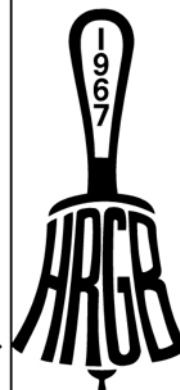


Handbell Ringers of Great Britain  
[www.handbells.org.uk](http://www.handbells.org.uk)



# Handbell Tune Ringing A Beginners Guide Part 2

**Part 1** is intended for the complete beginner, the kind of person who writes to say *"I would like to set up a handbell team. How do I go about it?"*

**Part 2** takes you from your team's first practice to their first public performances.

**Part 3** is for when you are thoroughly 'hooked' and offers advice for developing your team's performance

*This revision edited by **John Willis***

# Part 2 – From Practice to Performance

## 10. How to ring a bell

But surely everyone can ring a bell?

Yes but there are techniques involved, in the grip, movement and, perhaps most of all in ‘damping’ the bell or killing the sound.

It has been said that this is the difference between ‘ringing handbells’ and ‘ringing music on handbells’ as it observes the length of the note as in singing or playing another instrument. Some teams whose roots are with church tower bells do not damp at all because the tower bells ‘ring on’ – but of course they are ringing peals, not music.

Obviously the handle is to hold (except in certain special effect techniques such as ‘plucking’) and the clapper striking the bell makes the sound. If you look at the clapper you will see that, unlike the typical ‘school bell’ the clapper is rigid and will move only in one plane. Therefore, if you have the clapper moving horizontally, however much you move your

hand up and down, you will get no sound.

So, to get a note out of the bell, hold the handle firmly near to the crown or cap with the handle between the forefinger and thumb. (If you hold the handle right at the end, particularly with older bells with unstiffened handles, the bell will ‘flop’ like a flower that is too heavy for its stalk).

Check that the clapper is moving in an up and down direction and a sharp flick of the wrist should produce a note. It is more of a wrist movement than a big arm movement that is necessary in ringing – a big arm movement often produces little more than a black eye for your neighbour! If the clapper consistently fails to hit the side of the bell, a slight adjustment may be needed to the springs.

Unlike a recorder, for example, the sound made by the bell will go on until it fades or is stopped (damped). The larger bells will sound for longer than the small ones.

It is by damping in the right place that the lengths of notes are regulated in handbell ringing. Damping is achieved by touching the bells onto a foam-covered table in 'off-table' ringing and by touching the bells against the body for 'in-hand' ringing.

If you are using chimes or Belleplates® damping becomes even more important as these instruments have a tendency to 'ring on'.

Be careful to avoid buttons, brooches, badges etc., a reverberating bell caught against these makes a horrible noise and it does no good to the bell. Note that very precise damping produces a staccato effect so the type of damping used can be varied to suit the type of music being played.

## **11. Who plays where?**

Begin by making sure everyone is able to ring the bell – let everyone have a go on all sizes of bell.

At first it may be helpful to ring a short, simple tune several times, moving the ringers to a different position each time until each ringer has rung in every position.

This is good practice in bell handling and music reading and it

allows the leader to assess the position to which each of the ringers is most suited. There is much to be gained by finding the best position for your members.

An extrovert is usually the best person to put at the treble end whilst the timid or quiet person may be best suited to the lower bells which generally need to be rung more softly so as not to drown the melody.

Sometimes in larger teams there is a position in the lower centre where the parts tend to be less demanding and there you will be able to place the person who is perhaps not progressing as quickly as the remainder of the team.

Such a position can, if necessary, be created when bells are allocated or if you arrange your own music.

You will soon find out who is best suited to treble, tenor and bass ringing. Some teams prefer to have each ringer stay with one part and have the same bells all the time. This certainly makes life easier in some respects, but you will find there are benefits to moving ringers around so that they become more adaptable. Obviously a diminutive 10-year-old

can't handle a 29C but apart from the obvious limitations let everyone have a go on all bells initially to see which they prefer.

If you do decide to change round regularly, make a note of who plays where in each tune to avoid arguments next time.

Unless you've already decided, you can try the various styles, in hand and off table to see which you all prefer. Don't adopt mixture of styles!

## 12. The first practice

Having largely mastered getting a sound out of the bells (and stopping it!) we are now ready to start the first practice proper.

If you have an abundance of recruits you may be tempted to allocate 1 bell to each ringer – but this should normally be avoided. Each ringer will have little to do, will soon become bored and, because he is not often playing, will lose his place in the music and fail to ring at the correct time. It may be better to let people sit out in rotation – or even start a second team on another day/evening.

Unlike other musical instruments, effective solo practice is not possible and so a weekly practice

of about 2 hours is all too short. Make the best use of your time by spending as much of the practice as possible actually ringing. A fine balance must be drawn between the chit-chat of a social evening and keeping the practice going.

If you have extra people you will need someone to count you in to pieces, otherwise one of the ringers will need to do it.

Initially the main objective will be to get the right bells rung at the right time!

Having achieved this, attention can be given to playing the correct note values (accurate damping) and to building-in dynamics. Your music should show how loud or how softly the phrases should be rung as well as any changes in tempo or volume, such as the *rallentando* or *crescendo*.

If you have no conductor these things will take a great deal of practice but hopefully, after a while, the team will be able to 'feel' the mood of the music.

A conductor will be able to communicate his feelings for the music, but this will be no help to the ringers unless they get into the habit of watching him carefully.

Encourage your members to count the beats to themselves (this is particularly important if you use numbered music or ring without a conductor).

Initially the leader may count the beats out loud, or perhaps all of the team count together. It is surprising how difficult some people find counting but by making the whole team count you may identify which ringers are having difficulty counting and be able to help them.

### **13. What shall we ring?**

In choosing the music for initial rehearsals, the following criteria should be considered:

- Familiar tune
- Easy to play (to give an early sense of achievement) so avoid fast runs or half beats
- Good enough, musically, to provide musical stimulus to the team
- Provide each ringer with a reasonably interesting part
- The required tempo should be such as can be achieved by inexperienced ringers

It is a mistake to think that a simple, single line melody will be easier to play. In fact it is often more difficult and less satisfying to play since each ringer, especially those with top or bottom bells, will have little to do and will be more likely to lose their place.

At first help to point to the notes for someone having difficulty in following the music. If this is done, it should be dispensed with as soon as possible. Even when working with young children, pointing is not necessary and it only makes the ringers rely upon it rather than reading and counting for themselves.

### **14. Subsequent practices**

Having decided where to place the members in the team, progress will be more rapid and rehearsal more effective if a ringer remains predominantly in that position.

This is particularly important for 'off table' teams where each ringer will become familiar with a particular layout of bells before him. Just as a pianist does not have to look to find the keys, the ringer will know where to lay his hand on the bells without having to look for them.

In order to do this he will have to learn to replace a bell in the correct position after use and always keep the bells tidy.

Another advantage of a fixed position is that adjacent ringers get used to working closely with each other, especially when 'borrowing' bells.

Simple exercises in speed (*tempo*), smoothness and volume (*dynamics*) are useful. Practice ringing scales around the table progressing in stages from soft to hard.

Other useful exercises are:

- Ring two bells to strike precisely together. First as individuals, then in pairs and groups to achieve good timing on chords.
- Ring alternate bells, damping one as the other strikes. First as individuals then as a group ringing chords.
- Practice *arpeggios*, all bells ringing at the same volume. And then with *crescendo* and *de-crescendo*.

Sometimes a little theory is necessary but beware of overdoing

it, especially with a team of children.

Usually any theory can be introduced incidentally as it occurs in the music. For example it is no use explaining what a semi-quaver is or what *DC* means unless you are actually going to use them

Make sure that before the end of each practice everyone has had the satisfaction of ringing a recognisable tune. If you have a large set of bells you don't have to use them all at first, just use a few to ring simple tunes and gradually build up as the ringers increase in expertise and confidence until you are using the set's full potential.

### **15. Practice procedures**

When the basic techniques have been mastered and your group of individuals has been forged into some semblance of a team, the practices should begin to settle into a regular pattern.

It's a good idea to start a practice session with a few 'warm up' exercises. This is particularly important for the bass ringers as they could suffer injury from lifting heavy bells without some preparation. A book called *Healthy Ringing* by Susan Berry is available

<http://store.handbellservices.com/healthyringing.html>

The majority of practices take place after the completion of a day's work, and, toward the end of the practice there is usually a fall-off in the ringers' ability to concentrate.

The really intensive part of a rehearsal should therefore take place early in the proceedings. At the end, ringers will enjoy ringing something they know well which will give them a sense of fulfillment to go home with.

You may need to modify this pattern as you lead up to a special event, e.g. a concert or Christmas when you will want to focus on the pieces you will be playing – but don't forget to start the rehearsal with a 'warm up' piece and end it with an old favourite if possible.

## **16. Suggested practice plan**

- Start with something nearing performance standard, polish up any outstanding faults
- A period of intensive practice of relatively unrehearsed pieces
- Further polishing of pieces in the repertoire
- Start a brand new piece

- Ring through old favourites to keep them up to standard

- Final ring of a well known tune to remember on the way home

Always endeavour to keep the practice flowing constructively. Don't be tempted to run over time – some ringers may have baby-sitters or other commitments and bad time-keeping could lose a good ringer.

However, a social half hour after practice for a cup of tea gives ringers the opportunity to give their views on the activities of the group and to be kept up to date on events, group finances etc..

## **17. Working up a new piece from scratch**

When starting on a brand new piece it is often helpful to allow the ringers to look or ring through it at their own pace to sort out any particular problems.

Early practice should concentrate on getting an even but perhaps slower tempo than the final piece requires.

There will probably be a few bars here and there that present particular difficulties for a part of the team, for instance 'borrowing'

bells from a neighbour, changing to accidentals, difficult rhythms involving two or three positions, etc.

The ringers themselves can often solve these and a few minutes spent working on problems of this kind will save time in the long run.

Perhaps while the bass sort out their problems, the trebles can practice those potential stumbling blocks etc.

It is essential that any such difficulties are properly rehearsed and overcome before the playing is bought up to tempo.

As a general guide use the whole-part-whole technique; ring the piece right the way through, then pick out parts that need improvement before ringing it right through again to see if an improvement has been made.

### **18. A Conductor?**

A conductor who does not play, particularly with a large team or several children, is very useful and on the whole a more pleasing result is achieved.

A conductor who also plays as part of the team cannot hear the sound as a whole and it can be more

difficult for him or her to make constructive criticism.

A bonus of the non-playing conductor is that if, on the day of a concert, someone is not able to come at the last minute, you do have a 'spare' ringer to fill the gap.

### **19. Preparing for Your First Public Performance**

There will come a time when your team is ready to give a public performance, be it a handbell rally, in the local pub at Christmas, at a Concert or a Music Festival.

Again, you must think about insurance, this time public liability insurance (in case someone falls over a bell box or is otherwise injured). HRGB has made arrangements with the organisation *Making Music* to provided public liability insurance and although this not cheap, it is good value when compared with other options.

At an HRGB Rally most of the teams will remember how it feels to be starting off and will often give you helpful advice – and if you ask for it – constructive criticism as well. This is, therefore, often the best place for a first performance –



you can be sure of a sympathetic reception if anything goes wrong!

There is no competition in any HRGB event as a matter of policy and you will find expert teams as well as those just starting off, playing on an equal basis.

Don't let the experts put you off – they all had to start somewhere and with a lot of practice you too can achieve that kind of sound.

Uniform is not essential. Some teams like to dress up, others hate wearing anything resembling a uniform. As long as you look smart it doesn't really matter.

At handbell rallies you will often find team members wearing the same colour polo or sweatshirts and at concerts the better known teams even wear evening dress. But to some extent a new team can build up a false sense of expectation in the audience if they over-dress!

A local group such as Young Wives, Mother's Union etc. are also good places to give an initial concert, as the atmosphere will usually be informal.

If you've opted for a concert, it's not a bad idea to get another individual or group to help to break

up the evening. A constant evening of bells can be a little wearing even for the most dedicated bell 'junkie'!

The pieces to be played, will have to be chosen – and make sure that the team practice them in that order on the evenings leading up to the event. You will often find that the team has one or two favourites or pieces that go particularly well whenever you play them so use one of these as an 'opener'.

The weaker pieces can then be put in the middle of the programme – hopefully interspersed with stronger ones. Save the best till last – this makes sure that your audience go away with fond memories of you!

## **20. On the Day**

Make sure everything is set up in advance with bells, music etc. All in the right place on the table.

If your team is to walk in, get them to come in in order (to avoid an unruly scramble for positions)

And if possible get someone to look after personal possessions off-stage.

Some teams like to go straight into the first piece and 'introduce' it

and themselves afterwards – but that is a matter of choice.

Don't worry if a few bars into the piece things are obviously going wrong – you can stop and start again (apologising to the audience) – it happens even to the best of teams. It is usually due to someone having the wrong bell, the wrong music or counting to 4 in a piece of music that is 3 beats to the bar!

So it's a good habit for the conductor to quietly ask the ringers to check their bells for the right sharps and flats and remind them how many beats in the bar before playing each piece.

If you have a conductor he can talk to the audience about the team and the bells between pieces and answer questions.

This is particularly useful if you are an off-table team and have to re-arrange a lot of bells for the next item. If you don't have a conductor perhaps you could persuade a non-ringing member of the team to do the introductions.

The most frequently asked questions relate to the cost of the bells, the type of music, how long the team has been together, how

often you practice and why you wear gloves (if you do!).

A 'have a go' session for the audience after you've finished playing is a good idea and lots of fun for both the team and the audience.

Use a large chart with letters, numbers or colours for a simple piece of music (avoid single line melody if you can and pieces that are too fast or have too many half beats) and give volunteers just one bell a-piece. In most cases, you will find that the tune is recognisable! You may even get some new recruits for the team!

Another method of involving an audience is to produce a set of words for a simple piece of music with the words corresponding to a particular note highlighted.

For example have a sheet with all the words using the note C highlighted. Members of the audience are given a C bell with the this music (and so on for all the notes). The audience can then 'ring and sing' the music. It is possible to purchase some music already prepared in this way (e.g. from Aardvark music).

It is often said that handbell ringers never smile when they ring – this is due to the concentration involved, but at least you can smile (if only with relief) at the end of each piece!

If anyone makes a mistake during the piece, ignore it – but remember it for future a practice session. The ringer should not apologise, grimace, cringe or laugh during the performance!

At the end of the performance, the audience will (almost) always give you a big round of applause. No matter how badly you think you have rung, rest assured that they would do a lot worse!

It is important that both you and the team acknowledge the

applause in some way. It is very common to see ringers finish a piece, and instantly turn to their neighbours to say why they went wrong!

Throughout your practices try to stop this habit – ask them to watch the conductor for the final beat (not least to see where to stop ringing) and then just to set the bells down and wait.

The conductor usually takes the first bow and then turns and asks the ringers to bow together. *Practice this like a piece of music!*

When the applause dies down and the conductor indicates, walk off stage in a orderly fashion.

## Ten Pre-flight checks for ringers

1. Write the bells and mallets you require at the top of your music – don't let unexpected notes/techniques come as a shock to you.
2. Underline the first two bells you need to have you hands on – try not to ring a wrong note in the first couple of bars!
3. Check that your pages are in order/not stuck together etc. – finishing before anyone else is really embarrassing
4. Check your music stand – is it stable? Are the legs secure?
5. Check the time signature – are you counting in 2s, 3s 4s...?
6. Check the key signature – especially if your music is unmarked

7. Check the tempo – be sure you know the speed at which you are going to start.
8. Check the dynamics – how loud should you be ringing at the start?
9. Check your bells are the right way up? – some teams bias their bells to ring easier in one direction
10. Check your neighbour – you are part of a team: ensure they have done their pre-flight checks. Now look at the leader!

## **Ten Tips for team leaders before ringing**

1. Are all your team at the table? – yes it sound's daft but sometimes it's like herding cats
2. Have they all got the same piece open in front of them? – *Ashgrove* and *Grandfather's Clock* do not work well together
3. Do they know the speed of the piece? – murmur or beat out a bit of tune to get their brains in gear
4. Have you introduced the piece to the audience? – nerves make you forget that one!
5. Have you got the right music? – has a ringer been kind enough to get your music ready while you waffle?
6. Have you got any bells that you need? – sometimes conductors have to ring as well.
7. Are all the ringers ready and looking at you?
8. Check the two extremes of the table especially – the bass and treble ringers often have to rearrange their bells?
9. Smile – try to make the ringers relaxed even if you are not
10. Remember to thank the team after they have rung – you'd be pretty lonely without them.

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