

The joys of bell ringing - A personal perspective

Richard Winkler, Tower Captain of St Mark's Bell Ringers has kindly shared his reflections on his own experiences as a bell ringer, as well as an explanation of what is involved in actually making the bells ring!

Personally, there are many joys to ringing bells. Firstly, the mental and physical challenge creates an addictive desire to ring in perfect time and to learn new methods. As I become more experienced, the movements and visual cues start to become more natural, and it's



the feeling that guides me into the right position. That accuracy, however, can and often does flee from me just as fast as it arrives if I think too hard, but that simply creates new opportunities to get it right. Similarly, seeing new ringers learn and experience their own bliss in getting it right is exciting to watch as they progress, albeit commonly faster than my own ringing journey. The community of ringers, however, is what brings me back each week. People come from all walks of life, brought together by a common desire to learn

the art, adding atmosphere to the worship at the church and the wider community. We have mathematicians, comedians, scientists, and professional musicians amongst many others in the wider community of ringers which makes for never a dull moment, always with a story to tell and something new to learn. All too often we need to remind ourselves to get back to ringing after a good social yarn in the tower. And this all culminates with the positive feeling we have, contributing to the lasting history and tradition in the tower of many generations before us, providing this special community service.

The major challenge is the dedication to the craft and finding members with a sustained enthusiasm to continue learning until that addictive desire takes hold. Typically, it is a few weeks-to-months before ringing in rounds or call changes are achieved and months-to-years before method ringing becomes proficient. We love to see people continuously come back after experiencing the fascination in the history, the movements, and the technique upon their first introduction.

I am reminded of my own personal introduction to bell ringing. My experience at a previous church was that bells were electrically automated, initiated by simply flicking a switch or programming in a tune. When a now-fellow ringer first asked me at St Mark's if I wanted to learn, I mistakenly thought they were asking me to contribute to a roster or similar of setting the bells off each week after the service. Being invited up to the tower, seeing the ropes and six members standing in a circle, shouting incomprehensible calls, I was taken aback but captivated still at the uniqueness of it all. Seven to eight years later I still find myself learning just how to "set the bells of each week" but enjoy that there is no end in sight.

Bell ringing - Quite a skill!

Bells initially sit in an upside-down position with the mouth facing upwards, held up by plank of wood, known as the "stay", that juts out and rests on the surrounding tower frame. The bell is attached to a wheel with a rope hanging off it, which gives the user

control of the rotational movement. The bell ringer pulls on the “sally” or felt part of the rope known as “hand stroke”, bringing the stay off its resting position and gravity turns the bell over until it completes just under one full rotation, i.e. just before the stay hits its resting position on the other side. During this movement the clapper strikes the bell and makes the iconic sound. The rope is drawn up into the tower, which requires the bell ringer to pull on the tail of the rope, known as “back stroke”, and the bell swings back in the opposite rotation with an additional strike, back to its original position. This two-step process repeats until ringing is stopped, by which time the bell is left again resting on the stay in a safe position. Changing the speed of rotation is how the order of bells is changed to ring different “methods” or “calls”. As a member of our local band jokingly puts it; “the scale of the bells, some of them which weigh as much as a small car, ...[have] a piece of string to control it”.

Reflections of an experienced bell ringer: Richard Winkler interview

How long have you been bell ringing at St Mark’s?

I have been ringing since 2014, so about eight years.

How did you first become involved? What made you choose bell ringing as opposed to a different activity?

I was introduced by a learner bell ringer who was part of the 8am congregation back in late 2013. She invited me up to see the bell tower and the bell ringers, which I hadn’t realised were people. Instead, I thought that it was all an electrical process with automated ringing. But having seen the ropes and the ringers, I became fascinated by the skill and decided to join the group and learn how to ring.

What were your early experiences of bell ringing?

While some years back now, I remember I started off ringing in a one-on-one session with Thomas Perrins, a member of the very-well-versed-in-ringing Perrins family. We took turns in alternatively performing one of the two-step process; he would hold the tail of the rope as I pulled the “sally” or vice versa. Once I became comfortable with this, I started ringing with the group in basic rounds. We then introduced call changes before moving onto method ringing.

What surprised you most about learning bell ringing?

For me, bell ringing initially seemed counter intuitive. Having played several instruments before, I was comfortable with musical theory and timing. I realised, however, that this was not necessary for controlling the bell in the correct way. I worked this out when first being introduced to basic rounds, ringing the bells in order of weight, and attempting to have them as evenly spaced as possible to achieve nice striking. Typical for a beginner, I would find myself going out of time, with my bell taking longer to ring and forming a larger gap between myself and the bell before me.

Probably from musical theory, I had it in my head that a quicker pull would mean the bell would come in more quickly and thus come back in time with the rest of those ringing around me. In fact, pulling the rope faster would mean I would use more strength and the rotational arc that the bell would follow ended up being longer. So, this action would

actually push me further out of time. Instead, the right action would be letting the bell ring on its own and applying no strength to shorten the rotational swing and thus bring me back into time. These actions certainly come with experience and getting the “feel” of ringing, but I found it surprising that strength and musical timing were not things needed to ring well.

Do you have some funny or interesting stories along the way to share?

Having rung for a few years now, I like to think that I have some experience with the basic movements and skills required to ring successfully. One skill that is not as common but still learnt early on, is the ability to raise and lower the bell. When stored in a safe position the mouth of the bell faces down. To raise the bell, the bell is made to start swinging in a very small arc, and the arc or the rotational swing of the bell, progressively gets larger until normal ringing speed is reached and the bell can be stopped on the stay. In this end position, the mouth of the bell faces up. (Note the opposite motions to ring a bell down is termed lowering the bell).

Early this year (2022), when invited to ring for service at St Andrew’s in Sydney’s Town Hall one Sunday morning, the first thing we had to do was to raise the bells in peel (raise them all together). I am often quite nervous raising bells in peel as I normally go out of time with everyone around me, ruining the lovely sounding effect. This one morning, however, went quite well and we were about three quarters of the way to having the bells up and it sounded lovely. However, I mustn’t have been used to the length of the ropes and continued to use strength to pull the bell up, smashing right through the wooden stay and the bell turned over in a full circle, taking the rope from my hand up into the tower. Since the bell had nothing to keep it up, it began to ring itself down again due to gravity. Some more experienced ringers checked on it and then rang it up properly but without a stay to hold it up, one member had to constantly balance the bell when we were not ringing, which is no easy feat. Needless to say, I was embarrassed, but was told it happens to the best of us.

From your perspective what are the joys of being a bell ringer?

Being a rather quiet and introverted person myself, ringing an object that makes such a noise is not something I would expect myself to do. Bell ringing, therefore, becomes an activity to deliberately and unapologetically make such a sound to enhance the atmosphere at church services, weddings, and funerals. I use ringing as an act of Christian worship, to bring people to the church and to know Christ. And further still, the people that you meet and the lovely people who form our local band bring me back each week. Getting to share stories and experiences really is one of the biggest joys of getting together each week to partake in a rather esoteric hobby.

From your perspective, what are some of the challenges of bell ringing?

The main challenge I feel is sticking with it for the length of time and effort required. It doesn’t take too long before you can ring and ring together with other people in rounds and potentially basic call changes. But it can take a while to ring well. Once the basic skills are learnt, taking the time to perfect them and develop them to a good level of confidence is a challenge, but where the addictive nature of ringing sets in. It’s in this stage, where you get a taste for what is possible and what different things you can do, and

where I started aspiring to learn more complex methods and techniques. It is a slow process I'm afraid, one that I am still learning, but then again, so are we all who ring.

What skills have you learned and/or used as a bell ringer?

Having recently become the Bell Captain for St Mark's tower in Darling Point, the skills that I use as a bell ringer more recently are, in fact organisation and leadership skills. Organising the weekly sessions and informing everyone of when we will and will not be ringing based on the group's availability, has been an added level of work. But this pays off when I see the group come together, seeing our band try and learn new things and the positive feedback from the congregation on hearing the bells. Beginning to step into the position of leading the practice sessions and deciding which exercises to teach and work on as a band has also been a challenge. But I am grateful for the forgiving group that still comes back each week despite my fumbling around and finding my way.

What contribution do you think the St Mark's Bell Ringers make to the church community and also the wider community?

I feel it is very easy to overlook the bells and forget about them when they are not ringing or making their noise. When they do ring, however, I have experienced the incomparable atmosphere that they provide. Having eight bells ring to welcome the bride to her wedding or welcoming a newly married couple provides that extra feeling of joy and characteristic sound of a traditional church wedding. Ringing the bells half muffled at a funeral or memorial service acknowledges the grief but simultaneously celebrates a life. Hearing the bells as the congregation gathers outside church after the service to enjoy a spot of morning tea, further brightens up the morning. I also believe that the heralding of the bells is a method by which God calls his people to the church and welcomes them into the congregation. Hence, even on the quiet weeks where our band may not be available, I still believe it is important to ring with even just three or four bells to ensure that those moments are there, and that the community is enriched through the ringing.

What would you recommend to someone considering joining the St Mark's Bellringers?

Come as you are, try it out and learn more. We are always looking for new ringers and people to share the experience with. You don't need to be musically gifted or overly strong. There is lots to learn, even if it's just to see where all the noise is coming from. We would love to get in touch, to show you around, and if you are up for it, even get you ringing a bell on your first visit.

If you are interested in getting involved with bell ringing at St Mark's Anglican Church Darling Point, want to learn more, or maybe just see some bells in action then, please get in touch via: bellringers@stmarksdp.org