

Doing it the Ledbury Way

By Frank Seabright

We are a small district of the Hereford Diocesan Guild comprising 8 towers, of which 6 are active.

The tower members have worked together for many years; helping each other with weekly practices and service ringing, regular monthly evening practices and Saturday morning training sessions. The District is wrestling with the nationwide concern as the average age of ringers increases and too few new ringers are either recruited or retained.



Analysing the Problem and Issues

A meeting was convened, involving the captain and one representative from each tower, where the strengths and weaknesses of each tower and the District as a whole were considered. The main points to emerge from the meeting were:

- The shortage of teachers and the fact that any potential teacher lacked the confidence and knowledge to attempt teaching new recruits.
- The existing teachers were becoming disheartened by the continuous and unsupported nature of the existing individual tower-based teaching, and the difficulty of retaining learners.

Our Way Forward

The tower captains and other ringers at the meeting agreed to centralise our teaching to one district teaching process, where all learners would be taught to handle a bell using an agreed approach to bell handling. There was a firm commitment by all to support this initiative. The teaching team commenced its own training programme and are all learning and teaching using Integrated Teacher Training Scheme (ITTS).

The date was fixed for an intensive course to teach a new group of learners. This would comprise 5 consecutive evenings using tied bells. The new approach and an invitation to new recruits were heralded through the press, television, posters, door to door leaflets and face to face contacts.

The 12 experienced ringers from the original meeting were an integral part of the initial course, teaching the recruits under the mentorship of one of the ringers who had already completed some ITTS training.

We used the simple-step, progressive ITTS called 'Learning the Ropes' (LTR). The scheme is structure in a way that all the teaching can be shared by all the teachers thus each recruit is taught by several different teachers.

We also incorporated into the process the approach of teaching from 'Bell Down'. This has proved revolutionary and has eliminated the loose flying ropes and sallies which can be so off-putting and alarming both for the student and the new teacher.

During this week we also introduced the new learners to the vital social aspects of ringing. The first evening concluded with bread, cheese and beer, and on the last evening the local pub provided us with food and drink when rain put paid to the planned BBQ.



Students and teachers all wished to continue after the introductory week. A weekly 1½ hr session on tied bells followed, and as progress was made to ringing both strokes unaided, simulated sound was introduced. Initially only one tower had a simulator but during this time a second was added, with the additional facility of 6 separate laptops and earphones allowing each learner to practice with sound without disturbing the others. Each learner was tasked with ringing rounds on an increasing number of bells, started with rounds on 3 with the computer infilling the sound of the other 2 bells. With increasing competency in ringing and listening the computer generated ringing was increased to 4, 6 and 8 bell rounds. This stage of the process culminated with the learner ringing rounds with simulated sound, with experienced ringers taking the other bells – again starting with 3 bells and progressing upwards.

Once a reasonable level of achievement had been reached, the learners 'went live' and were introduced to each of the tower practices in the district. This enabled them to meet the rest of the ringers, to experience ringing on open bells and to widen their awareness of the varying nature of different peals of bells.

The concept of tower membership was introduced at this stage, the learners being encouraged to join a local band on practice night but to continue coming to the tied practices, ensuring they still had the opportunity for one-to-one teaching. It was a deliberate decision that prior to this stage the learners were considered 'district learners' and did not go or belong to one specific tower, a decision that has worked well.

Outcomes

The District has 5 new ringers ringing rounds by rhythm (unfortunately one had to give up due to ill health).

Each learner quickly became accustomed to visiting the other towers in the district and knew and was known by other ringers. This has helped to avoid the hang-up of "I'm not going there - I heard the bells are difficult/heavy/too light etc". The learners have learnt at an early stage to handle all sorts of bells and the techniques needed to deal with the differences.

They have become a cohesive group who have supported each other through the process, and continue to be good friends.

The “Learners’ Outing” was a particular success – a venture to be repeated and recommended

We have 12 teachers throughout the district, 2 at each tower, who are all able to continue to support the new learners.

Advantages

- The learners are taught as a group and give each other support
- The teachers also have each other for support, help and guidance
- The teaching commitment is not as onerous as it might be, as it can be shared between the whole group of teachers, not every teacher has to be at each session
- It brings and keeps the towers together, and further promotes the social side of ringing, aiding retention.

Reflections following the first Course

Since the initial course we have fitted a simulator in a third tower and upgraded the original simulator to a multi-computer system. This gives a choice of 3 venues, and a wider variety of bells. The multi-computer facility is a huge advantage and very definitely worth the small extra cost.

The enthusiasm generated by the scheme raised another 6 interested potential ringers that encouraged us to embark immediately upon another course. In hindsight this was a mistake! We should have given ourselves a break, putting the potential learners on a waiting list for a course starting a little in the future.

We reinforced the point that each new learner should achieve the recognised level of competence before moving on and handling/striking issues should be ironed out before they became a habit. Evidence suggests that it takes 200 attempts to learn a particular technique and 2000 attempts to unlearn and relearn in a different way. The presence of 3 - 6 teachers at the sessions, each bringing their individual experience, helped address the varied learning styles and needs of the learners.

Final Points

Any group of towers in relatively close proximity can make this work.

Towers not ready or able to join at the start can be involved later.

Any tower wishing to be part of the scheme should be prepared to put forward 2 teachers or potential teachers from within their band.



It is important to identify and fix an appropriate practice night. It needs the majority of the teachers to be available, but a fixed night suitable for the learners is essential. The fixed night for the course inevitably clashed with one tower's practice night, which excluded this band from full participation in the first course.

This situation is being considered as further courses are planned.

It is also important to bring all the learners back to a tied practice on a regular basis. This ensures that handling issues and faults do not creep in, facilitates the teaching of raising and lowering in peal, and continues the practice of ringing by rhythm and listening with the simulated rounds.