guiding your hands. Don't look up to see where the rope has gone - **keep looking straight ahead!** The objective now is to “hold the bell on the balance” until you are ready to set it swinging back the other way.

To control the bell you need to stop it moving when it is just over the balance, when its weight starts to pull slightly on the rope. Two things can make this difficult: tensed arms or a slack rope (or both!).

You are holding the tail-end to control the bell at backstroke; as the sally flies upward start to lift your hands slowly so that the rope “overtakes” them; this will lift your relaxed arms. The rope lifting your arms puts a little tension on the rope and you can feel what is happening at the other end, but if you lift your arms too quickly and the rope is slack you can't feel anything. If your arms are tensed the rope will just jerk them upwards and, again, you have no control.

Feel how the bell slows as it reaches the top of its swing; stop it when you judge that it is just over the balance. If you don't get this right one of two things can happen:

1. The bell will fall back - you've stopped it too soon. Or:
 2. You feel a bump as the stay hits the slider - you've left it too late..
- (Of course at this stage your tutor will make corrections if you go wrong.)

As an alternative to (2), you may not feel a bump, but the bell feels heavy on the rope. This is also a sign that you have let the bell go too far over the balance; the further a bell goes over the heavier it feels.

Ideally, when you stop the bell swinging you should feel a slight pull on the rope; the bell is now balanced ready for the return swing.

It helps to get this right if, when the bell is balanced, your arms are at a comfortable full stretch over your head. If you find that you are bumping the stay then take in an inch or two of rope so that your arms are lifted higher; if the bell is falling back despite your reaching up then let out a little rope. Feeling the bell on to the balance is our objective; having your arms at full stretch gives you a reference point. (Ringling with your arms fully stretched also gives you better control over the bell, and this is discussed later.)

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When you pull on the rope to return the bell to handstroke, pull all the way down and pull straight. Pulling all the way down involves accelerating your hands to keep a slight tension on the rope until your hands are fully down in front of your imaginary sporrán. To pull straight think of sliding your hands down a broom handle that is just in front of your body; to do this you need to bring your elbows back slightly as your hands come down. A common mistake is to swing your hands outward as you pull; this makes the rope fly outward and catching the sally becomes difficult.

All this can seem difficult until you get the knack of it, but with practice you will be able to swing and balance a bell without having to think about it, like keeping your balance on a bicycle. Practice is everything.

When you can control your bell at backstroke it is good practice to ring it in rounds with your tutor still controlling the handstroke. This will start to give you a sense of rhythm which is very important in ringing. It is also important to start listening for your own bell. If you are ringing (say) the third, listen to the bells sounding while counting “One, two, THREE, four, five, six - One, two, THREE, etc. This helps you keep your bell in its place with the others.

When you have control of the bell at backstroke it's time to look at the handstroke.

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Ringling at Handstroke

When learning to control the handstroke much of the previous session still applies; we must balance the bell as before. To do this we need a little tension in the rope to feel what is happening and it helps if the arms are at full stretch as the bell comes up to the balance. Usually you will be shown what to do first.

For this session you will be holding the sally (handstroke) while your tutor looks after the backstroke; however your tutor will also be helping you with the handstroke at first.

To find the right place to catch the sally; with the bell set at handstroke reach as high as you can, taking hold of the sally right hand over left hand. This is about where you should catch the sally when it returns.

With your tutor assisting, pull on the sally and lift the bell from its “set” position so that it is lightly balanced. Now pull down on the sally **and remember to let go** when your hands reach waist level. The sally will fly upward (but don’t look up!); your tutor will take care of the backstroke and will catch the sally as it returns. For the moment you can concentrate on pulling the sally (handstroke) and letting go at the right time.

The next thing to master is catching the sally. When the bell is pulled from the backstroke the sally comes down to somewhere round waist level and then rises. The objective is to catch the sally, with both hands close together (right over left) just as it starts to rise. When you have pulled the bell at handstroke let your hands and arms go right down - the sporan again! – wait, and start to lift them to meet the rising sally. This takes a bit of practice and your tutor will help you with the timing. Also, you need to catch the sally in the right place to hold the bell balanced as your arms come to full stretch.

A few tips:

- Let your hands go right down with arms relaxed after pulling the sally; a common fault is to lift your hands up to chest level waiting for the sally. This doesn’t work!
- Lift your hands in time with the rising sally as you catch it - this makes for a smooth catch.
- If the bell bumps against the stay, catch the sally a little higher; your hands will be taken higher and this will stop the bell sooner.
- If the bell falls back despite you reaching up, catch the sally a little lower; you are now able to let the bell swing higher.

Remember that the objective is to hold the bell balanced with your arms at a comfortable full stretch. **This stage can often require a lot of practice to get it right, so don’t get disheartened.**

When you can keep control of the bell at handstroke it is good practice to ring it “handstroke only” in rounds. Get used to the rhythm, listen for your own bell and count your places as before.

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Combining Handstroke and Backstroke

When you can control a bell at backstroke and at handstroke separately you will need to combine these two actions. The next important thing to learn is how to hold the tail-end correctly in the left hand. This is well illustrated on page 8 of the “Beginners Handbook”, one of many Central Council publications available for learners at various stages. Using only the thumb to hold the rope in your palm leaves **all** the fingers free to grip the sally as shown on page 10 of the same booklet. The most common fault is to fold the third and fourth fingers over the rope - **don't do it!** If you get into this bad habit now it can take ages to get rid of it later.

Before you start combining handstroke with backstroke it is useful to ring handstroke only while holding a “dummy” tail-end. This gives you confidence for holding the real tail end later, also you can practice the arm movement from handstroke to backstroke and then to handstroke again by “following through” the action in time with your tutor. It is important to practice the timing for this because, once you set the bell swinging, it isn't going to wait for you!

Normally your tutor will show you the actions before you try; study this with the description in the “Beginners Handbook” - “**Down - Away - Together - Up**”

Taking these in turn, starting at handstroke, grasp the sally and tail-end together, lift the bell off the stay and - -

- DOWN: Pull down on the sally as you have been doing.
- AWAY: Let go of the sally, keep hold of the tail end with your left hand, gripping with all your fingers
- TOGETHER: Bring your **right** hand to your **left** hand, grasp the tail end right hand over left hand.
- UP: As the sally rises start lifting your hands, follow-through to backstroke and balance your bell.

Now use the same key words to return to the handstroke:

- DOWN: Pull down as normal for backstroke.
- AWAY: Open **all** the fingers of both hands, holding the tail end with your left thumb only. Let your arms go right down (to the “sporrán”), relaxed, ready to catch the sally.
- TOGETHER: Catch the sally, in the right place, with **all** your fingers round it.
- UP: Lift your hands with the sally, follow through to balance the bell at handstroke -

and start again from the beginning.

When you become more familiar with this sequence try to relax your arms as much as possible. The more you can relax the less effort you need to ring a bell, thus the easier it becomes. Keep practising, because when you start to ring in rounds there are other things to think about, so you shouldn't be thinking too much about controlling the bell.

Watch other ringers; you will see a variety of styles, but you can soon pick out the best!