

# Autistic Spectrum Disorder

by Mark Place

I was compelled to write this article after a young ringer with ASD, who is a pupil at my school, was recently victimised by fellow young (and not-so-young) ringers on ringing social media platforms. His ASD was used as a source of memes and jokes, and he was referred to as ‘mutually hated’. Such comments can be devastating for any child, but to attack a fellow ringer who is so obviously extremely vulnerable clearly demonstrates a gap in their education.

I feel sorry for my parents, for many, many reasons. From the age of around four years old, on the occasions I would be taken to their friends’ or family members’ houses, I would always inevitably enquire about their vacuum cleaner, or perhaps one better in my books – a carpet shampooer. I was obsessed – don’t ask. I would, apparently, duly unwrap the mains cord, pretend to use the device, wrap the cord up neatly back onto it and be done. I do not recollect these occasions, but my parents take great pleasure in regaling me with such stories. I can only imagine their utter despair and embarrassment at the time.

My name is Mark Place, and I have Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). I am writing this article to provide the ringing community with tried and tested traits from a one-time young ringer on the autistic spectrum. By no means does the following encompass all you will need to know or may have experienced, but I hope some of what you read might resonate with you about someone you know, or yourself – or just provide something of an introduction to this disorder. Many people show autistic traits from a young age, and most correctly recognise it as part of their personality; some are proud of the way they manage their lives, while others prefer to deny they have any difficulties; some enjoy being the centre of attention while others shy away from the limelight. A formal diagnosis of autism may or may not be relevant to the life of an astrophysicist, a rock star or a hospital porter, but each of these individuals may have suffered the same difficulties in social communication and interaction that I describe below.

## What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder causing difficulty in social interaction and communication, and is characterised by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought or behaviour. ASD manifests itself in a variety of behaviours: the diagram above right illustrates many possible symptoms of ASD, and conditions which may occur in tandem. Some people with ASD may display one or two of these characteristics, while others may exhibit many more. The myth of autism being linked to genius-type traits is still a common one; while “gifted” is listed, this is by no means always the case. The condition affects different people in very different ways. Some are able to live ‘everyday’ lives; others will require a lifetime of specialist support.



Around 1 in 100 children are diagnosed ASD: 1% of the population. Indicators of ASD can include:

- Abnormal or monotonous tone of voice
- Avoidance of eye contact or poor eye contact
- Deficits of language communication
- Inappropriate social interaction
- Intense focus on one topic
- Lack of empathy
- Lack of understanding social cues
- Over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours
- Preoccupation with specific topics
- Problems with two-way conversation
- Social withdrawal
- Unusual reactions in social settings

Although there is no definitive root cause for ASD (it was once widely believed but now thoroughly discredited that vaccines were a possible culprit), the risk can be increased by:

- Advanced parent age (either parent)
- Pregnancy and birth complications
- Pregnancies spaced out less than one year apart

## Childhood obsessions

I always had problems with social integration at primary and early secondary school. I was easily led, impressionable, and misjudged social situations to the extent that recalling those incidents makes me blush to this day. I was bullied, and it was overall quite a lonely experience. For this reason, I would always be more inclined to speak to adults rather than my own age group; they were far more polite and patient with me.

From vacuum cleaners my intense focus progressed to trains and train sets. I once wrote to Jimmy Savile to see if he could fix it for me to help drive a train from Northallerton to Kings Cross, and back. Thank Christ my invitation never came.

At the age of nine, I had my first ringing lesson. Move aside trains, church bell ringing is where it’s at! And why not?! The mechanics, the theory, the history, the information and statistics are fascinating. Every mini-talk or presentation I gave since

my first ringing lesson until I was around 13 years old would be about one thing, and one thing only: bells. I bored my classmates silly, and even drove a visiting drama workshop leader to lose his temper with me, screaming: “Can you not think or talk about anything other than bells, you indescribably boring child?!” My actual drama teacher did agree that this was perhaps a little harsh.

## Vulnerability

Having experimented with my own small rings of bells at home, including Victorian door bells (which featured in a *RW* article), and later ceramic plant pots, it wasn’t long before I attracted the unwanted attention of two gentlemen. Having ASD and a lack of understanding of social situations when you are young makes you extremely **vulnerable**.

I was once invited on a ringing tour where, at one point, the organiser suggested I sit on his knee in the front of the minibus to help navigate between towers. Why not? That seems very friendly. Another gentleman named Peter Holland, from Beeston, Nottinghamshire, also made contact not too long after this incident. I’m not sure if he was actually a ringer (as he stated), but he certainly had connections within the ringing community. Peter turned up one Sunday morning, having arranged to take me to ring at Liverpool Cathedral that afternoon. Fortunately, his Mini Metro decided to have a mechanical issue, so he just stayed long enough for me to show him my mini-ring, and to have tea and cake with me and my parents. In recent years, I Googled his name, only to find out he was currently serving time at Her Majesty’s Pleasure for the sexual abuse of 12 boys aged 8 to 14 (although police think there were hundreds more) between the years of 1974 and 1993. Another close shave. Safeguarding Officers, **please** take note.

I want to share with you my most memorable ringing misdemeanours, in an attempt to help you relate and understand such behaviours with young ASD learners you might have at your tower, in your guild, or interact with online.

When I was 11 years old, I remember my family meeting up with friends in Durham. We went on a boat trip one sunny Sunday morning which was most enjoyable. As the boat was mooring up, the cathedral bells began to be raised for Sunday service ringing. That was it – I was off the boat like a shot, possibly before it was moored safely. To the absolute horror of my parents, I ran out of sight, to the cathedral and desperately sought out the door to the tower steps. Thank goodness a verger was on hand to witness this frenzy and engaged me. He asked what I was doing and kindly took me for a walk around the cathedral grounds to chat to me and calm me down, desperately avoiding me ascending the tower. Having had the good fortune to ring at Durham Cathedral since, I am so grateful,

as the myriad of steps and corridors one has to negotiate in obtaining successful access to the ringing chamber beggars belief!



## Communication

One of my many obsessive traits in ringing was to have to know what the colours of the sallies were at each tower we were to ring at. I had many questions about all aspects of the bell installations we were about to ring at and this was clearly exasperating, as I remember being picked up for a ringing tour one day, and the driver arriving only to announce, “You can get in, but only if you shut up.” What had I done wrong? I was getting in to his car first thing this day and I hadn’t even said anything! This comment reverberated in my mind for the whole day and pretty much ruined it for me.

Shortly after this tour, I auditioned for and was given a role in our local amateur dramatic pantomime. The script started with a town crier’s bell clanging and the next line was “What’s that racket, is it Mark ringing his bells again?” I didn’t get it at all. Mark who? What bells? I only knew it was about me when another cast member laughed and pointed at me when the line was said each night. Well, I had the last laugh – I was cast as the bells of Bow for Dick Whittington the following year, with my mini-ring of eight bells in their own tower taking stage-right (the local Am-Dram society were really very good to me).

Another aspect of ASD is hearing and reading only what you want to. This manifested itself perfectly on an occasion where I was lucky enough to ring at York Minster. I watched in awe as the more experienced ringers rang up the back bells and I wanted to join in. I remember asking a Minster ringer if I could ring up the dumb bell, and heard “you can”. As I raised this ‘bell’, I watched the faces of my tour group go gradually purple. I sat down all triumphant that I had helped in any way, only to be hissed at: “What on **earth** do you think you are doing – who said you could do that?” I said the name of the Minster ringer who I spoke to, who then promptly stood up and rang the dumb bell back down. It transpired she had said “well **you can** check it is not up”. Good enough for me, clearly!

I was always intrigued with a tower in our branch of the Yorkshire Association: Baldersby St James. A 25cwt ring of eight hung on three tiers in a pencil-thin Victorian tower. These were only ringable for a short time, but I always wondered what of them. *The Ringing World* often publishes a “25 Years Ago” and “50 Years Ago” column, and one week it republished an article about a C Potter taking some ropes to test-ring the front five at Baldersby. I immediately called my ringing master to report the amazing news: that “Christine Potter [a most respectable ringer from York] was ringing the front five at Baldersby!” having not read the column title properly, or put any of the content into its correct context. He patiently listened,

and quite rightly very politely told me to get my facts right before disturbing him with such phone calls again.

Fixations and impressions can also cause issues. At the age of 13, after ringing at St Paul’s Cathedral for an audition for the ASCY, I was in awe at the array of boxes the ringers had to stand on to ring this 62cwt ring of 12. To recreate this fabulousness, I decided to raise all the ropes at St Helen’s, Ainderby Steeple, a 9cwt ring of six, so that all the ringers needed a box, from the treble, increasing in height to the tenor. Can you imagine what the local band thought when they arrived for Sunday morning ringing? The word “ridiculous” was used on more than one occasion, and to this day I cannot think of a more appropriate word to use!

## Saved by the bells

Ringing ended up being my social saviour. Despite my history of making my classmates glaze over with the indescribable tedium of me talking about my favourite hobby, I somehow managed to convince quite a few to give it a go. We founded the Northallerton College Society of Change Ringers in my GCSE years; between a few already proficient ringers, we taught seven or eight classmates, and eventually managed to ring rounds and call changes on the lovely ring of 10 at All Saints’ Church, Northallerton most Wednesday lunchtimes. We also rang methods, and a full peal of mixed Plain Bob and Grandsire Doubles was scored, which was the first peal for half the band. This network of friends, who were also mostly musicians, were a lifeline for me. We regularly rang together both at Northallerton and on Friday nights at Ainderby Steeple, which was always preceded by pints of coke and free chips at The Wellington Heifer over the road. Coke inevitably turned into beer, and on A-level results day, I got the grades I needed to be accepted by Southampton University to study Music.

University was the perfect place to reinvent myself; with a blank canvas, I could try and learn from my previous social blunders and hopefully develop further. Although I am sure my contemporaries in SUGCR would say I was obviously ASD, I felt I was making progress. Still obsessed with ringing, I became Master of the Guild in early 1999, and that summer our project to install the Hartley Twelve (a mini-ring of 12 bells) came to fruition. Through SUGCR, I met my new housemates, a mixture of ringers and non-ringers, who I lived with throughout university, and am still really good friends with to this day. I went on to become Master of Southampton City Ringers where we undertook a project to augment the ring of eight bells at Bitterne Park to the world’s lightest ring of 12 in a church.

I’m now 41 years old. So how have I got on?

You may or may not have picked up on my ASD in my writing style in this article; I wouldn’t know. I continue to have the occasional misunderstanding of sarcasm, avoid new situations, meeting new people, and had a brief obsessional romance with Musical Theatre, but there my obsessive behaviour

seems to have ended, thank goodness. I am very happy, have a wonderful non-ASD partner and close group of friends, am Director of Music at More House School in Frensham (which specialises in educating boys with mild learning difficulties including ASD – perfect!), and am Steeple Keeper of St Andrew’s Church in Farnham, where I also ring when COVID-19 doesn’t prevent it, and the tower isn’t broken.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I **plead** that you bear with us ringers with ASD. As bizarre, tiresome, and annoying as we can sometimes be, we can and do eventually catch up with social etiquette, and can prove to be quite useful, as I hope I have done in some manner over the years (debatable)! I have no doubt that numerous ringers are on the autistic spectrum, and this can prove invaluable in so many aspects of the Exercise, as indeed with so many areas of life. That said, and as mentioned earlier, ASD doesn’t always present itself in the manners I have described in this article, which would be regarded as high-functioning. Like many developmental disorders, there is a sliding scale, with some experiencing more profoundly disabling effects.

## Strategies

Here are some modern tried and tested ways of approaching teaching and interacting with a young person with ASD:

- Allow extra time for them to process any information you impart
- Foster a supportive environment
- Incorporate sensory tools such as a fidget when you are explaining theory – having this physical outlet helps to prevent loss of concentration
- Support routines and transitions, as change and uncertainty can be particularly stressful – give plenty of notice of any deviation from the norm
- Support social skills practice
- Use clear, concise instructions
- Use their special interests as a gateway to teaching other skills
- Use visual cues

Above all else, I have learnt that the best thing for me was for my friends and teachers to be **patient** and be **kind**, which the majority of them were. It paid off; I hope!

