



Eyes down for a full house

Perhaps they don't still use this expression in Bingo sessions (*Tail End* has never been inside a Bingo hall) but it seemed a good way to introduce this month's topic – where people look while ringing. Apart from the tiny minority of ringers who are blind, we all use our eyes while ringing, either consciously or unconsciously. Some look ahead and some look down. Some heads nod up and down as if following a hypnotist's charm. Some heads are still, while others swing from side to side like clockwork models. Some heads swing wildly with eyes darting furiously around. What do they achieve? Which are the more effective strategies for using your eyes?

Looking up

The psalmist wasn't thinking about ringing when he said 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help'. Little help will come from lifting your eyes in a ringing room (apart from perhaps dust in your eyes – some teachers warn their trainees 'there is only dust and pigeon droppings up there').

So why do some people let their eyes follow the sally aloft, with their heads nodding up and down while ringing? Perhaps it is a primitive reaction – like a cat following the movement of a mouse. The sallys are brightly coloured, and attract attention. It can be visually tempting to follow them. But in terms of gleaning useful information, it adds nothing to do so. The sally's movement at backstroke is copied by the tail end much lower down. The real pattern needed by ropesight lies within the upper part of the area traversed by the ringers' hands (holding or not holding a sally). Looking higher than this is unnecessary, unless you are trying to diagnose problems caused by rope movement, sticking sallys, rope guides, etc.

Sally worship

A few people, regardless of whatever else they do with their eyes, religiously look at the sally at every handstroke. Maybe they are still afraid that it might not be there for them to catch, but more likely it is just a habit they got into when they started ringing, and they are unaware that they are still doing it. It is not necessary – the sally should always be in the same place (unless the handling is very untidy). Perhaps they are worried about catching it at the right height, though the most reliable way to do that is by timing the rise of the hands as part of the overall backstroke-handstroke rhythm. Trying to pounce on a chosen spot, like a cat chasing a mouse, is jerky, and more likely to make the rope move around and misbehave. In any case, looking straight ahead, your own sally passes through your field of view.

Looking left and right

When ringing, you should normally face the centre to maximise your ability to see all the other ropes. If the rope circle is not 'circular', and you are in an awkward corner, then you might need to vary this a little.

If you have normal eyes, your field of view is about 180°, including peripheral vision (see Figure 1, viewed from above) so you can see all the ropes at once. Peripheral vision is most sensitive to moving objects, so it is good for seeing ropes! You can prove this, with a simple test. Hold your arms in front of you and wiggle your fingers. Then see how far you can move your arms sideways while still looking straight ahead, and still see your fingers moving. To make best use of peripheral vision, don't focus on what is in front of you, but gaze with what some people call 'soft eyes'.

Looking straight ahead lets you see all of the ropes, whereas if you turn your head from side to side to look at individual ropes, some of them go outside your field of view. Sooner or later, you will look in the wrong direction, not see the rope you needed to see, and panic or go wrong.

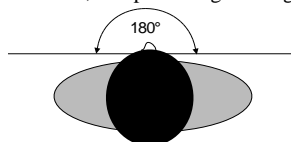


Figure 1: Field of view while ringing

Searching eyes

Many people who look left and right, do so calmly and deliberately. They might have learned the order to expect the ropes in familiar methods, but quite possibly they are also using their peripheral vision quite a lot without realising it, to provide the cues for where to look next. Not everyone seems able to do that though. Sometimes you see eyes darting frantically around, desperately looking for a rope to follow. Perhaps looking so hard 'at' individual ropes makes the vision narrow, so the surrounding ropes 'disappear'. It must feel very insecure, being so reliant on something that you don't see until the last split second.



Looking down

Have you noticed that some ringers look at the floor, and wondered why they don't look at any of the ropes? Is it perhaps some sort of rhythm induced meditation? In fact, they almost certainly are watching the ropes, and watching all of them, using peripheral vision as described above. Looking downwards pushes everything into peripheral vision, making it easier to see the whole picture, rather than getting absorbed in a bit of it. The bells to the side get the same attention as the bells in front. Also, not looking directly at ropes can help reduce the distracting visual cues caused by odd struck bells.

Looking at other ringers

There are plenty of useful things to see, and ropes aren't the only things of interest in a ringing room – there are ringers as well. You can glean quite a lot of useful information from them. From their faces you can see who looks lost and who looks confident. From their overall stance, you can see who is ringing steadily and who is struggling. These all give useful clues about who might be in the right place and who might be in the wrong place. In addition, from both the face and the stance, it is very obvious if someone has just gone wrong and is in the throes of trying to correct the error.

All of this information helps you to make sense of what is going on around you. If you rely on seeing ropes to follow, it is crucial to sense when they are in the wrong place, and should be ignored. If you confidently rely on rhythm to place your bell, it still helps to be aware of disruption, which might induce you to make a mistake if your concentration lapses.

Being helpful

You might think that 'helping other people' is only for experts, but ringing is a team activity, and we should all try to help each other. The most conspicuous forms of help are provided by 'minders' standing next to people, and by the conductor 'putting people right', but these are just the extremes. Not everyone 'needs a minder' and not everyone who goes wrong needs verbal correction. In many cases, subtle forms of help can be just as useful.

Think of a simple slip, like missing a dodge. If the other ringers are aware of what is happening around them, then those closest to the dodge, and certainly the person being dodged with, should immediately spot something wrong. The errant ringer's face should show whether the dodge really has been missed, or whether it was just poorly executed. You could say something, but looking pointedly at the other ringer often achieves the same effect – communication by so called 'nod and wink'.

You don't need to be an expert to help iron out trips like this. If you are 'on the spot', you just need to be observant, and catch the other ringer's eye. The same skills of observation that let you spot someone else's trips, also let you 'read your surroundings' to correct your own.

Ropesight

Ropesight is about much more than seeing who to follow. It is the skill of seeing what is happening around you while ringing. Good ropesight is best developed looking ahead, with all the ropes in view, rather than focusing on individual ones. There is much more to ropesight than discussed here, and *The Learning Curve* might return to it in a future article. There are sections on ropesight in both *Ringling Skills* and *The Tower Handbook*.

Some homework

What do **you** do with your eyes while ringing? Are you aware of what you do? What do those who ring with you do? It can be interesting to look at people while sitting out, as well as while ringing.

Tail End

Ringling Skills (£5) and *The Tower Handbook* (£16) are available from CC Publications.