THE RINGING WORLD

The Weekly Journal for Church Bell Ringers since 1911

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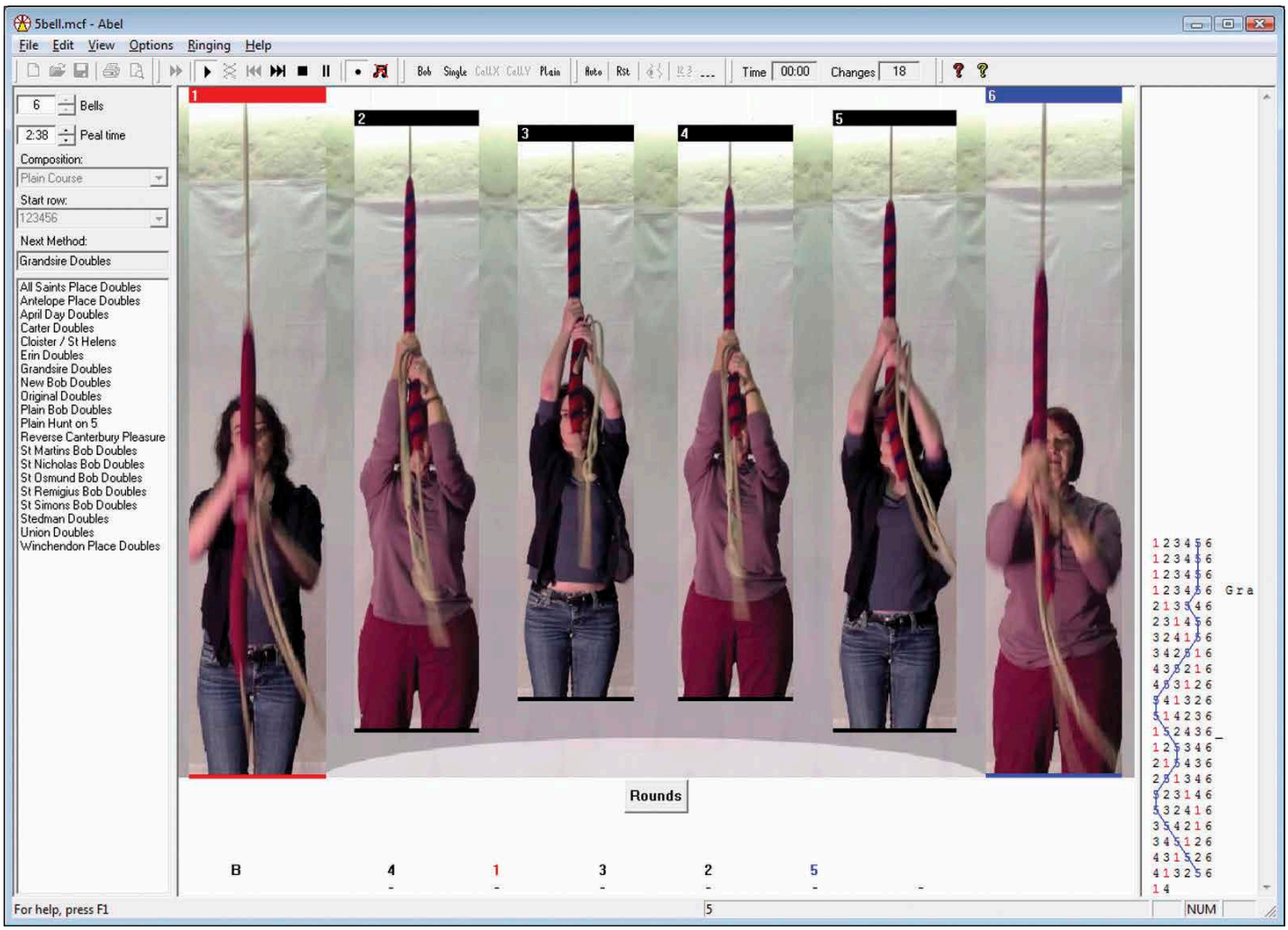
Images that can change our world

a software review by Roger Booth



The latest version of Abel – 3.8.0a – is available as a download (£20) or on a CD (£22): see advert on p.1274

The newest version of the *Abel* simulator – it would be no exaggeration to call it a technological breakthrough – has the potential to transform the way ringing is both learnt and taught. Chris Hughes, who developed the original software, has added moving images of real ringers so that beginners, and indeed experienced ringers, can practise in a realistic virtual environment.

Last week Chris and I and a group of local ringers helped to demonstrate how the new system works when the BBC came to film technology in action at Christ Church, Isle of Dogs.

Until recently a simulator allowed people to practise listening skills, but many ringers are unable to ring purely by ear and there are certainly not enough people around who can train people to do this. The result is that the ringer, who perhaps can ring a doubles method on a tower bell, then has a go at doing the same thing on a simulator and finds it very difficult and soon gives up trying.

What was needed was a simulator that not only made the right sounds, but also gave a realistic impression of the visual experience of ringing with other ringers. *Beltower* was the first to do this, with cartoon characters, and soon enterprising ringers connected this up to a projector or a large LCD screen to give a larger image and an even more realistic impression.

Chris Hughes' latest release of *Abel* takes this development one stage further with the use of video samples of real ringers replacing the cartoon characters. You can now look at a screen and practise ringing by ropesight with realistic images of from three to sixteen ringers.

Isle of Dogs experience

Christchurch Isle of Dogs is an active church, but one of many towers in the area without a local band, and we have always wanted to do something about this. About four months ago we installed sensors on all of the bells to help train a new band. After we saw the latest release of *Abel* at the Ringing Roadshow we upgraded to it and acquired a spare projector. By moving some of the peal boards we had a perfect area for a 6 foot (1800mm) wide screen on the opposite wall, which showed moving images of the ringers.

One of the key problems with the recruitment and training new ringers is retention. It takes a lot of effort to recruit a group of new ringers and you don't want to waste that effort by losing 90 percent of your recruits in the first few months. Projects like the North Bucks Branch *Big Ring Pull*, the Taunton Branch Recruitment and Training project, and the success of the Marsworth Ringing Centre have all demonstrated that by following three key principles it is possible to retain more than 60 percent of newcomers after two years:

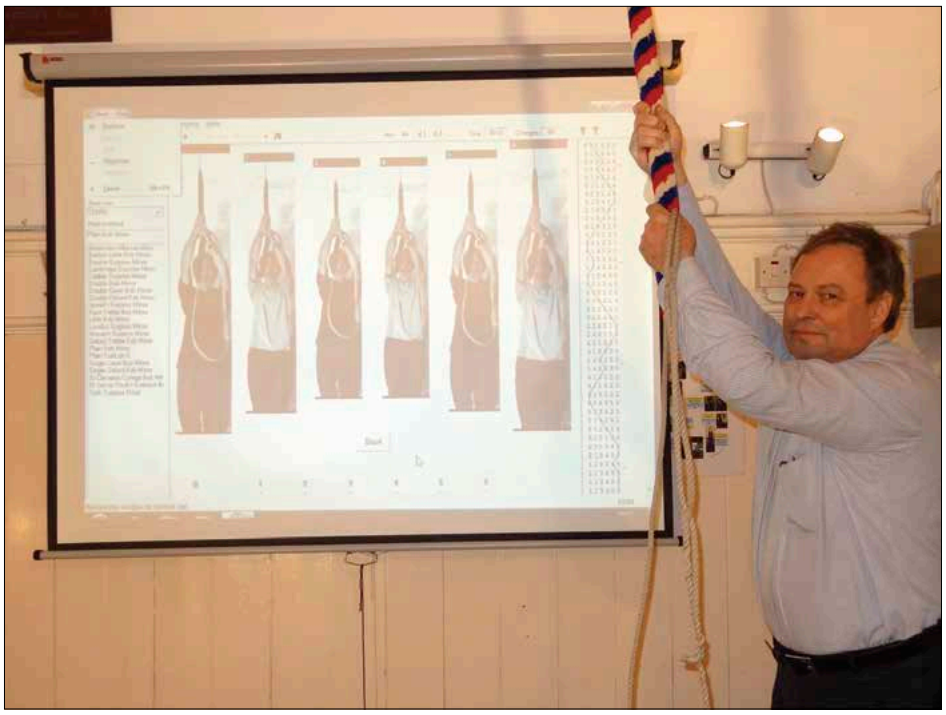
- **Intensive training:** A few minutes' practice each week is not enough. Two or more intensive sessions each week will enable people to learn much faster, join in with the rest of the band within a couple of weeks, and retain their interest.
- **Targeted practices:** Many traditional practices try to cater for all abilities, but this can be unsatisfactory for both the experienced ringer and the new ringer, each getting limited practice. Targeted sessions can be much more productive.
- **Group working:** With towers and teachers coming together and collaborating, rather than working independently, it is much easier for groups to put on programmes of intensive tuition and targeted practices.

Working with our friends at Bermondsey, Rotherhithe and Greenwich we wanted to follow these principles and make sure that we were able to offer our new ringers a programme of intensive targeted training. The new version of *Abel* (3.8.0a) makes that so much easier.

More rope time

Our new ringers have been able to progress much more quickly than at a normal practice where you can only give each beginner two or three 'prime rings' in an evening (a touch specifically for them with a strong band around them) – while experienced ringers don't want to spend all evening doing elementary exercises.

With the new release of *Abel*, we have been able to give the new ringers much more rope time in an hour and a half target session,



Roger Booth demonstraing the latest version of Abel at Christ Church, Isle of Dogs, London

Abel's inventor Chris Hughes testing the latest version

so they get to perfect things straight away, not over a series of weeks. They also tell us that it is less intimidating, as they are less worried about making mistakes in front of other people.

We have also been able to have useful discussions about striking. Without prompting we found that several of the beginners were watching the striking display at the bottom of the screen to see how far out they were. It was particularly useful to slow the peal speed down to 4h30 and to have a discussion about counting your place and including an open hand stroke lead, and then to get them to count along, before gradually speeding up. It was much clearer than doing this in real time.

Teaching people how to lead by ropesight was also much easier to explain. By slowing the motion down we were able to show how the treble needs to wait till the tenor ringer is almost catching their sally, before the treble pulls off to start the next handstroke. We know that ropesight is not as accurate as ringing by rhythm, but we are pretty sure that our new ringers are using a combination of both senses.

With our multi-bell interface we have also found that two new ringers can practise ringing rounds at once, so long as they are not on adjacent bells – two and six work well. Once we got over this stage we were able to teach them to ring plain hunt on three, using just two experienced ringers with the three cover bells added by the simulator.

Although it's not the same as ringing with real people, and we need a mixture of simulator and real sessions, we are now able to do far more. We have effectively been able to set up a second practice night, without the need to find five more experienced ringers willing to ring just rounds, call changes, kaleidoscope exercises and plain hunting all night.

Of course you can still practice ringing by ear, without moving images, and experienced ringers can practise ringing more advanced methods. However, tried various combinations on the new *Abel* we have found that it is most effective on six and eight bells. As the number of bells increases the size of the images on the screen becomes smaller, so once you get to twelve bells the value of the moving images tails off – but how many Bristol Maximus ringers rely on ropesight!

Many other towers could befit from a similar simulator installation. In view of the ageing profile of the ringing population we do need to train many more ringers, yet the shortage of experienced ringers to do this on a meaningful scale is a problem. This technology significantly reduces the number of experienced ringers required. It also brings ringing up to date and makes it much more appealing to the younger generation. Of course there are a few minor bits of tidying up that need to be done, and this is in hand, but overall Chris Hughes has done an excellent job.

It's also amazing how competition between the private developers has resulted in this huge step forward. And it does not stop there. David Horrocks' *Saxilby Simulators* have been on sale for a few years now, so it is possible to buy an off the shelf dumb bell. Whitechapel Bellfoundry are now selling, under licence, kits for the Adelaide Ringing Centre's dumb bell design. Even David Bagley, supplier of the photocell sensors is now under serious competition from Tony Croft with his newly designed *Belfree* plug and play wireless simulator sensors, making installation so much easier.

The Whiting Society have also produced an excellent DVD *From Rounds to Ropesight* which includes a detailed explanation and many exercises which new ringers can try at home in order to develop their ropesight skills. This provides a useful complement to the latest version of *Abel*. What is now needed is a publication on how to put all of these latest developments to best use. Phil Gay's book *Simulators and Teaching* is well out of date, but I understand that the Whiting Society

Concluded on p.1274

Compromise keeps the Camberwell bells turning

by Andrew Harvey

A London vicar who took the drastic step of silencing his own bells has agreed to a compromise arrangement that will allow ringing to continue. Father Nick George of St Giles, Camberwell said he was responding to 'a few complaints' from residents near the church when he ordered ringing to stop in an email he sent to tower captain David Cloake.

"It was a bolt from the blue," David told *The Ringing World*. He agreed that the sound from the ten bells was particularly loud on the south side of the church but said he had received no indication that parishioners were unhappy and was puzzled that there had been no discussion between the vicar and the ringers before the order to stop.

Camberwell is part of the London Docklands group of towers, both north and south of the river Thames where there are in David's words "too many ropes and not enough ringers". Towers at Rotherhithe, Walworth, Limehouse and the Isle of Dogs can no longer sustain consistent practices or Sunday ringing. Only Bermondsey has a regular weekly practice while at Camberwell he ran a monthly session that drew support from other parts of south London and further afield.

Ten years ago Camberwell was silent and neglected before a group of volunteers cleaned up the belfry and reclaimed the ringing chamber from the pigeons. Even then it was clear that the oak louvres were inadequate as a sound control system but overall the return of ringing was welcomed.

The monthly Friday night practice from 7 to 9pm became a popular fixture and the bells were also pealed a couple of times a year and rung for up to a dozen weddings. "They're a hard ask," says David. "Not the easiest set of bells but since they were retuned and rehung, they sound lovely."

The vicar ordered ringing to stop at St Giles, Camberwell

Then in October came the surprise of the vicar's email. He wrote: "The complaints have been good natured but firm, and needing some feed-back from me, which I cannot ignore. It is not inconceivable, for example, that if I do ignore them, this may make us vulnerable to legal action." He said ringing was to be suspended 'until further notice' while the question of sound control was investigated.

David Cloake alerted his fellow ringers and sent an email to Surrey Association members. He received widespread support and indeed, it became clear that within St Giles there was concern at the silencing of the bells. At a subsequent churchwardens' meeting a compromise was offered to the ringers: a limited practice could resume from 7.15 to 8.30pm with a brief break in the middle. While not ideal, David felt it was better to keep the bells turning than to risk months of silence and the daunting task of trying to resurrect ringing at some future date.

Father Nick was unwilling to discuss the situation with *The Ringing World* but did say he planned to meet the ringers to work out how best to improve sound control. "It's all containable, it's all positive," he said. David further added that he had been due to meet the vicar to plan a way forward. "Nick has been a great supporter of the ringing over the last ten years. I understand his position and concerns. I very much hope we can resolve this issue through the introduction of sound control, however, the louvres are very large and the job could be somewhat costly".

From treble to tenor: Louise Booth, Eva Redei, Elizabeth LeMoine, Joe Tilley, Andrew Clark, David Moore, David Cloake, Mike Todd, Luke Camden and Colin Friend (Photo by Morag Todd)

Front page article on *Abel*

Concluded from p.1255

already have such a publication under active consideration.

The BBC's flagship technology programme *Click* came to the Isle of Dogs on 2nd December to film a piece about the use of simulators in bell ringing featuring the latest release of *Abel* and an interview with Chris Hughes and some of the ringers. The item is likely to be broadcast just before Christmas. *Click* is broadcast on both TV and radio and can be found on many social networks and *iPlayer*. On TV it is broadcast on:

BBC Breakfast on Saturdays at 06:45 and Sundays 07:45
BBC Two on Mondays at 10:30
BBC UK News Channel on Saturdays at 01:30 and both Saturday and Sunday at 11:30 and 15:30
BBC World News on Saturdays 08:30 and 16:30 and Sundays at 04:30 and 13:30

A word from the inventor

Chris Hughes writes:

A tower ringer expects to see when other ringers pull their ropes: they want ropesight. Some years ago, PC graphics improved to the point where it became possible to provide cartoon graphics of ropes and ringers, while maintaining the regular rhythm of the simulator bell sound. This was a step forward, but still the cartoons did not provide quite the same experience as seeing real ringers. Looking at the small screen of a PC is quite different from seeing people and ropes moving all around you in a tower. Recently however, the falling price of PC projectors intended for the home cinema market has made it possible for some towers to use a projector to provide almost life-size pictures.

The latest development was launched at the 2014 Ringing Roadshow. *Abel*, the most commonly used simulator program, now provides video-like graphics of a ringer, apparently ringing the simulated bells. This is done using frames from two seconds of real video (one backstroke or handstroke), which the program manipulates to fit with the rhythm of each of the simulated bells. In effect the PC has to create and show six, eight or more small videos, one per bell, all at the same time, while still maintaining the precise timing of the bell sounds. When projected on a large screen, the result is a realistic ringing experience. At last ringers can use ropesight with a simulator providing life-like images of the other ringers.

Thus the latest developments allow someone to practice as if with a band of real ringers who all ring with perfect rhythm and never make any mistakes! The realistic bell sounds let the ringer hear whether their bell is striking in the right place, and the projected graphics let them practise ropesight. Because of the very wide range of features that the simulator provides, it is possible to practise almost any aspect of ringing, from training exercises for new ringers up to the most complex ringing ever achieved, all in the most realistic environment yet available.

Abel for Windows PCs | Mobel for iPhone/iPod/iPad | Mabel for Apple Mac

Abel is the world's most popular ringing simulator for both home and tower use, used by 5,500+ ringers. Mabel provides Abel's main home-use features on an Apple Mac. Mobel is a simulator for iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad: "a belfry in your pocket".

Use Abel or Mabel to ring, conduct or print anything from call changes and Plain Hunt to Spliced Surprise, on 3 to 24 bells. Use Mobel to ring or conduct plain courses or touches of any method on 4-16 bells, or ring spliced, or see the line of any method.

Details, and ordering, at www.abelsim.co.uk. Mobel is in the App Store. All profits to charity, including The Ringing Foundation.

6089