

Handbells: Breaking through

A two-part article by Bill Jackson

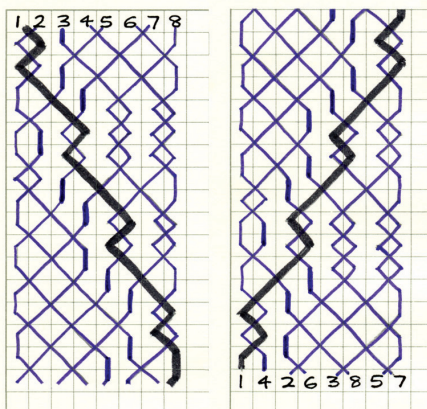
(cartoons by Roger Gamble)

Part two: Method structure and blue line

Method structure

After ringing a peal of London Surprise Major with John Mayne, Kath Baldwin and Roger Baldwin, I learnt that the more ways you can come at the business of ringing Surprise in hand, the better chance you have of succeeding. Place notation alone, whilst it can give you the first breakthrough, is unnecessarily restrictive and even tiring. You are dependent on being always alert to open and close a shutter, as it were, on one change at a time. Thus, in a peal you take 5000 or more still shots. It would be much more comfortable with a movie camera.

How can one, then, turn place notation stills into a motion picture of the method in its totality? A method suggested by John is to trace **all** the blue lines of one lead of a method (with the Treble in a distinctive colour). This enables him to see “what’s going on” as the Treble pursues her course. Take London Major, for instance:



Below the Treble, the bells are simply plain hunting “backwards”, as can be seen by a glance at all the straight lines. Most of the bells put themselves in this position by making a place as soon as they descend below the Treble. **Above** the Treble it is Treble Bob, once the two sets of thirds at either end of the lead are dealt with. (These thirds cause temporary backward hunting **above** the Treble.)

This approach, in other words, is postulating that places are only a part of the story. Understanding the hunting and dodging pattern also provides valuable signposts. Roger also would support this study of the construction of a lead, in a slightly different way. Draw in the Treble, then the places, and finally the blue lines linking the places. This highlights, in London, the continuity of (1) the backward full leads, (2) the places that “chase” the Treble up to the back and precede her descent, and (3) the two sets of thirds at the beginning and end of the lead.

Of course, London is just an example; any method could be analysed in this way, with the general objective of uncovering signposts. In a method like Yorkshire, for instance, you might find it helpful to look at the “boxes” formed by the places, and the way in which these boxes’ size and position reflect where the Treble is.

Blue line

For tower bell learners, the blue line comes second only to ropesight. And when a tower bell ringer turns later to handbells, it is only natural that he starts ringing handbells by the blue line. For simple methods like Plain Bob, where bells travel in straight lines, he draws in the paths of his two bells and of the Treble, learns the starts, notes where his bells cross or dodge with each other, notes also where each crosses the Treble, and then splits his mind in two to ring the method. Helpful signposts soon emerge along the way, such as coursing orders, telling him which bell to follow around. Coursing orders are particularly important on higher numbers, whichever technique of ringing handbells you employ.

For exotic methods, however, you need a new approach to blue line. So, when learning the line for a Surprise method, take the pivot bell first (3 in Xennapod). Knowing which is the pivot bell tells you immediately which pairs are opposites. Working outwards from 3 – in terms of coursing order – they are (5, 2) (7, 4) and (8, 6).

Two lines of opposites

Think of the blue line in one-lead sections comprising two lines of “opposites” that meet at the half-lead. Thus in the lead (5, 2), 5 follows its own forward line to the half-lead and then the backward line of 2 to the lead-head.

If you are ringing 5-6 in that lead, you think of it as 5 (2) and 6 (8), and you ring the forward lines of 5 and 6 to the half-lead, followed by the backward lines of 2 and 8 to the lead-end. The lead-head notation then gives your new starting positions. By thinking of the leads in discrete blocks like this, it makes no difference whether it’s a 2nds or an 8ths place method, or whether a call is made.



In this way you need learn only the first half-lead line for each bell in the method.

Always know where the Treble is

Knowing the blue line in this sort of detail means that you know where you’re going all the time, so that if there is a slip within a half-lead, you can put yourself right immediately. Contrasted with this, a ringer using only place notation or method structure could after a slip be far out of place within two or three changes, and have to wait for the half-lead to correct himself.

I am indebted to David Pipe for the foregoing. At the same time he adds that his reliance on blue line tends to be in direct proportion to the lack of structure in a method. He stresses – and this in my opinion applies regardless of which technique you are using – that **it is important to know at all times where the Treble is**, and to be conscious also of the coursing relationships between bells working together.

Another exponent of blue line is Robert Newton, who has made Surprise Maximus on the tenors a speciality. Having plotted his two lines for a whole course, he then shades in between the lines the area where his two bells are coursing. This process shows him at a glance where he can relax, and conversely highlights the more difficult parts of the course, to which he can then pay special attention. By superimposing the two lines on a print-out of all the numbers, Robert can then get a useful insight into the tenors’ relationship with 9-10.

In any case, knowledge of a method’s blue line can at the very least be a very valuable supplement to place notation. For example, as Bernard Groves points out, if one of your bells is plain hunting or treble-bobbing, it gives you a breathing space to concentrate on your other bell.

An amalgam is best

Expert handbell ringers will sometimes tell you that they are not sure how exactly they managed the breakthrough originally; but on reflection they admit to drawing on all three techniques: place notation, method structure and blue line.

Each approach, then, has its own contribution to make, with differing importance depending on each person’s “chemistry”. By trying all the different techniques we may find that we can overlay one technique on another, such that what emerges is **our personal technique**. The end

result may not be right for anyone else's makeup, but if it fits ours, progress occurs.

Guest conductor

A final thought: when you are ready to ring a peal, don't let the lack of a conductor deter you. Any of the great handbell conductors will be only too glad to visit and crown your efforts with a peal! Tell him which bells each of you will be ringing, so that he can choose a suitable composition.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge with thanks the help and criticism proffered by Bernard Groves, Margaret Woolley, David Pipe and Robert Newton, amongst others. I hope, too, that readers will feel impelled to question any points, however small, so as to make this study of breaking through on handbells more complete.

Len's Loons Afloat

Traditionally, Len's Loons occur biennially at the start of the summer holidays but, in an attempt to break the run of misfortune that has dogged one of the Loons core members immediately prior to the last three Tours, we decided to organise a Mini Loons in the alternate year just before the Easter Holidays.

This resulted in eleven Loons boarding two narrowboats at Gayton Marina, on the Grand Union Canal, on Friday, 23rd March for a weekend break of boating, walking, ringing, eating and drinking. On the way to the marina we rang at Rothersthorp (5) and Gayton (6). Tragedy struck as Josie boarded, the bottom fell out of a carrier bag and a bottle of wine and a jar of marmite fell to the ground. The wine survived but the marmite ended in a watery grave. Josie was inconsolable.

A short chug to Blisworth (5) where we arrived late to be met by Phil Carhill, who was very understanding as I had already brought the time forward being worried about having enough daylight to get to our intended mooring for the night.

Having enjoyed the Blisworth bells we set off through the Blisworth tunnel, the third longest canal tunnel in the UK and very wet in places. An experience for all who had not done that trip before. Not made any easier as the headlight was virtually extinguished when the door to the front deck was pushed open across it!

With the light fading fast we made it through the two top locks and moored up at Stoke Bruern, just below the Boat Inn, tidied up the boats and set off to find dinner. Excellent food but slow service. We were amused by the friction in the kitchen between the boss and the chef who, at one point stated that he was not cooking any more that evening!

Leisurely start on Saturday morning: stroll up to Stoke Bruerne (5) church where, to our surprise, we were let in by Phil Carhill who was deputising for the tower captain. Here we were joined by the day trippers, who had come by car, and tried out some new doubles variations. Brisk walk back to boats, chug down to Grafton Regis through the remaining 5 locks. The car users had distributed the cars along the route so they could join us on the boats.

Arrive Grafton and set out on a bracing walk up the steep hill to St Mary's church (5) for our third meeting with Phil! Another walk to the excellent White Hart, which was very popular. Worries over getting fed and being able to move the boats: sent two skeleton crews back to the boats to eat marmalade sandwiches on the move. The cars were pressed into service to shuttle the rest of the

party from the pub to Potterspurty, collecting the skeleton crews on the way. The six at St Nicholas were put to good use, more doubles plus plain and surprise minor.

By now I had realised that my canal timings were woefully optimistic. The cars were pressed into service to ferry us back to the boats for the chug to Cosgrove where we were to moor for the night. Only a very short walk up to SS Peter & Paul (6) where we repeated the doubles and minor recipe. Another excellent meal in the Navigation Inn, after which the day trippers left for home.

Early morning start on Sunday to take on water before a short chug to Old Wolverton so that newcomers to this part of the Grand Union could go over the aqueduct. Turn round in the winding hole and head back to Grafton, and the White Hart, for lunch. Cross country route march to ring at St Margret's Alderton (5). It didn't look so far on the map!

Route march back across the fields to the boats for the chug back to moor up just below the bottom lock of the flight up to Stoke Bruerne, and another route march to S Michael & All Angels, Ashton (5), for the final ring. Some of us were very grateful for the Keith and Joyce taxi service to get us to the church and back to the boats.

Ringing is all about team work and we demonstrated that team work in working the locks back to our final mooring at Stoke Bruerne. One team prepared the locks so that the two boats could go in almost together, and the other team closed up and left the lock ready for the next user. We flew up the five locks to our mooring and final meal at the Navigation Inn.

Everyone said that they enjoyed the experience. No lock outs, no one fell in or got left behind. Everyone had a go at steering the boats, although some had difficulty with left and right, push right to go left, pull left to go right didn't seem to work for everyone!

Finally, a very big thank you to the incumbents for allowing us to ring, the tower correspondents, especially Phil, for making the arrangements and letting us in. We had a super trip.

LEN PALFREY



Left to right: David Bardwell, Josie Irving, John Harland, Keith Townsend, Sue Norbury, Joyce Vernon, Annette Townsend, Ken Baker, Sue Mansfield, Michael Palfrey, Keith Vernon, David Rooke. Missing: Toosh (the dog) and Len Palfrey, the Loon himself, behind the camera

HAVE YOU MADE A WILL? HAVE YOU HAD A WINDFALL? OR JUST COME INTO MONEY?

Would you like to help the worthy cause of bell restoration?

Your local ringing association will have a bell restoration fund and will be delighted to hear how you can help them.

The Central Council Bell Restoration Fund also needs money to help with national (and even occasionally international) projects.

Most charities get substantial amounts of their income from bequests. Very little is left to bellringing causes, and it is time this changed, to build on the good work started with Millennium money.

To find out how you can contribute or how to include bell restoration in your will, contact

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