



# Teaching to Ring.

## Introduction.

Teaching, in any subject, is a highly individual process. Whilst there are broad rules of what makes good teaching, tutors develop their own individual approach. These notes are based on techniques and explanations that work for me; if you find that different techniques work better for you - that's life. The important thing is that we all **think** about what we are doing in teaching others.

## Thought-starters.

- Learning to ring is a voluntary activity; an important part of our task is to make it a pleasant experience so that pupils want to continue.
- SAFETY is paramount at all times.
- When working with young persons **always** have another adult with you - preferably a parent.
- Much of the best teaching is done by example, thus our own standards are important.
- A calm, confident manner helps to put pupils at ease. Remember that they are in unfamiliar surroundings and have to gain confidence.
- Training sessions on silenced bells, separate from the practice night, are ideal for new pupils; however, pupils should be ringing with the rest of the band as soon as possible.
- **Involvement** and **Achievement** are important factors in learning because they promote **Motivation**. Each training session should be planned to involve pupils to the maximum and to give a sense of achievement (however small) on completion. Thus teach in small steps.
- Lessons should be planned to give a sense of continuity.
- Lesson plans represent an ideal situation; we sometimes have to modify them to suit actual circumstances.
- Tell pupils **what** to do rather than what **not** to do! (Be positive.)
- Give pupils opportunity for self-study. This includes provision of books, handouts, etc.
- What now seems easy to us demands total concentration from pupils. **Patience is essential**. At each stage the necessary skill gradually builds up in the pupil's 'Auto-response' mechanism; the pupil finds that it is 'becoming easier' and this tells the tutor that the teaching is producing results.

## Also consider:

- Are the bells suitable for teaching in terms of weight, 'go' and set?
- Using tied bells is kinder to the neighbours.
- Is the ringing chamber comfortable, especially in winter, well-lit, welcoming?
- Is the seating adequate?  
(Lack of these benefits can lead to loss of recruits!)
- Can pupils safely visit the bell loft to see a bell swung full circle? If not, a model bell will be needed to explain what happens. (In any case, a model bell is a good teaching aid.)



### Remember:

When teaching physical skills, **we** demonstrate and explain while the **pupil** has to learn and practice. This takes time and repetition while the pupil 'gets the hang of it'. It seems so easy for us, but it demands total concentration from pupils until, gradually, the necessary co-ordination starts to build up. Maybe it 'just comes naturally' to the occasional pupil but, for most pupils, we (and they) need a lot of patience in the early stages.

### Ideally, each teaching session will consist of:

- **A clear-cut explanation of what to do; stick to essentials - fine details can follow later.**
- **A good demonstration, repeated as often as needed.**
- **Adequate practice time for pupils**
- **A recap on what has been learnt.**

It is important to find adequate time for lessons. A half-hour on practice night before the practice proper is one way - or you might arrange entirely separate sessions for first lessons.

### Teaching Backstroke.

- Firstly ensure that pupils are fully aware of what is going on. Preferably let them see a bell swung full circle, otherwise explain with a model bell. Relate this to the rope movement.
- By demonstration with a helper, make pupils aware of correct stance and of the arm movement as the bell swings to backstroke then to handstroke. (Explain these terms!)
- Ensure pupils know that you will control the handstroke - they must not attempt to catch the sally. They **must** keep both hands holding the tail-end.
- Use a dummy tail-end to demonstrate the correct grip, right hand above left hand. With the pupil holding the dummy, lift the pupil's hands fully above the head in the backstroke position. (Stand on a box if pupils are tall!) Then let them move their hands fully down (to '**Where a Scotsman wears his sporrán**'), moving the hands in a straight line as if actually ringing. Do this a few times so that pupils aren't taken by surprise when doing it 'for real'.
- Having explained and demonstrated, with the bell at handstroke, start the practical lesson with the pupil holding the tail-end, arms down and relaxed. Have one hand on the tail-end to guide the pupil's hands. (Tell them to 'Let me do the work'.) Pull handstroke with the other hand, guide the pupil's hands to backstroke, setting the bell if possible. Guide the pupil into the backstroke pull, catching the sally one-handed and setting the bell. Repeat as needed, introducing the pupil to balancing the bell and pulling backstroke.
- When starting exercises with the bell, be prepared for pupils to tense up. This is a natural reaction and pupils have to be 'Talked out' of it.
- Ideally, have a skilled helper watching from a distance to identify handling faults - you have a lot to think about and are standing close to the pupil.
- **Safety** - The Unthinkable. What if the rope is in danger of entanglement? It's easy to say that this shouldn't happen and, with proper care, it won't. But - what if it does?
  - (a) knock or grab it clear of the pupil. But if you can't -
  - (b) catch the sally and hang on! Unless you are teaching on unduly heavy bells this will save the day. Extreme measures? Yes, but pupil safety comes first. With proper care and attention you'll never have to do it.



## Possible faults - Backstroke.

What is wrong?	What might cause it?	Suggested remedy
Bell does not reach the balance.	1 Rope too short. 2 Pupil tensed and/or pulls too soon. 3. Are <b>you</b> pulling hard enough?	Adjust rope. Advise pupil to relax and/or 'Take it slower'. Adjust <b>your</b> pull.
Bell bumps the stay.	1 Rope too long. 2 Pupil checks too late. 3. Are <b>you</b> pulling too hard?	Adjust pupil's grip on rope - or adjust rope length. Assist pupil to feel the bell on balance and hold it there. Adjust <b>your</b> pull.
Rope flies about.	Pupil not pulling straight, especially if hands move outwards.	Advise pupil to pull straight - 'Like sliding your hands down a broom handle', also, 'Bring your elbows back as you pull'.
Rope falls with a wobble.	Pupil not pulling all the way down.	Advise pupil to 'Pull gently all the way down'.
Pupil's hands not going fully down.	Tenseness.	Advise pupil to relax, 'Let your hands go right down'.

## Things to go for.

- **Balancing the bell.** Pupils will sense this better when they allow their arms to relax on the upswing. Practice, practice and more practice, with repeated demonstrating and explaining is often needed at this stage.
- **Arms at a comfortable full stretch.** This gives a definite position where the bell comes on to the balance; it also gives the longest possible upswing and, subsequently, the longest pull. All of these are important factors in good bell control. Adjust the pupil's grip on the rope to achieve this.
- **Smooth action.** Avoid jerkiness; encourage pupils to 'Take your time', allowing the bell a full swing up to the balance, then, 'Pull smoothly, don't snatch', 'Pull all the way through'. Then, on the upswing, 'Lift your arms in time with the rope - let the rope overtake your hands - feel the bell balance'.
- **Arms fully down** after each pull - hands in front of the imaginary sporran. Pupil should relax - for the moment.
- **Body straight;** 'Don't lean forward' (or back). 'Stand straight'. 'Keep your shoulders square'. Posture is important.
- **Head up.** Nodding the head when pulling is a common fault. But not to look up - 'Look straight ahead', 'Don't move your head when you pull'.



- **Repetitive phrases**, otherwise known as ‘Patter’ can be helpful, firstly because you will know exactly what you are going to say; (**never be lost for words!**), also because repetition helps to drive the message home. This can be even more effective when you can synchronise words to actions, e.g. ‘Reach up - and - balance - and - pull!’
- Ringing in rounds, backstroke only, might be attempted when pupils show an ability to balance the bell at backstroke. It is only fair to say that not all tutors agree with this technique, however several advantages are claimed for it:

Pupils spend more time actually ringing - and this is on open bells..

A sense of rhythm is included with their pulling.

Pupils can start listening for their own bell. (Get them to count!)

Pupils are ringing with the rest of the band; this is important psychologically.

The added activity helps prevent loss of interest and thus loss of recruits if learning is slow at this stage.

## Teaching Handstroke.

The skills learnt at backstroke will be needed at handstroke, plus a sense of timing in releasing and catching the sally. With most pupils, catching the sally at the right moment (and thus in the right place) is a difficult action at first.

- With a helper, demonstrate what is required of the pupil. With the bell set, make a point of catching hold of the sally as high as possible, stretching up to do so. ‘This is where you should catch it when it comes back’.
- Teach the handstroke action in two stages:
- Firstly ‘Pull and let go’ Brief pupils that, for the moment, they will **not** catch the sally when it returns. Say ‘Pull and let go’ to pupils, in time with the actions. (Tutor then pulls from backstroke, catches the sally and sets the bell so that the pupil can repeat this exercise.) Ensure that pupils hands go fully down (to the ‘sporrán’) after the ‘let go’. Advise pupils how hard to pull. (Usually a bit stronger than at backstroke.) When the pupils have got this right:
- Introduce catching the sally. Explain that the sally should be caught around **waist level** as it rises. Use the same patter as before, ‘Pull and let go’, adding as you pull backstroke, ‘- - -and - - - catch!’ To help pupils establish a rhythm in the catching it is important that the tutor pulls the backstroke rhythmically each time.
- Tenseness and over-anticipation are common faults at this stage. Be ready for this, especially to talk pupils out of it. (Calm, confident approach!)

## Possible faults - Handstroke.

What is wrong?	What might cause it?	Suggested remedy.
Pupil looks up for the sally.	Over-anticipation.	Tell pupils they will catch the sally as it comes up - not as it comes down. ‘Keep

## Disconnected Jottings by an Itinerant Bellringer

Written by Peter D Wenham

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		looking straight ahead’.
Pupil lifts hands to chest level before catching the sally.	Over-anticipation.	Tell pupils to keep hands down, raising them to catch the sally as it rises. (Sense of timing.)
Pupil snatches at the sally.	Over-anticipation.	Tell pupils to lift hands in time with the rising sally and to catch hold smoothly.
Pupils hands do not go fully down after pulling	Over-anticipation.	Advise pupil to relax with hands down.
Bell fails to balance.	(1)Catching the sally too high (too soon?)  (2)Arms tensed. (3)Pupil pulls too soon.  (4)Are <b>you</b> pulling hard enough?	Advise pupil to catch lower or later. Time your word ‘Catch!’ to suit the pupil’s reaction time. Advise pupil to relax. Advise pupil, ‘Take it slower’. Adjust <b>your</b> pull.
Bell bumps the stay.	(1) Catching the sally too low (too late?)  (2)Are <b>you</b> pulling too hard?	Advise pupil to catch higher or sooner.  Adjust <b>your</b> pull.

### Things to go for:

Essentially, the same key points as for backstroke, however, the essential extra skill to be developed here is the sense of timing to catch the sally in the right place, consistently. Let pupils practice ‘handstroke only’ rounds with the band as they progress.

### Before combining both strokes.

Emphasise:

- Correct grip of the tail-end - left thumb only, so as to have:
  - **All** fingers around the sally at handstroke.
  - Both hands fully down (to the ‘sporrán’) after releasing the sally, at the same time:
  - Changing the grip to the tail-end - **‘Bring your right hand to your left hand’**.
  - Raising both hands in time with the helper (or tutor) as the bell goes to backstroke. (Full stretch!) and Pulling’ in time with the helper - hands fully down to the ‘sporrán’, at the same time:
  - Opening **all** the fingers of **both** hands, tail-end retained by left thumb **only**.
  - Catching the sally, together with the tail-end, **all** fingers round the sally, balance the bell.
- And that’s a lot to remember - but it’s all important!

### Combining both strokes.

As always, adequate demonstration should precede pupils’ practice.



### Things to go for:

- Smooth, rhythmic action.
- Timing the change of grip.
- Keeping the hands close together throughout the actions.
- Reaching to full stretch. (Adjust grip on tail end and/or height of catching the sally if needed.)
- Pulling all the way down.
- If bumping the stay - or having to 'fight' the bell - 'Have you pulled too hard?'
- If the bell doesn't balance - 'Have you tensed up?' - or 'Pulled too soon?' - or 'Not pulled hard enough?'
- Where possible, let **them** decide what they need to correct.

The great moment, of course, is when pupils 'Go solo' - ringing rounds entirely on their own. A favourite ploy is for the tutor to gradually move round behind the pupil, ready to help if needed, but effectively out of the pupil's sight.

At this stage learning to ring becomes a different ball-game for both pupil and tutor. The need for physical assistance has diminished, eventually to vanishing point, though it is still necessary to stand by for a while when pupils tackle different bells - and visit different towers. It is also necessary to keep watch on pupils who have 'gone solo' to check whether handling faults creep in!

### So: What's Next?

#### Striking!

Good striking, of course, is a priority. To be good striker you have to be able to hear your own bell. How many pupils have said, 'But I can't hear which is my bell!'. So:

- Teach pupils to listen, first of all when others are ringing; make them count the bells as they sound, 'One-two-three-four-five-six-one-two-three-four-five-six-**gap**-one-two-three- and so on. Make sure that they appreciate the 'gap' of the open lead. (This counting technique is also good for keeping youngsters busy when others are ringing - it keeps up the involvement factor.)

Make sure that pupils know when **their** bell sounds - 'When your hands come up past your face'.

- When they ring, get them to count the bells as they sound, emphasising the count for their own bell. Thus, a pupil ringing the third should be counting, 'One-two-**three**-four-five-six-one-two-**three**-four- etc.
- At this stage they should appreciate that the count of 'three' comes as their hands are moving up past their face - and **that** is where they hear their own bell.

With further practice pupils should be able to hear whether their own bell is sounding 'central' between the bells before and after their own and, possibly with a little coaching, to get their bell placed correctly.

When pupils ring with a band who can strike well, introduce the concept of rhythm, to 'Feel when to pull', with the message that all good ringing is rhythmic.



From here, additional skills such as ringing the leading bell, covering, call changes, raising and lowering in peal (possibly the ultimate test of bell control!) and change ringing will be taught as pupil ability increases. **(Pupils' Notes for all of these are given in the earlier Instalments of this series.)**

## **Have you used a Simulator?**

The basic idea of a computerised simulator is that practices can be held without the bells sounding outside the tower; the sound is triggered electronically from the swinging (silenced) bells and delivered through loudspeakers. With no sound outside the tower practises can be held for extended periods, repeated as often as you wish, and the inevitable 'Crunches' are not inflicted upon the general public.

In 'Silent practice' mode all the bells (with clappers locked or tied) are used. Rounds, call changes or methods can be practised as with open bells. You only get the sound inside.

For the learners, when you have just one helper with you who can ring rounds in time with the computer pupils can practice rounds (one at a time) without having a full band present. It works like this:

Set the computer to 'ring' rounds on six. With the bells silenced,, the helper rings 2, the pupil rings 3 with the simulator ringing the other bells to complete the sound. Provided the helper rings in time the pupil has a rope to follow and rounds to listen to. We have been very glad of this facility when short of a full band.

These exercises have been done using the ABEL programme.

## **Raising and Lowering in Peal.**

When pupils can raise and lower a single bell confidently, they can be introduced to raising and lowering in peal by using two or (preferably) three tied bells, the pupil 'ringing' the second, with proficient helpers on the other bells. This visual exercise will give pupils a sense of timing in ringing up and down before exercising on open bells. Then, if circumstances allow, raising and lowering just three open bells in the early stages gives pupils a better chance of hearing their own bell. (These exercises, silent and open, can also be used when teaching leading up and down.)

## **A Final (?) Word:**

In teaching, nothing stays still. A good tutor will always be looking out for new ideas, new techniques. We benefit from this - and so do our pupils.

"If you are teaching a class you can think about the elementary things that you know very well. These things are kind of fun and delightful. It doesn't do any harm to think them over again. Is there a better way to present them? Are there any problems associated with them? Are there any new thoughts you can make about them? The elementary things are easy to think about; if you can't think of a new thought, no harm done; what you thought about it before is good enough for the class. If you do think of something new, you're rather pleased that you have a new way of looking at it."

Richard Feynman.