

Helping to create England's soundscape

Why bellringing is special

The sound of English style bellringing is a special part of our heritage. The unique way of ringing bells, and the special way they are hung to make it possible, evolved in England over four hundred years ago. Handel called England 'the ringing isle' because he heard bellringing wherever he went. The art of ringing spread across the country and then the English speaking world. Around 40,000 active ringers continue the tradition in over 5,000 towers.

Creating the familiar sound is a truly dynamic process – all the bells swing full circle from mouth-up to mouth-up with every blow. Teams of skilled ringers make the orderly, rhythmic sound using a unique blend of physical and mental performance skills handed down over the centuries. Change ringing combines modest physical activity with intellectual stimulation and social contact. The ringing community provides a potentially worldwide network of friends.

How ringing works

Each bell is controlled to a precise rhythm by the ringer's actions on the end of the bellrope. Bells are quite heavy (mostly between the weight of a motorbike and a small car) but controlling them needs only modest effort because of the way they are hung. Ringing is about technique and finesse, not about brute force. A ringer learns to feel what the bell is doing and respond to its natural rhythm. Swinging the bell slightly higher or less high controls the bell's timing but it can't be forced, it must be guided. A skilful ringer can achieve a precision of a few hundredths of a second.

Ringling is a team activity – synchronisation with other ringers is essential. The ringer of each bell must know when in the sequence it should strike, and control its swing so that it does. This requires a rhythmic action, working with the bell, continually listening to check the timing of each blow and make any corrections needed.

Change ringing – systematically varying the order in which the bells sound – adds an extra dimension to the sound. It requires precise changes in the speed of individual bells so their sounds fit together.

Methods are rung from memory. Ringers learn patterns or rules for how a bell progresses through the sequences. While ringing they translate this to know when the bell should strike, and they execute the physical actions needed to achieve it.

Ringling performances include periodic 'calls' that can prolong or shorten a performance. Routine performances last 5 to 10 minutes, with breaks in between, but longer performances have no break. A quarter peal takes ~¾ hour and a peal ~3 hours – all from memory.

Rewards of ringing

It takes a while to become competent in the basic skills but the rewards increase at each stage. There is no direct equivalent of the unique combination of skills, and the corresponding satisfaction. Controlling a bell combines skills similar to controlling a bike (but with more weight), with the dynamic precision of a sport like tennis. The whole body rhythmic experience has similarities with ballroom dancing. Ringling is a collective performance – like playing in an orchestra everyone shares in creating the overall result.

Overlaid on the physical/sensory experience, is a mental experience with no direct equivalent in other music or sport. Memorising methods has some parallel with formation dancing but the complexity is greater, and translating conceptual position into time of action is unique.

Ringling methods have an elegance driven by the underlying maths, but non-mathematicians can appreciate the resulting patterns and regularity, and everything fits perfectly together.

Ringling is a healthy activity offering mild physical exercise (especially with an upstairs ringing room) and mental exercise.

Ringling life

Ringling can be a rich and varied experience. Most ringers belong to a band that rings at one or more towers for services and regular practice. Many bands also teach, coach and develop new ringers, and most meet socially – in the pub, meals together, outings, etc. Bands often engage with their local communities with tower open days, talks to schools, etc.

Active ringers do a lot more, for example ringling with other bands, ringling peals or quarter peals, going on ringling outings (travelling round the countryside ringling in different towers), attending training courses or taking part in ringling competitions,

The ringling community

Beyond the local band there are ringling societies, typically covering a county and mostly split into smaller districts. They are affiliated to the (international) Central Council of Church Bell Ringers, which provides many services for ringers (publications, directories of towers and bells, standards, liaison with government and public bodies, and advice on many aspects related to ringling).

Becoming a ringer is like joining a huge extended family. Ringers often know other ringers across the country, forming a large informal network. Ringers around the world almost universally welcome visiting ringers and invite them to ring with them.

There is much more

As well as on tower bells, change ringling is performed with handbells, but rarely seen in public. The methods are the same, but the experience is quite distinct. Bell control is easy, but since each person rings two bells the mental task is more challenging.

Ringers have many opportunities beyond the actual ringling. For example the maths of ringling has a fascination of its own. Ringling composers also use sophisticated software to produce 'true' compositions (with no repeated sequences) and interesting music.

Many ringers take pride in the maintenance of ringling installations. The technology has traditional roots but continues to evolve. Some innovations coming from keen ringers rather than professionals.

Ringers interested in history have many opportunities. Change ringling has evolved over four centuries. There are nearly 50,000 bells from over 600 UK bell founders since the middle ages.

A lifetime of ringling

Some ringers start as young children, and many continue well into old age – ringling is a truly lifelong activity. In return for taking a fair share in their band's regular ringling, ringers have an engaging hobby with virtually free use of bells.

Ringers can progress as much or as little as they wish beyond basic competence. They can become deeply absorbed, or it can be 'just another activity'. The scope for learning methods is virtually limitless and the open nature of ringling gives great flexibility to ring with different bands, offering different opportunities and challenges.

Wherever a ringer moves or travels during life, if there is a band of ringers there are ready made friends.

Ringers share a heritage going back many centuries, which develops and progresses with each generation of ringers. Ringers are the custodians of the loudest and most public musical instruments, and of the art of change ringling. Their performance plays a special role in public life, especially at times of national rejoicing or sadness. The sound of bells has a special place in the nation's consciousness, and each generation of ringers ensures that it can be heard.