

Learning to ring – what to expect

Our primary aim is to teach people to ring so that the bells in Darlington and Heighington are rung regularly for service on Sundays.

It is great that you want to learn to ring. New ringers are always welcome and you will meet many friendly people, and will have a lot of fun.



Initial Steps

The best thing to do first of all is to come along to a ringing practice near where you live, so you can get an idea of what is involved and meet some other ringers. This is a typical scene of a practice night at St Cuthbert's Darlington, with a band getting ready to ring.

Possible options in the Darlington area are:

- St Cuthbert's on a Monday evening 7.00pm to 9.00pm. As it is a town centre church, we have to lock the door, so you either need to be there promptly or ensure you have a phone number so we can come and let you in. There is a spiral staircase of about 80 steps in total. You would not need to stay for the whole practice as someone can let you out partway through.
- Heighington on a Wednesday evening: 7.00pm to 9.00pm (more flexibility here as the bells are rung from the ground floor, so the door is not locked).

Learning: Safety

Ringing is a very safe activity, provided common sense is used, and people are taught and supervised properly. It is not completely risk free of course, in the way that crossing the road is not risk free, but the risks are small, and great efforts are made to keep them that way. Before starting we always go through some basic safety procedures, such as not walking about when bells are ringing and that 'let go' means 'let go of the rope NOW', and we practise that. Also, we teach on the smaller bells, which are much more forgiving and safe when learning to ring.

Learning: Basic Information

A bit like learning to drive a car, ringing is taught in stages, so we add a bit at a time, when you are ready. (You do not start doing 3 point turns on your first driving lesson).

Some limited physical contact is necessary. The teacher must always stand close to the student, as they will be ringing the bell together for the first few lessons. The teacher will have a hand on the rope for much of the time, to be in control at first, and later to be able to take control immediately when and if needed. This means

that hands and arms will sometimes be in contact. But there should be no need for further contact than that.

Learning: The Bells

We offer to take people up to see the bells, so you can get an idea what happens when you are ringing a bell, but this is not essential. It may involve climbing ladders and belfries are not usually the cleanest of places!



These are the bells at Holy Trinity, Darlington.

Teaching Sessions

We generally do the teaching of bell handling separately from the main practice, as that way we can provide a sustained practice for a decent period of time for each learner. It usually takes about 5 hours of tuition (spread over about 5 or 6 sessions) to get to the stage of handling a bell properly and safely. The teaching centre at Holy Trinity, Darlington, operates on Saturday mornings from 9.30 am to 12.30 pm but we also try to find other times convenient to you so that you make quicker progress. You will be taught by more than one teacher, but all our teachers have been trained by the Association of Ringing Teachers and will either be accredited teachers or working towards their accreditation.

Other Information

Ringling is tremendous fun. It is not expensive. There are a couple of useful books, comprising a small log book to track your progress and an accompanying book which is intended to help you through the first stages of the 'Learning the Ropes scheme'. They cost £7.50 in total. We do ask for a small donation of, say, £2 per session at Holy Trinity, to go towards things such as new ropes and bell maintenance. Ringers are welcome wherever they go to ring - there is great camaraderie. While it is hard to explain in a document like this, you can take ringling to whatever level you want.

Frequently asked questions.

Do I need to be musical?

No – there is no music in the conventional sense, and you do not need to be able to read music.

Do I need to be good at maths?

No – all you need is to be able to count.

Is ringing very hard work? Do I need to be physically fit?

It depends. Ringing really heavy bells can be hard work. But you do not have to do that. It is much more about timing and practice. To start with you will be ringing on quite small bells, which do not require much effort; in fact you may need to be careful not to pull too hard. It can be quite a climb to the ringing room in some churches, and very few have lifts! There are nearly 90 steps to the ringing room at St Cuthbert's and none at all at Heighington. Holy Trinity has a short spiral staircase.

Will I get carried up off the floor?

No. Your feet should not leave the floor. One of the first things you will learn is the importance of letting go as soon as your teacher says so. Properly taught, ringing is a very safe activity.

Will I get blisters/sore hands? Can I wear gloves?

It is possible you may get very slightly sore hands, but this will usually be because you are enjoying yourself so much you don't want to stop! It may be because you are gripping the rope too tightly or are pulling too hard. Very few ringers wear gloves, and most have found that it is impractical as it affects the quality of grip, reduces the 'feel' you get through the rope and may even cause blisters.

Is ringing expensive?

No. Ringers do like to go and ring at other churches ('towers') and when doing so it is normal to leave a small donation. We ask people to leave a donation at Holy Trinity after each session to help with maintenance. When experienced enough, you may be asked to ring at weddings, and then you will usually receive a small payment.

Some of the bell ringing methods look incredibly complicated?

Yes – some of them are. But this is one of the great things about ringing. You can make it as complicated as you want, and there is always something else to learn. You do not have to make it that complicated though; the important thing is to have fun and enjoy yourself.

Is there a recognised teaching standard?

Yes. The Association of Ringing Teachers (ART), was set up to provide some assurance about the quality of teaching in ringing. You will be taught by someone who is either an accredited teacher, or someone who is working towards accreditation and will be under the supervision of an accredited mentor. ART has a scheme called 'Learning the Ropes' which follows a series of 5 levels, from basic bell handling to the early stages of change ringing. You can join the scheme if you want to.

What happens once I have learned the basics?

Once you have learned to handle a bell safely, we will encourage you to join one of the local bands of ringers and to attend one or more practice sessions on a weekday evening as well as to ring for service on Sundays.

Where can I find out more?

Visit the website of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers (www.cccbr.org.uk). There are many bell ringing societies in existence, usually based on one or more diocesan areas, eg the Durham and Newcastle Diocesan Association of Church Bell Ringers (www.dandn.org). Or ask a ringer.

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Clockwise from top left:

Holy Trinity, Darlington

St Cuthbert's Darlington

St Michael's Heighington

St John's Darlington