A FREE GUIDE FROM COLLINGWOOD CYMBALS

Starting out in cymbal making

The absolute basics, before you buy anything



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Version 1 · November 2026

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Before you start

This guide assumes nothing. If you've never held a cymbal hammer and you're wondering what it would take to start making cymbals, this is for you.

It isn't a how-to. It won't teach you how to hammer or lathe. It's the broad picture: how to stay safe, roughly what you'll spend, what will be hard, what a workshop needs, and how to ask others for help in a way that gets you useful answers.

As a 100% self-taught cymbalsmith, I'm happy to offer this advice to anyone who may benefit from it. My workshop, including the tools I use, the space and how I move in it, as well as, of course, the things I learned and the knowledge I built, were all developed and adapted over time. This guide will help you get started with a level of confidence and efficiency, while avoiding the trap of perfectionism.

It isn't the only way. Other makers will do things differently, and you should talk to them too. That's why a big part of this guide is about which questions to ask, so you can find out what you need to know.

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At the anvil in my previous Bristol workshop

ONE THING TO HOLD ON TO

Cymbal making is slow to learn and often counterintuitive. That's normal. Nobody gets it right on their first few blanks, and that's fine.

02

Health and safety first

Before tools, before blanks, before anything: look after your body. Most of the damage in this craft builds up slowly, so you won't notice it until it's done. The same goes for your mental health, and I'll come back to that later.

HEARING

Hammering bronze is extremely loud, and the damage is permanent. Wear ear defenders every time you hammer, and plugs underneath them as well if you're hammering for long. Think about anyone else in the room too.

- **Dust and soot.** Blanks can arrive covered in factory soot, and lathing and sanding make fine bronze dust. Wear a proper dust mask, rated FFP3 in the UK and Europe or P100 in the USA. Other countries have their own ratings, so check what applies where you live. Keep the air moving, don't eat in the workshop and wash your hands before you do.
- **Edges.** Raw blanks are cut by a shear and can be razor sharp. Wear gloves to handle them, and deburr the edge early.
- **Machines.** On a lathe or anything that spins: no gloves, no loose sleeves, no jewellery, hair tied back. Know where the off switch is before you switch on.
- **Your body.** Hours at the anvil are hard on wrists, elbows, shoulders and back. Set the anvil to a height that suits you, use a hammer weight you can control, and take breaks before you need them.
- **Vibration.** Hours of hammering and power tools send vibration into your hands and arms, and the damage builds up. Use well-fitted handles, keep your grip relaxed, and take regular breaks.
- **Your mind.** Frustration builds up too. Know your limits, take breaks, and ask for advice rather than pushing through. More on this in section 4.
- **Eyes.** Safety glasses for drilling, grinding, lathing and trimming.
- **Other people.** Neighbours, family and anyone sharing your space. The noise travels, and so does the dust on your clothes.



After lunch one day in my first workshop, I put my bowl down and carried on working. At the end of the day, this is what greeted me. That dust was in the air I'd been breathing all day.

DO YOUR OWN CHECKS

I'm a cymbalsmith, not a safety professional. Use this as a starting list and read the instructions for every tool you buy. On the free resources page of my website, you'll find links to help you start looking at health and safety advice and rules where you live: collingwoodcymbals.com/health-and-safety-links

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What you're likely to spend

Prices vary a lot by country and by how much you build yourself. These are rough figures to help you plan, not quotes. You don't need all of it on day one.

Item	Rough cost	Notes
Safety kit	£50–£150	Ear defenders, plugs, glasses, gloves, dust masks. Buy this first.
Dust extraction	£150–£1,500	An extraction unit for the workshop, or a powered air-purifying respirator (PAPR): a face shield or hood that blows filtered air at you. Worth it if you lathe or sand a lot.
Hammers	£10–£200 each	One or two to start. A hardware hammer can be adapted cheaply.
Anvil	£50–£500+	From a home-made one to a commissioned one. Depends on what you can make yourself.
Blanks	£40–£200 each, plus shipping	Bronze is sold by weight, so size and weight decide the price. See my blanks guide in the free resources on my website.
Lathe	from a few hundred to several thousand pounds	Not needed straight away, and most often built or adapted to spec. Although it isn't vital for starting, lathing is often an overlooked element of the process. It gives you very deep and very subtle control over a cymbal's shape and therefore its sound, and is much more powerful than many people realise. An essay about this will be available soon in the free resources on my website.
Hand tools	£20–£200	Files, drill and bits, scales, tape measure, marker, clamps.
Workshop space	varies hugely	A garage or shed costs little. A rented unit is a monthly cost before you've sold anything.

The costs people forget

- **Shipping and import charges** on blanks. These can add a lot to the price per blank, especially on small orders.
- **Blanks that don't work out.** Some of your early blanks won't become cymbals you'd sell. That's part of learning, so budget for it.
- **Electricity, consumables and replacement parts:** sanding belts, drill bits, masks, plugs.
- **Your time.** It takes a long time before your work pays for itself, if that's your aim.

A SENSIBLE WAY IN

Start small: safety kit, a hammer or two, a simple anvil and four blanks. Spend more once you know what you actually need.

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The drawbacks nobody mentions

I love this work. It's also worth knowing what's hard about it before you put money in.

- **Noise.** Where can you hammer, and when, without upsetting anyone? This decides a lot, so answer it first.
- **It's slow to learn.** The same technique on two identical blanks can give two different results. Progress comes in fits and starts.
- **You will lose blanks.** It's easy to go wrong quickly without knowing why. Sometimes the only answer is a fresh blank.
- **It's physical.** Hours of hammering are tiring. Your body sets the pace more than your enthusiasm does.
- **Money goes out before it comes in.** Tools, blanks and space all cost money long before you have anything to sell.
- **Advice contradicts itself.** You'll hear golden rules that don't hold up, and experienced people who disagree. You'll have to test things for yourself.
- **It can be isolating.** Long hours with ear defenders on, often working alone, can cut you off from the world around you. Make time to talk to people.

STEP AWAY SOMETIMES

Some of the best progress I've made has come from not making cymbals. Put the hammer down, do something else, and let what you've learned settle and sink in. You come back with a fresh perspective. Don't pour all your energy into it. A good balance will keep you going for years.

ASK, DON'T PUSH THROUGH

It isn't meant to be easy. But when frustration builds, that's the time to look after your mind as well as your body, know your limits, and really listen to what other cymbal makers advise.

NONE OF THIS IS A REASON NOT TO START

It's a reason to start with your eyes open, keep your spending small at first, and give yourself time.

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Your workshop space

Find a space where you can make noise and mess, and play and demo cymbals on a kit, without annoying other people or other people annoying you. Hammering is repetitive, loud and intense.

Give yourself room to move, to stand up and relax sometimes, and not be cramped into corners near dangerous machinery. You'll spend a lot of hours in there, so make it somewhere you want to be.

A comfortable, safe space

- A solid floor that can take the anvil and the impact.
- Natural light if possible. It makes a real difference to how you feel.
- Good lighting that catches the cymbal's surface, whether you're looking closely or taking a wider view.
- Extraction for dust, and a door or window you can open to get some air.
- A clear fire exit, a fire extinguisher and a first aid kit.
- Somewhere to sit, and basic kitchen and toilet facilities. Breaks matter.
- Somewhere the noise won't cause trouble.
- Room to expand as you learn.



Natural light from a big window in my previous Bristol workshop

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Tools for a first workshop

You don't need a full workshop to begin. You need a safe space and a few good tools. Add and modify tools as you find out what you need and what you're missing. Don't worry about “perfection”.

Cymbal making is elemental. We hit bronze, we cut it, then we hit it again with sticks. Keeping your approach simple and respectful of that will help you refine things as you learn.

Everything here can be researched further through the free resources on my website, or by asking other cymbalsmiths (see section 9).

To start

Tool	Why
Safety kit	See section 2. **Always first.**
One or two hammers	Different weights and face shapes for different jobs.
An anvil	Something solid to hammer on, preferably hardened steel, and curved in at least one area. At a height that suits you, often mounted on a wooden base. See my free resources for more.
Scales	To weigh blanks and track how much metal you take off.
Drill and sharp bits	Mounting holes often arrive undersized and need drilling out.
Files and deburring tools	For sharp, ragged edges.
Marker, tape measure, notebook	Write down what you did to each blank. You'll forget otherwise.

Later

- A lathe (see section 3).
- Sanders and polishing gear for finishing.

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Asking someone to build machinery for you

Cymbal-making equipment can be hard to come by off the shelf. If you have experience of practical work, construction or engineering, you may want to try building it yourself.

Always consider the health and safety first.

If you can't build it yourself, look for local people with the skills, for example welders, carpenters and fabricators. They know metal, they know wood, and they know machinery. They won't know cymbals, so explain what you need and why, and work with them to produce something that will work for you.

- **Explain what it has to do,** not only what it looks like. "Hold a 22-inch cymbal by its centre and spin it steadily while I cut it" tells them more than a photo. For a lathe, the cymbal spinning counterclockwise, as you stand facing it, is very important. I explain why in my upcoming lathing essay.
- **Bring pictures and a sketch with measurements.** Even a rough drawing helps.
- **Give your limits:** the largest and smallest cymbal, the weight, the speed, the space you have, your power supply.
- **Ask about safety from the start:** guards, an emergency stop, and how it's fixed down.
- **Agree a price and a timescale in writing** before work starts.
- **Test it before you pay in full.** Check it does what you described.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THEM

– Have you built anything like this before? Can I see it?
– What would you change about my design, and why?
– What will it cost, and what could make that go up?
– How long will it take?
– What safety features will it have?
– If something isn't right when I test it, will you fix it?
– Who do I call if it breaks?

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Asking suppliers about their products

Whether you're buying blanks, hammers or a motor, a good supplier will be happy to answer questions. Ask before you pay, and keep their answers in writing.

- Be specific. "Do you sell 20-inch B20 blanks at around 2,500 g?" gets a better answer than "What do you have?"
- Ask whether they sell by description or by exact weight. Some suppliers just sell a "20-inch medium", and you get what you get.
- Say you're starting out. Many suppliers will point you to what suits a beginner.
- Ask for photos of the actual product if you can.
- If an answer isn't clear, ask again. Language barriers are common with overseas suppliers, so keep sentences short.

QUESTIONS FOR A BLANK SUPPLIER

- Is this the alloy I've asked for (for example, B20 or B8)?
- Do you sell by description or by exact weight? How close to the ordered weight will it be?
- Are they sometimes a little oversized?
- Flat or with a bell? What bell shapes can you do? Can you supply them without a bell, or without a mounting hole?
- Is the edge raw or smoothed?
- Is there a minimum order?
- What is the price, per piece or per kilo?
- How do you ship, what will it cost, and who pays import charges?
- How will you declare the value for customs? Make sure it's the true value. An under-declared parcel becomes your problem, not theirs.
- How can I pay, and when will it ship?
- What happens if a blank arrives split or damaged?

My free guide *Buying your first cymbal blanks* goes into all of this in much more detail: collingwoodcymbals.com/cymbal-blanks-guide

QUESTIONS FOR A TOOL OR MACHINE SUPPLIER

- Is it suitable for working bronze?
- What safety equipment does it need?
- Are spare parts easy to get?
- What's the warranty, and can I return it?

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Asking other cymbal makers the right questions

I'd encourage you to reach out to other makers. The trick is knowing what to ask, so you find out what you actually need to know.

Most cymbal makers are generous with what they know. They're also busy, and many get the same messages over and over. A good question gets a good answer.

- **Do your homework first.** Read and watch what's already out there, so you're not asking what they've already explained.
- **Say what you've tried.** What you did, what happened and what you expected.
- **Ask one clear thing at a time.**
- **Don't ask for their recipe.** How someone makes their signature sound is their living. Ask about principles, not secrets.
- **Respect their time.** If you want proper help, offer to pay for it. Many makers teach.
- **Say thank you, and tell them how it went.** People remember that.

Hard to answer	Easier to answer
How do I make a good ride?	I hammered a 20-inch medium blank from the bell outwards and the edge went wavy. What would you look at first?
What blanks should I buy?	I'm thinking of four medium 18s and 20s from one foundry. Is that a sensible first order, or would you change it?
Why does my cymbal sound bad?	My 18-inch crash sounds choked after lathing. Here's a recording and its weight before and after. Any idea what's happening?
Can you teach me everything?	Do you offer lessons? I'm a complete beginner with a small workshop set up.

SHARE AS WELL AS ASK

Once you know a little, pass it on. That's how this small community keeps growing.

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Where to go next

That's the broad picture. If you take anything from it: protect your hearing, start small, don't worry about perfection, and expect to learn slowly.

There's more help out there now than ever. More cymbal-making events are starting to happen. I spoke at the Indie Cymbalsmith Summit in Chicago alongside several other makers, and gatherings like that show how much more open and accessible this craft is becoming.

Where to learn

- **With me.** I offer teaching online, in person at my workshop in Bristol, or remotely anywhere in the world. There's also my Patreon: patreon.com/collingwoodcymbals
- **Timothy Roberts (USA)** has lots of content on his Reverie Cymbals YouTube channel: youtube.com/@reverie_cymbals
- **Nicky Moon (USA)** offers training and runs a Patreon: patreon.com/cw/nickymooncymbals
- **Mike Mongiello (USA)** runs Make Your Own Cymbal sessions in Pennsylvania: mongiellocymbals.com
- **Turkish foundries.** Many can be contacted about training, and will welcome you to their workshop for it.

Free from me

- *Buying your first cymbal blanks*, my guide to choosing and ordering your first blanks: collingwoodcymbals.com/cymbal-blanks-guide
- My map of cymbalsmiths of the world, to find makers near you: collingwoodcymbals.com/cymbalsmiths-of-the-world
- My Cymbal Density Calculator, to work out your blank weights: collingwoodcymbals.com/cymbal-density-calculator
- If you have questions, get in touch through collingwoodcymbals.com.

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