

What is Bellringing?

If the general public sees a bell in a belfry at a local church, it will invariably appear in the down position (Figure 1). It is made to sound either by swinging it until an interior clapper strikes the bell or by fixing the bell and swinging a clapper against the bell!



Figure 1. Bells “down” as the general public would always see them (the new Allanconi 8 at Hawkesbury, Glos. Courtesy M. Higby)



Figure 2. The same bells being rung “full circle” so they spin nearly 360° on each revolution.

The way change ringers ring bells is to rotate them to full or nearly-full circle and the bells strike or sound when they are up (see Figure 2). The ringers do this by controlling the swing with a rope attached to the bell via a wheel which acts as a lever and so bell ringing is not necessarily ultra-physical as the lever helps. It is excellent exercise as it also frequently includes climbing long and steep staircases!!!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4INBO45UEw> is a video clip of bellringers ringing as change ringers do. The ringers pull the striped woollen part of the rope, called the sally, down and let it go so that the rope can be wound onto the wheel. The bell rotates close to 360° with the ringer’s hands raised with the so-called tailrope in their hands and the bell sounds when they are at full stretch. The ringers then pull this tailrope down and the rope is released from the wheel as the bell rotates 360° when they catch the sally and the bell sounds again!

By making deft adjustments to how hard the bellrope is pulled and by changing the degree of swing by manipulating the rope, bells can be made to interchange with each other and thus music is made.

Below is a more detailed description of the skill of bellringing and how possessing it can be a passport to a new and wide ranging group of friends at home and abroad.

More detail on the skill of bellringing

Would you be capable of controlling the rotation of a 2.5 tonne bell to centimetre and 20 to 30 millisecond precision using a rope?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iog83SBPmt0> is a video clip of 12 bellringers ringing the bells of St. Patrick's Cathedral Dublin for a full peal which lasted 3 hours and 50 minutes.

The gentleman on the highest box is in control of the tenor bell which weighs 2.31 tonnes and he is controlling the speed of the bell and where it "fits" in the tune. If you watch him very carefully you will see that he has different lengths of rope below his hands, as the video progresses.

If the length of rope below his hands is long then the swing of the bell will be slightly less and the bell will ring more quickly. If the length of rope below his hands is short then the swing of the bell will be slightly greater and the bell will ring more slowly.

If the rope position below his hands does not change then the bell rings roughly at the same speed with respect to the others.

This ability to ring faster, slower or at the same place allows bells to swap positions and this is what generates the capability to make music using bells which rotate to nearly 360°.

How the skill is learned and what the benefits are

To get to the stage where you can control a bell competently and with precision, you need a year or two of practice at your chosen bell tower.

To begin with you will learn by an instructor ringing a bell and gradually in three distinct stages transferring control to you, whereby you will develop a style where you and the bell are joined by a rope and form a complete mechanism.

Once you are able to handle a bell on your own, then that is just the beginning of learning how to make music with your bell ringing with others and changing the speed of your bell so accurately that you exchange places with another bell without any change in the overall speed or rhythm.

This makes you a valued member of your local church band of ringers. Once you can change place effortlessly, then the whole arena of change ringing is open to you with an infinitesimal number of challenges.

Not only that, you can visit many of the 5,000 or so sets of bells that exist throughout the world (listed in Dove's Guide) and be assured of a great welcome.

Aiming High

If you take up any hobby, it's essential to know how the best exponents of the hobby carry it out.

See the Birmingham 12 bell band of ringers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5fvp-RrDIc> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pugRM2Nsnyo>

A Birmingham band (not always the same persons, obviously) has won the ultimate striking competition for change ringing an astounding 24 times out of 45, since 1975.

What comes across from both videos is the tidiness of the bell ropes and the level of concentration. At no time do the ropes stray outside the body width and when the ringers grip the woollen sally the tailrope kept locked behind it so that it makes a cross.

Incidentally, see if you can find the left hand ringers. One of them has rung in all 24 wins for Birmingham!!

There is no doubt that both videos show the ringers and bells as one.