

Handbell Ringers of Great Britain
www.handbells.org.uk



Handbell Tune Ringing

A Beginners Guide

Part 1

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

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*This 2023 revision edited by **John Willis***

Part 1 – Getting started - what you need

1. Bells

Obviously an essential!

You may be in luck and have inherited, found or been given a set, or you may be wondering how to get hold of some.

New teams might consider using chimes or Belleplates® as a less expensive option.

Various grants are available to help with fundraising and the William Hartley Memorial Fund (WHMF) exists within HRGB to provide interest free loans to members.

Buying new bells

Basically you have a choice of English (Whitechapel or Taylor) or American bells (Malmark or Schulmerick available through their UK agents). Dutch handbells are no longer manufactured.

Details of prices are available from the foundries or their agents but before you buy it is a good idea to find a local team with a set of bells from the foundry that you are considering so that you can get some idea of the sound of the bells.

Figure 1
A TRADITIONAL ENGLISH-MADE HANDBELL
from circa 1700 to the present day

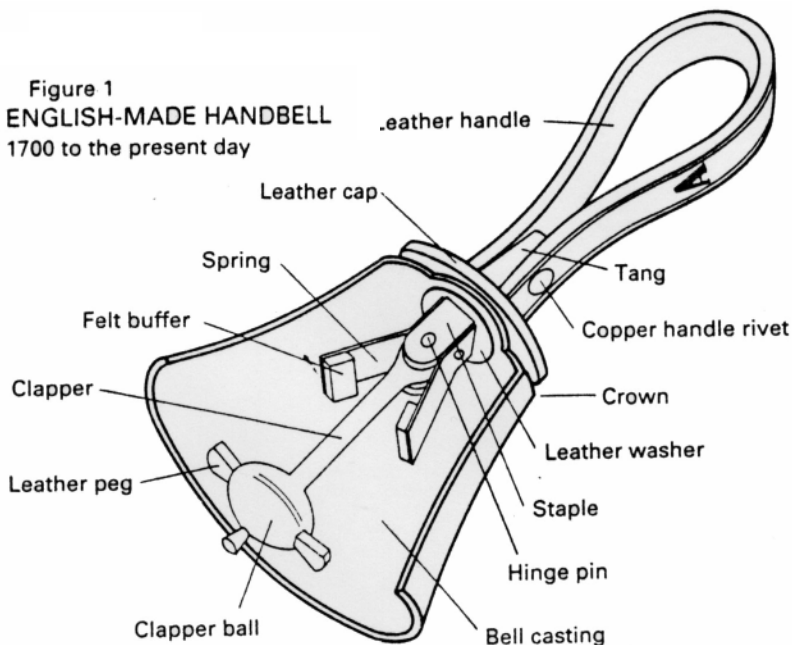
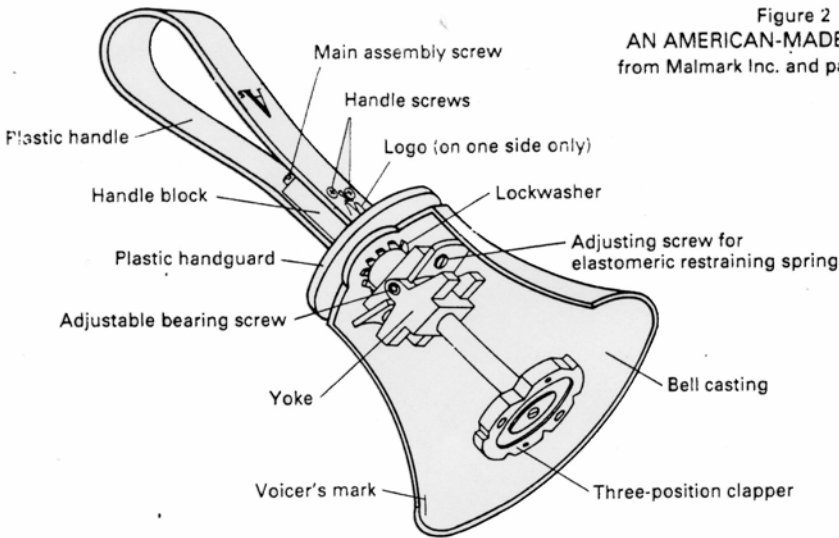


Figure 2
AN AMERICAN-MADE HANDBELL
from Malmark Inc. and patented in 1974



The main differences between English and American bells are:

English bells have leather handles, whereas the American ones have plastic handles (this does not affect the quality and playability of the bell).

In most American bells the clapper assembly can be adjusted to alter the tone of the bell to 'hard', 'medium' or 'soft'.

English bells are tuned by ear and have slight variations between sets – which often adds character to their sound; American bells are tuned using computers and are very consistent in their sound.

English, leather handles may be 'looped' or stiffened. The latter have an inset of leather riveted in the

loop to form a solid, inflexible handle.

1.1 Second-hand bells

Occasionally advertisements appear in *Reverberations* (the HRGB Journal), the *Ringin' World*, the *Church Times* or even *e-Bay* on the internet, offering sets of bells for sale.

Alternatively you could advertise for bells in these magazines or locally. It pays to ask around before you do so – sets have been unearthed in Church cellars, museums, under beds and even in coalholes! You may find that you are able to borrow a particular set but not buy them. Occasionally sets of bells or odd bells appear in antique shops or auctions.

Before you take the plunge and buy a second-hand set it would be a good idea to get someone to give an expert opinion, particularly if you are not musical yourself and do not know much about bells.

Many older sets will be in need of restoration and some may be in Philharmonic pitch (almost a semitone lower than the modern Standard pitch). This won't matter if you are only going to play the bells on their own but if you are likely to join in with other teams or use other instruments as well, it may be a problem.

Foundries will usually provide a report on old sets of bells, advising whether it is worthwhile to restore them, and the cost. If a lot of restoration is needed, particularly if it involves re-casting and tuning additional or replacement bells, it might be cheaper in the long run to buy new bells.

1.2 Chimes

Chimes (or handchimes) were developed in the early 1980s as a more affordable alternative to conventional handbells.

Sharing the same basic characteristics as handbells, chimes are a versatile and durable musical instrument now finding favour with groups of ringers around the world.

Designed to stand up hard treatment in the classroom and in music therapy, these carefully engineered instruments represent excellent value wherever a ringing instrument is being considered.

1.3 Belleplates®

Belleplates® provide an excellent and inexpensive introduction to the art of tune ringing, being lighter and more durable than handbells.

Invented in England, these flat metal plates are ideal for schools or use by older ringers who may find bells or chimes too heavy.

2. Care and maintenance of handbells

Handbells are expensive musical instruments and should be treated as such. Replacements are not only expensive but can also take a long time to obtain if they need to be tuned to match your set. The breakage of a commonly used bell, e.g. 15C or C5, (middle C) can mean that the whole set is rendered virtually useless for some time.

The metal of the bell (called bell metal!) requires very little maintenance other than an occasional polish with a non-abrasive cream (e.g. Peek, Autosol etc.) and a soft cloth. Some teams polish their bells after every practice, others only once in a blue

moon. Far more important than polishing is the way the bells are handled.

It has been said that the bells should be treated as if they were very expensive cut glass! It is important that they are not 'chinked' together or against anything else such as the table or buttons.

As a general rule it is best to avoid handling the metal parts of the bell as finger marks can leave a greasy or acid film. Some teams like to wear gloves when handling the bells.

It is also important that the bells are stored properly and not jumbled together in a heap as this can lead to damage of the handles as well as the bells. With leather handled bells, it is important that the handles are not bent when they are stored, and if you come across an old set that has been in store you may well find that the handles, particularly if they are unstiffened, have suffered.

There are special cases on the market for those with enough money to buy them, but if you are short of funds after buying your bells, wrapping them individually in soft cloths will do. If you have someone who is handy with a sewing machine then individual bags can be made, with the note and number embroidered on.

The 'works' of the bell generally need very little maintenance. An occasional drop of thin oil (e.g. sewing machine oil) will work wonders on a squeak.

Check that the clapper leathers, felts and spring pads are in good condition. On old bells they may need replacing, particularly if they have not been used for some time.

English bells tend to develop a 'rattle' over time as the hinge pin wears, allowing a degree of side play in the clapper. Replacing the pin will usually cure this problem. The Bells of Whitechapel sell a range of 'spares' to fit their bells but it's a job probably best left to the experts at the foundry or someone with experience of refurbishing handbells.

The English foundries also sell replacement handles but putting them on does need a lot of care to avoid damage to the bell and is best left to the professional.

American bells are 'guaranteed for life' and spare parts and handles are freely available and can easily be fitted by the owner.

Some teams maintain that wearing gloves stops oils from the hand from making the leather handles soft – which in turn makes them

difficult to control, but this is a matter of choice.

Don't forget to think about insurance for the bells – your house insurance probably won't cover them. Check the HRGB web site (www.handbells.org.uk) for details of available insurance.

3. Types of ringing

There are two basic types of ringing, and you will need to decide early on which style your team will adopt (although it's always good to be able to do both!).

3.1 Off-table. This is a traditional style of ringing which was adopted by many English teams, especially in the North of England. The bells are arranged (laid flat) on a table, which is covered with a layer of foam and a cloth. They are picked up, rung and replaced on the table.

A ringer may have anything up to 22 bells in front of him, which he just picks up and plays when they are needed. The foam 'damps' the sound of the bells as they are put down.

This method tends to be used by teams with larger sets of bells.

3.2 In-hand. This style of ringing has a number of variations.

Two in hand - Each ringer has two bells, one in each hand (with their

associated sharps/flats picked up from the table). This obviously has limitations, as the number of bells that can be played depends very much on the number of players in the team.

Four in hand - Each ringer holds four bells, two in each hand. They are arranged (usually with handles looped together) so that one bell in each hand rings in the up/down direction and the other from side to side. The big advantage is that quite complex music can be played by just 3 or 4 ringers – but it is harder to 'damp' accurately.

Off shoulder - Similar to two in hand but the bells rest on the shoulder. Each is played when required and returned to the shoulder to 'damp' the sound.

It is quite a useful method to use when teaching a team of children to ring, as they only have to remember the two bells that they hold.

4. Equipment you will need

For Off-Table Ringing:

Tables: You can use your own dining room or kitchen table to begin with but you will probably find that you soon get to the stage of wanting more space. Check heights carefully as too low a table will produce back problems very quickly!

A paste table is cheap and folds up compactly, although if used for heavy bells or leaned upon by ringers, tends to dip in the middle at the hinges. Adaptations to overcome this by fitting a central leg to the table are possible, as is the building up of the sides of the table to contain the foam. A problem sometimes encountered is the cry of "The leg has fallen off" just when you want to start ringing.

Many people now use Gopak or similar folding tables, which are light but strong. Purpose built bell tables are available in the USA but seldom seen here.

Foam: Foam is expensive; 4" depth is probably ideal but bulky to store and 3" medium density will suffice for all but the largest bells.

Thinner foam is not adequate for the larger bells but can be rolled for easier storage. Some teams compromise by using thinner foam for the 'treble' bell table, and thicker foam for the 'bass' table.

To begin with you could use a thick padding of blankets, sleeping bags or the cushions from a three piece suite! Even layers of bubble-wrap have been seen.

Whichever you choose, and especially when you buy foam, do make sure that it is fire retardant as

this will be a requirement of most buildings when you ring out.

For In-Hand Ringing:

In theory very little equipment is required, although later on you will find that a table and foam will be helpful to put the bells on between pieces and to hold the 'accidentals' (sharps and flats)

5. Music – central score or individual copies?

Whichever ringing style you choose, you also have to decide on the type of music you will use.

Some teams use a large central score of music on a music stand or blackboard easel, although ringers with poor eyesight may have difficulty in reading a central copy.

If you eventually take the team along to rallies where there is 'massed ringing' (all teams ringing the same piece simultaneously), it may be difficult to keep in time with the others using this method.

You will need to write out every piece of music you play on large sheets of card. This is both time consuming and a storage problem.

If in the longer term you play for an audience, the ringers may be obscured by the music.

Other teams prefer individual copies of music for each ringer and

so use some form of music stand. These can range from the metal floor standing type, to those which rest on the table.

A few teams use shared music with one copy between two ringers.

6. Music Notation

Music for handbells can be purchased in a variety of forms, each team has their own individual way of marking or re-writing it – half the fun of meeting other teams is to see the different ways in which this is done.

The number of copies that you have is a matter of team preference, ranging from a single (central score) copy through one-between-two sharing to individual copies for each ringer.

No information of music would be complete without mention of Copyright. Generally speaking it is illegal to photocopy (or hand copy) music unless it is specifically 'copyright free'. You will therefore need to purchase one copy of the music for each of your music stands – whether you ring from the staff notation or convert it into another form

So you now need to decide whether to ring from numbers (or letters) or staff notation.

Most music is available in staff notation although some number notation music is still sold.

Again, it's best to seek advice – HRGB teams will usually be glad to demonstrate the different styles.

Staff notation

This is universal in the music world and therefore the preferred method of most teams. There are huge quantities of music written in staff notation that is suitable for, or written especially for, handbells.

Your ringers don't all have to be 'music readers' to use this style. Because each ringer looks after just 2 bells primarily, they soon become familiar with their places on the staves. A chart or individual card with the notes written in, in both bass and treble clef is an additional aid.

Try circling or highlighting each ringer's notes on their music – using red for one hand (usually the right) and green for the other. Sharps and flats can be highlighted in another colour. This method is used by many of the big teams with a lot of experienced ringers and is surprisingly successful with young children.

But if you can 'wean' your ringers off marked music eventually you

will find that there is much less work to do in preparing new pieces!

Staff notation variations

Full score:

In most music purchased, both bass and treble lines are present with the ringer picking out the notes which relate to the bells he is in charge of.

Even children who learn a musical instrument at school and are quite familiar with the treble clef may not be used to the bass. By carefully selecting parts for new ringers, they will learn not only to play bells but also to read music.

Middle C:

In some music arranged for handbells Middle C is on the treble staff whereas in other music it is on the bass staff.

Obviously this has implications for the allocation of bells to ringers: when C is on the treble staff it will be paired with the D and when it is on the bass staff it will be paired with the B (unless of course you have a ringer who is happy to ring notes on both staves). The allocation of Middle C bell will also have implications for the rest of the team. It can be confusing, particularly for new ringers, to have one pairing e.g. B and C, in one tune and then move 'half a pair' in the

next (i.e. C in the right hand for one tune, C in left for the next!)

This can be tackled either by grouping tunes of one type together (there will usually be consistency within a series of books or publishers) or by going through and writing in all Middle C's where you want them

Treble and bass staves only:

Some teams use music where each ringer has a copy of the music showing only the treble or the bass staff, whichever his notes are in.

Ghosted score:

In this case the whole tune is written out in 'ghost' form but the notes played by any ringer are highlighted or coloured in. Thus perhaps two people can share one copy, one set of notes marked in red, one in green. The fact that the rest of the tune is there helps the ringer to keep his place more easily and to see the rhythm of the piece.

Part score:

(Sometimes called 'William Gordon music' after the Stockport music publisher of the 1880's who produced a great deal of music in this form.) Only notes relating to the bells handled by one ringer are present on the copy, so each ringer has a personal copy.

In all these methods it is useful to number each bar, not only to help someone to find the place if lost, but also for rehearsal, e.g. "Start at bar 10".

Numerical notation

Many teams with small sets of bells use this method very successfully. It originates from the church bell ringing practice of numbering the bells 1 to 12 (or however many there are in the tower).

When bell numbers get into double figures, however, no matter how clear you think the music is, someone is sure to play bells numbered 1 and 2 instead of bell 12!

Number systems vary between teams, depending on the number of bells and notes they have in their set. Some number from the bass bell upward, others from the top bell downwards! This makes it very difficult to have a 'standard' numbering system and the availability of music in numbered notation is limited.

Bear in mind that if you choose to have individual or shared copies then it could be time consuming if you have to write them all out.

Alphabetical notation

Some teams use the letter of the note, i.e. A to G. But this method too has its limitations if you have more

than one octave of bells, because you will need to distinguish between the different octaves, perhaps by using a different colour or letter style for each.

Colours

By tying a coloured tape to the handle of each bell and using a colour chart corresponding to the tune, a very simple tune can be rung successfully, even by very small children. There is not really enough scope in this for serious ringing but it does make an enjoyable evening and entertaining 'party piece' for audience participation.

All the above methods present problems when a tricky rhythm is required. Usually a long line (–) after a note can indicate a held note and another symbol can denote a short note but even so, some rhythms are hard to define.

7. Getting ringers

Having got your bells and your music, you need some ringers! **This is the most important and sometimes the hardest thing of all.**

Maybe you already have a nucleus of interested people, but why not try advertising in your local paper, or church magazine or try local scout and guide groups, W.I.s etc. If you belong to a church (especially if they own a set of handbells) you

may find some kindred spirits in the congregation.

Getting half-interested people to come along to a social evening to see the bells is a good idea. Another possibility, if you feel able, is to start a class at your local Adult Further Education Centre.

One can sometimes attract ringers through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme where the young people need to take up a new interest or activity – but be prepared to lose them when they go off to University.

Once you've got your team (called a handbell 'choir' in the USA) do try to keep them interested and involved. Fix a weekly 'ringing' night at your first meeting and make sure people can come regularly – because you will not be able to play without a full team!

You will also need somewhere to practice – you could start off in your own home, which is fine as long as the team is small (or you've got a large house) and the neighbours don't object.

Otherwise you could investigate the possibility of using a room in the church hall, community hall or village hall, school etc.

Bear in mind the need for storing or transporting valuable, heavy and

bulky equipment – as well as the cost of hiring the premises. A three octave set of bells with tables, foam etc. will more than fill the boot of an average family car.

8. How many ringers do I need?

That really depends on the bells you have and the music you choose. For a 2 octave set you will probably need 8 people (2 bells each). Occasionally you may have the problem of too many ringers – at first, when all are beginners, one bell a-piece may suffice (or be as much as the ringers can cope with) but as you progress problems arise as to whether you have everyone playing (but under-employed) or have people 'sitting out'.

If more than one player has to sit out, depending on how well disciplined the team are, you may have the problem of chatter, and it can be very annoying for ringers and conductor alike to try and sort out a problem piece to a background of jokes or holiday reminiscences!

It may be preferable to split into two teams, depending on numbers – perhaps meeting on different nights. One team leader we know gives out music on a 'first come, first served' basis, thus anyone who is late or misses a practice does not

play in that particular piece in the future unless someone is absent!

9. All ready?

Now that you have all the basics, it's just a question of enthusiasm and commitment.

Expect a few problems in the early days (like many other things there is

a knack to ringing which only comes with practice.)

You may feel that you need help to 'get going' so think about asking an experienced ringer along for a week or two; HRGB will usually be able to find someone to help.

Enjoy your ringing!

About HRGB

The aim of the Society, which was formed in 1967, is *"To advance, provide and encourage for the public benefit the art of handbell tune ringing in all its forms."*

It is the only national organisation supporting handbell, handchime and Belleplate® players.

The Society presents to its members a wide range of activities and music designed to show the many aspects of handbell tune ringing.

The Society is organised into 8 regions giving access to a nationwide network of handbell ringers from all walks of life and of varying abilities. Each region holds rallies where teams have the chance to ring individually or to combine to ring the same piece of music in 'massed' ringing. Workshops are also organised in the regions for

teams to try out other ringing methods or techniques.

A National Rally which culminates in a concert by some of the participating teams, is hosted by a different region each year.

Established ringers may also attend more advanced events such as the National Residential Ringing Week and UK Bronze) which provide a more intense ringing experience.

The UK is one of six countries to host the International Handbell Symposium which is held every two years giving members the chance to visit Japan, Korea, Australasia, Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore and U.S.A. to meet and ring with handbell teams from these and other countries.