

Handbells: Breaking through

A two-part article by Bill Jackson

(cartoons by Roger Gamble)

Part one: Place notation

Bill Croft (p.1244), in sketching the history of his own handbell ringing, shows us the advantages of the right environment in the pursuit of progress. Regularity of practice, inclusion in a competent band, a well-motivated progressive attitude, readiness to take risks, dedication, perseverance, a good conductor, attendance at handbell courses/weekends – none of this can be faulted.



Anyone keen to break through to exotic methods would no doubt also be ready to practise regularly; but as for inclusion in a competent band, what happens if there is no competent band within a reasonable travelling distance? And will a competent band be ready to take a learner on board, when it may itself be intent on extending its own exotic repertoire? So the learner is caught in a Catch 22 situation. He cannot easily join an advanced band without having first advanced to at least near-exotic status; and he can't advance to exotic status without joining an advanced band.



Or can he? I hope to show that, given the will, there are ways to break through.

Your starting point

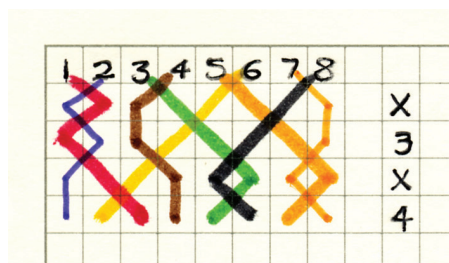
A starting point might be a group that has been ringing Treble Bob Major for some time, each member knowing where his two lines

cross, where each meets the Treble and where the lead-end is. The band aspires to Surprise Major, and is prepared to work hard for it.

Breaking through into completely different levels of method complexity, however, calls for more than just hard work. A new venture deserves a new approach.

Place Notation

Place notation, as well as being a handy way to define a method, is also a useful tool for ringing it. Consider the following rows:



To produce these changes in a different way from the traditional blue line technique, one can say "All change" for change number one, which forces 1 to change places with 2, 3 with 4, 5 with 6, and 7 with 8. No other change except 21436587 is possible if the instruction is "All change", given that no bell can move more than one place at a time.

All change is usually written "x". "x" means that bells in positions 1 and 2 swap over, as do bells in positions 3 and 4, positions 5 and 6 and positions 7 and 8.

Now consider row two, with its notation (3), which means that the bell in position 3 stays in position 3. Immediately below position 3 a pair of bells in positions 1 and 2 swap over, and immediately above position 3 the bells in positions 4 and 5 swap over, as do the bells in positions 6 and 7, leaving the bell at the back to stay at the back.

The leading and lying positions in a change need not be notated, because they are automatically determined by the internal notation. Thus, 3 entails 38 (three eight) and 4 entails 14 (one four). On a practical note, too, memorising only internal places is less demanding.

Learning the notation

It is important to know where the Treble is, when learning the place notations. Try to learn the notations in groups of four, corresponding to the Treble's dodges. And incidentally, start with an unfamiliar method, to avoid confusion with your old thinking.

Thus, for Xennapod Surprise Major, you would learn

- Treble in 1-2: x3x4
- Treble in 3-4: x5x36
- Treble in 5-6: x4x45
- Treble in 7-8: x236x7(HL);

and then:

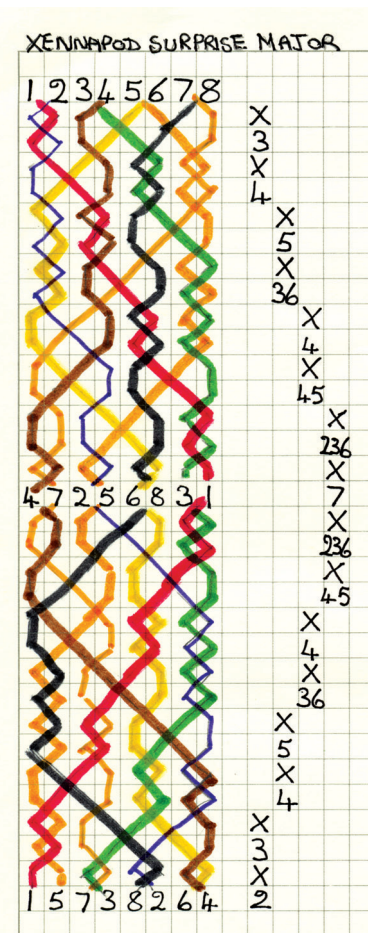
- Treble in 8-7: x236x45
- Treble in 6-5: x4x36
- Treble in 4-3: x5x4
- Treble in 2-1: x3x2 (LE)

Notice that the notations for the second half-lead are a mirror image of those for the first half-lead.

Why include the Treble's dodges in the notations? Because the Treble's movements and the notations are pivotally interlinked. Know exactly where the Treble is, and you know what notations are due. And conversely, being sure of the notations means that you can correct any slip of the Treble immediately.

Place notation: putting theory into practice

"Do your homework" is valid advice often given to learners, but as such not terribly helpful. What sort of homework? And how do I do it?



Step 1: Your own diagram

Take a piece of squared paper, and write the figures 12345678 on the top row. Enter the notations for one lead (internal only) in stepped form on the right, corresponding to the Treble's dodges. Pencil in the places (no figures) to the left of the notations. Pencil in the connecting lines (no figures) and then go over each of the eight lines in different colours. Finally enter the half-lead change and the lead-end change, in figures.

Step 2: Solo practice – first four changes

To begin, what I did was to turn myself into a metronome, as it were, for a section of four changes, counting quietly “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; (handstroke pause) 1, 2 “ etc – **every** change, **every** position, in fact.

With the notation “Treble in 1-2: x3x4” firmly in mind, I pretended my thumbs were 3-4. Now I emphasised my own positions in each of the four changes, raising and lowering my thumbs at handstroke and backstroke respectively. I started counting “1,2, THREE, FOUR, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2, THREE, 4, FIVE, 6, 7, 8. (handstroke pause) “1,2, 3, FOUR, 5, SIX, 7, 8, 1,2, 3, FOUR, FIVE, 6, 7, 8.



Once I was comfortable with that, I repeated the exercise for 5-6, then 7-8 and finally 1-2.

Step 3: Solo practice – one half-lead

Next try half a lead. If you are ringing a right place method, you execute the notation at the backstroke and relax at the handstroke (x). As the backstroke change of each 4-change section finishes, focus quickly on the **notations for the next section** (eg “Treble in 3-4: x5x36”). Keep counting “1,2,3,” etc – don’t stop. As you count, emphasise your positions in each change with your thumbs. Move on, section by section, to the half-lead. Remember – concentrate on your **positions** in each change, whilst keeping the notation in the mental background.

At this point another hint may help. As well as following a fixed lead-end position sequence, each bell follows a fixed **half-lead** sequence. So if you lose yourself, you need not wait until the lead-end to correct yourself; you can do it at the half-lead. In practice, I found that the easiest way to memorise the half-lead sequence was just to remember the half-lead change in the first lead (eg for Xennapod it is 47256831) and mentally transpose when I needed to.

Stop at the half-lead and check that your thumbs are in the right position.

Once comfortable with this, do the same for the other three pairs. By the time you get to the trebles, you’ll be doing it in your sleep.

Step 4: Solo practice – getting up to speed

Now work on your speed. First of all, record a course of the method (any right-place method will do), preferably on tower bells. They ring more slowly than handbells, and therefore give you more time to think. Instead of handbells use thumbs again. Take the tenors

first this time, and work through a recorded lead, counting away quietly, emphasising your own positions and “flashing on” the notations, section by section.

Persevere to the end of the first half-lead if you can, checking that you finish it in the right positions. Have a break, and then start at the half-lead and thumb your way through to the first lead-end.

Having thumbed through a lead on 7-8, take 5-6 next for a lead – and so on, pair by pair. Work through the whole course in this way, half-lead by half-lead.

If you don’t like tape recorders, the computer software programme “Abel” is an alternative. With it you can ring your pair to any method at any speed – and it will review your striking afterwards! For more information, see the website: <http://www.abelsim.co.uk/>

Finally, before you move to group practice, learn by heart the sequence of half-lead and lead-end positions for the pair of bells that you intend to ring. For example, if you are ringing 5-6, learn “five and six/four and five: two and seven/three and two: six and three/five and seven: seven and four/two and one: three and eight/seven and six” etc.

Congratulations! You have finished your homework.

Step 5: Group practice

When you come together as a handbell group, practise ringing the first half-lead, and then a full lead. When this is successful, change pairs and do it again. Continue until everyone has rung each pair.

Each time you break down, restart at the previous half-lead (ie don’t go right back to the beginning of the course each time). Venture into touches when you have mastered the plain course.

Step 6: Wrong places

You will no doubt sooner or later want to move on to methods with wrong places, like London Surprise Major. Do not be daunted. Learn the notations exactly as you learnt the right place notations, grouping them again in fours, corresponding to the Treble’s dodges. Again, use the xs as breathing space.

I hesitate, incidentally, to deal with odd-bell methods in this article. Some of them are certainly exotic but they probably need a separate article by an odd-bell specialist. Come on, someone!

FROM THE E-LISTS

A round-up from the internet compiled by John Camp

Some ringers are losing their grip. Helen Pettet consulted **change-ringers** about sweaty hands. The application of witch hazel was advocated. Or magnesium oxide. Anxiety might be the cause, suggested Basil Potts. It was possible to ring with only the little finger of one hand on the backstroke, maintained Leigh Simpson. Insurance for open days was troubling Malcolm Bland but, apart from a recommendation to consult the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group, no advice was forthcoming.

On bell historians, Carl Zimmerman unsuccessfully hoped to be guided to an exposition of the development in England from quarter wheel to full wheel. The oldest bells hung for change ringing were identified as the trebles at Bradwell (Milton Keynes), possibly from 1297. John Adams drew the list’s attention to the GNER magazine *Livewire*, which carried an interview with a stonemason working at York Minster. ‘Sometimes’, said the mason, ‘the practicalities seem to go out of the window – a conservationist will make a decision more appropriate to the inside of a museum than outside a building’. The analogy with bell restoration does not need emphasis.

Several lists mentioned the decision of the PCC at Nafferton, N. Yorks, to buy and install (naturally subject to a faculty) the bells from St. Minver (Cornwall). Andrew Aspland, on the **3&4-bell** list, was anxious that the old Nafferton bells should be put to some useful purpose and not just displayed on the floor. Warner bells were not all buckets, affirmed Alan Birney on **nabbers**. On the **north American** lists, Tim Barnes reported that the sound control difficulties at Trinity, NYC, had been resolved. Recent ringing, including two peals by a band from the UK, had not generated any complaints from the neighbo(u)rs. **Ringings-theory** came back to life, after a long absence; perhaps Philip Earis has been otherwise engaged. Now he asked for a worthwhile extent of spliced treble-dodging major. Ander Holroyd indignantly protested that he had already cracked this one. At the other end of the spectrum, a **FODS** member required help with calls in Grandsire.

Back to York, where hoax peals sent to Campanophile produced reaction on **ringing-chat**. What was going on? York also featured in what is probably the second-oldest recurrent list-topic: does a city have to have a cathedral? We know, by now, that the answer is ‘no’. Yet there is refreshment. Each time the subject is raised, new tangents spin off. Villages and hamlets have been defined before, but the assertion, by Aidan Hopkins, that the word ‘civic’ could apply only to a city was original. It is also none too sound. To David Baverstock was attributed the claim that the City of London is in Middlesex. The ‘City of Truro’ at one time held the speed record for a steam locomotive. Why was it, sighed Sue Marsden, that everything always ended up being about trains? Nevertheless, contributors shared their thoughts about the characteristics of drivers of certain marques of car. A few people were known to use their legs to get about. Psalm 147.10, which has to do with God’s view of men’s legs, was the most unsingable verse in the Psalter, claimed Aidan, but Anne Willis giggled at ‘the congregation of naughty men’ (Psalm 86.14). Another elderly topic is the titles given to those in charge of ringing. What is appropriate nowadays? wondered A.J. Barnfield. David Bryant proposed ‘Health and Safety Manager’. Emma Southerington wanted to be a ‘Ringleader’.

If you want to know more about ringers’ e-mail lists and how to join them, send a blank e-mail to ringinglists@bellringers.org. This address should not be used for messages.