

Listen to it!

How many of you have heard the conductor shout this out?

On the face of it, it is a rather strange request because it is invariably at a time when the ringing is at its roughest and the last thing you want to do is listen to it. Listening, as Derek the course leader, pointed out is an action, unlike hearing which is passive. We may be able to hear the awful cacophony but it is quite another thing to be able to listen to it and work out which bells are causing it – which are too early or too late, which are clipping the bell in front or the bell behind, which are ringing too fast or too slow.

The course which I and 16 others attended on Saturday 9th February at Chilcompton was aimed at reducing the number of times we would be the cause of such outbursts. It was also designed to help those of us who might find ourselves in the role of conductor to identify which bells are in the wrong place and help get them into the right place.

“Ringing is not just for the pleasure of the ringers”, as Derek reminded us. There are people outside whom, whether they like it or not, have little choice other than to hear the bells. We all owe it to these strangers to ensure that the sound we make is as pleasant as possible. Although I have met a number of blind ringers over the years, I am not aware of having come across any profoundly deaf ringers so it is probably fair to assume that we can all hear the bells (obviously, some better than others). This course, however, was not about hearing, it was about listening – interpreting what we are hearing and, in some way, qualifying it.

Bell-ringing is a peculiar exercise in many ways. A peal of bells is probably the only “musical” instrument that sounds better when played by a mechanical device than by humans. There have been mechanical organs, pianolas and now robots that can play the violin or the flute but none of them can fool a trained ear (at least, not yet). The same is also true when a band of ringers is compared to the sound made by a mechanical or electronic device ringing the same method but, in this case, it will be the humans who will, almost invariably, come second.

Chilcompton is particularly ideal for such a course. The bells are all fitted with sensors which are connected up to electronic wizardry which allows you to ring anything from rounds on 4 to Bristol 16. You can choose which [place] bell you wish to be (as well as which of the 12 you feel most comfortable ringing). The simulator rings the chosen method leaving a gap which you have to fill by ringing your bell in the normal way. The sensor on your bell causes a sound to be made by the simulator (not the bell). The speed of the simulated ringing can also be adjusted to suit the particular bell you have chosen to ring. Each of us had several goes on this to try to ring 6th place to rounds and Stedman Doubles, needless to say with varying degrees of success. It was curious that there seemed to be very little correlation between our ability to do this and our level of experience. I have to admit, I found it very difficult indeed, even after I had asked Anna, our tutor, to turn the volume up so I could hear the simulated sound of the bells.

But all was not lost, for next was the high point of the day when we all sat down to a delicious lunch of stew and proper baked potatoes. Without this, I fear few of us would have survived into the afternoon.

In the hall which is attached via a covered walkway to the church, we were also given the chance of trying to determine how many bells were ringing and whether they were ringing with or without tenor covers. Anna played a CD which had dozens of tracks of different numbers of bells ringing different methods. I think we all managed to tell when it was 6 bells, most could differentiate between doubles and minor and also between open and closed hand-stroke leads but when it came to 12, 14 or 16 the best some of us could do was to recognise that it was “more than 8” whilst others were able to get very close often getting the number right and sometimes even whether it was an even or odd method. I think we all failed on the trick question which was doubles with 4, 6 and 8 covering.

From counting the number of bells we moved on to trying to identify which bell or bells were early or late. Using another piece of software we had to listen to rounds on six. The program would then randomly select one, or more bells to ring early or late. We then had to tell Anna which bell was wrong and whether it should be rung faster or slower. She then entered this and we were able to listen to the result and make further adjustments as required.

Incidentally, while the six of us were doing each of these exercises there were two other teams doing each of the other two exercises. We then all came together for tea and cakes (provided by those participants who were sufficiently well organised to have made or bought cakes beforehand). At this point we had a chat and filled out the inevitable appraisal forms.

Did I enjoy it and was it worth it, undoubtedly “yes” on both counts. Did I come away from it, a better ringer or conductor? The jury is still out on this. I am not in my prime and my hearing has never been good enough to take up a normal musical instrument – my family do their best to disown me if I ever burst out in song! But, what I did learn was just how much I rely on sight and perhaps what is more useful, that as a conductor, telling the band to “listen to it” is almost certainly a waste of breath, at least until all of them have been on this course at least once.

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