

# Public time in the Borough of Yeovil

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A short study of the relationship between the turret clock of Yeovil Town Hall and that of the Parish Church.

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My research originally focused on the fate of the turret clock of the Town Hall, Yeovil. The timeline that developed, as I studied newspaper reports, records, books and the minutes of meetings, illustrated the Borough Council's challenge to find a reliable public clock. Their endeavour provides the foundation to explaining the importance of St John's Parish Church turret clock, why it is without dial and the part it has played in the history of the town.

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In 1849, Yeovil Town Hall was built for £4000. ‘The building, which was in the Grecian Ionic style, formed part of the more extensive Municipal Buildings with which it is connected, and beneath it is a range of business premises.’ It also contained a fine dance hall. The architect had allowed for a dial in the central portion of the façade but a public clock was not added until early August 1863. The Council disregarded the original design, no doubt, due to restricted visibility. Not only could the dial only have been read at the front of the building, but because of the narrow street it would be impossible to see. Instead, they decided on a more conspicuous four dial turret placed upon the top of the hall.



The cost of the building work and installation of the clock became the subject of much criticism in the community. The following letters both featured in the editorial of the Western Flying Post on September 25th 1863.

*“Maister Heditor, - Why accardin to what I do hear the be gwain to mak rather a deerish job o’ thick ther clock tower ater all, bean tem? Why, I do hear that even what they do call Clerk o’ the Works is to have another poun a week, which, accardin to mi recknun, wi what he had avore, is jis 10s and 10d a day – pritti ni as much as some o’ we poor ratepayers do git in a week ster workin hard var’t. Now, I doant blam the man, var we no mos O’ the Londoners be pritte wid o wake, an a mach var a score of your vok in the country sich as oar Yeovil Corporation. – I be, Maister Heditor, A POOR RATEPAYER.”*

*“Sir – Permit me to ask if you or any of your readers can give us ratepayers anything like a guess what the clock tower will cost the town by the time it is finished? I, like many others, from reading your reports of the Town Council proceedings, was given to understand that it was to be the cheapest erection ever made by hands. Indeed, it was augered by some of the would-be prophets, that the contractor would be inevitably ruined by the carrying out of the contract. But if the contract price is low, the cost of a Clerk of the Works will be high enough in all conscience! The sum of £3 5s per week is not very bad pay for looking on, and when we find that not a stroke has been done for the last three weeks past, one is constrained to inquire where is all this expense to end? If things go on so much longer, the “economical” employment of a Clerk of the Works will be a somewhat expensive pill to swallow. I am, Sir, yours obediently,*

*ENQUIRER.”*

On the 8th December 1863, the Western Flying Post reported the new addition to the Hall and described the clock movement in detail:

*“The New Town Clock*

*The inhabitants of Yeovil have long been anticipating the convenience of a turret clock in a tower at the Town Hall. On Friday last, being the day for the holding of our annual cattle show, the clock, with its illuminated four dials, was for the first time publicly announced as complete. We have to congratulate our fellow-townsmen that so good an horological monitor has been obtained economically. The clock has been constructed by Mr Dobel, watch and clock maker, Yeovil, upon the simplest adaptation of large timekeeping construction, combined with the most effective principles of measuring and proclaiming time. The clock itself is powerful, and fully capable of striking bells of even larger size, also of showing time upon*

*dials of increased diameter. The most important and imposing feature in the whole work is the beautiful effect of the illuminating dials which so closely approximates in chasteness and perspicuity to the appearance by night of the dials off the Houses of Parliament. Mr Dobel has succeeded in giving that pellucid surface and has used the same medium, or if not the same, that which produces equal effect, so that we may safely affirm that in or out of London, the nearest approach to the effect of external dial lighting attained at the palace at Westminster, is at the Town Hall, Yeovil. The wheels of the clock are composed of gun metal of unusual hardness. The great wheels are 15 inches in diameter, and controlled in their operations by an escapement upon the dead beat principle, having a two-seconds pendulum rod, 14ft in length, with a pendulum ball of 1 cwt. The striking parts are upon an improved principle. Each dial plate is 5ft 6in in diameter, and weighs 2 cwt 10 lbs. The large hammer, which strikes the hours weighs 25 lbs, those which strike the quarters are, of course of lighter weight. The cast-iron frame of the clock weighs 5 cwt, and the whole of the machinery, dials, &c, weighs 30 cwt.”*

Records show that Robert Dobel did not construct this movement. He bought it from the firm of J. W. Benson of Ludgate Hill, London. It was common practice for local clockmakers and jewellers to engrave their name on domestic and turret dials and setting dials despite not necessarily having made the movements. Public dials are very good advertising space. Dobel was born in Wiltshire, in 1808. By 1830 he had moved to Yeovil and was married. An advertisement of 1859 describes him as ‘Watch and Clock Manufacturer, Goldsmith, Silversmith, Jeweller, Optician, Engraver, Etc’ of the borough. Parish records show that he also had a lucrative contract for maintaining church clocks in the surrounding villages. Following the death of his first wife in 1837, he married again in 1838. She died in 1851. The 1861 census records him as living with his son, together with a domestic servant. Robert Dobel died in 1868 aged sixty-one. Frederick, his twenty-one year old Son, continued the business.

The New Town Hall turret became an illuminated beacon and landmark to the surrounding district. As this January 1864 comment from the correspondence column of the Western Gazette confirms:

*“A gentleman who is well known in Yeovil for his frugal habits has, it is said, recently sold his clock, as now, when he wants to know the time, he has only to go upstairs and look at the town clock over the tops of the opposite houses. On Christmas night, the Yeovil Town Clock was heard to strike ten by a person standing on the bridge by which the South Western Railway crosses the turnpike road, between the Junction and Sutton*

*Bingham, and this although the wind was blowing from the listener towards the town.”*

Although popular with the town, the turret and its clock movement seemed doomed. Later in 1864, the Town hall clock weights fell through the hall ceiling. One embedded itself in the dance floor. The other, most likely the heavier striking weight, travelled through the floor and was visible in the ceiling of the market below. The following year a newspaper report states concerns regarding instability of the turret itself. Further reports show a few more usual and trivial issues: including the clock movement stopping due to the weight of snow on the hands and high winds smashing the dials. By 1887, instability in the turret had increased. Surveyors blamed poor design and unsatisfactory materials declaring the structure unsafe. The Council had no choice but to remove turret and clock for the safety of those that passed underneath.

Newspaper reports and correspondence prior to the turret construction in 1863 showed the dissatisfaction of taxpayers regarding the expense of the turret and delays in its construction. The Council's 'folly' had, once again, become the source of discontent. Rather than rebuilding the turret, a less-expensive solution was sought.

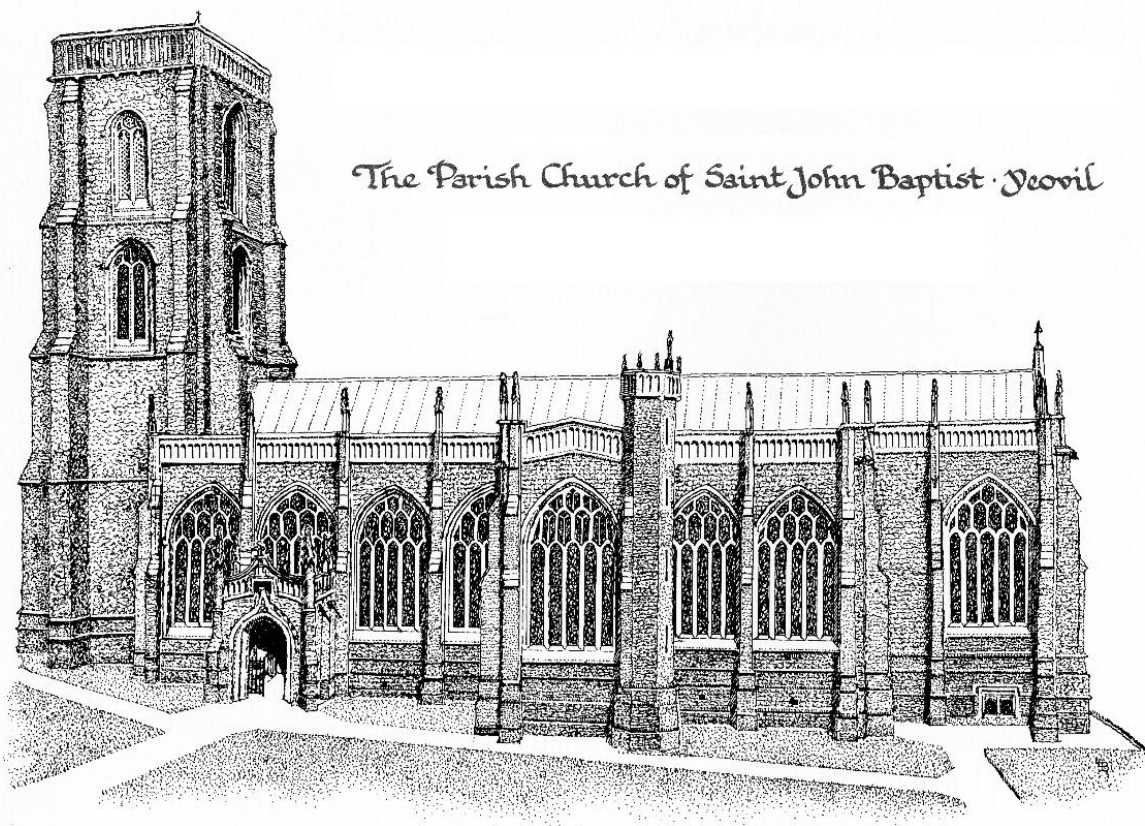
Council minutes note that a temporary Town Hall clock was discussed in 1888, with John Tyte tendering for the work. He supplied a double-sided dial drum clock hanging above the Town Hall entrance. The dial had the name Cox on it. Tyte was born in Wells, Somerset in 1848 and began a partnership with Messrs Hancock, Cox and Co. Jewellers and Silversmiths in 1874. It proved very profitable and in 1883, at a sale at the Mermaid Hotel, Yeovil, he purchased a dwelling house and shop in Middle Street for £1060. In 1897, the partnership between Tyte and William Cox was dissolved by mutual consent with Tyte continuing the business and having the responsibility of any debts. He sold the business in November 1898 following the death of his wife.

The townspeople were still unhappy with that solution. Further discussion continued regarding the audible chiming and striking associated with a public clock. This report from the Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette from 30<sup>th</sup> April 1891, describes how the Parish Church enters this timeline:

*“A very sensible proposal is made which, if carried out, will obviate the necessity of expending a large sum of money in erecting a tower in the borough of Yeovil for the reception of a public clock and chimes. As the church tower is now in course of restoration, and the bells will be put in thorough order, it is suggested that clock works should be placed within the tower and that the bells should be utilised for the purpose of striking*

*the quarters and giving the Westminster chimes. The handsome church tower would not be defaced by placing the dial of a clock there, but four dials to a non-striking clock would be erected in place thereof in a lightly-constructed turret over the market house. This would point to the minutes and hours as they fly by, and as both clocks would be under the control of the same person the chimes in the tower would respond to the hands of the clock over the market house. If this arrangement be carried out it will save a sum of public money and should give satisfaction all round.”*

Whilst the lightly constructed turret above the Town Hall was deferred, the proposal for the church tower went ahead.



Later in 1891 or early 1892, a three train, double three-legged gravity escapement flatbed movement was installed at St John's Church. The three trains are separate, yet connected, mechanisms that interact with the going, or time, train. The second train provides the chiming of the quarters and the third train produces the hour striking. The inscription on the setting dial states that the clock was presented to the Corporation of Yeovil to be installed in the church tower. In 2012, a Yeovil Town Council meeting of the Buildings and Civic Matters Committee agreed to transfer ownership of the Parish Church clock to

the Church as the Council were no longer interested in paying the costs of maintenance and repair.

In 1912, the original Town Hall clock movement and bells were installed in a new steel reinforced turret to commemorate the 1910 coronation of George V. The hanging drum clock was stored and then used to top the newly built Reckleford School in 1916. The Town Hall turret clock struck the hours for 23 years and, it seems, while the Parish Church clock chimed.

However, the Town Hall and turret continued in its misfortune. On Monday 16th September 1935, the Devon and Exeter Gazette reported:

*“So fierce was the gale at times that the face of the Yeovil town clock was blown in on the Huish side....”*

In the small hours of September the 22nd September 1935, a violent storm began over Yeovil. Newspapers report that the turret may have been struck by lightning. Although the cause will never be established, it is possible that the gas lighting, fanned by the wind through the smashed dial, could have ignited the structure.

The Town Hall was gutted by fire and razed to the ground. The blaze was visible 10 miles away in Crewkerne. Yet many Yeovil residents had no idea about the fire ‘because of the layout of the town, (they were) shocked and indeed dismayed when they happened on the sooty rubble whilst attending church the next day.’ The skeletal remains of the turret and Town Hall remained until they were demolished in 1936.

The clock movements themselves, although relatively simple, have a multitude of technical terms. For this document, it is unnecessary for the reader to understand them. It is important, however, that an awareness of the changes in turret clock design over 30 years is acknowledged between the Town Hall’s 1863 J. W. Benson and the 1891, or 1892, Thwaites & Reed at St John’s. Although the Western Flying Post report of 1863 makes reference to the Great clock at the Palace of Westminster, the comparison with the Dobel (Benson) clock stops at the dial. The Benson escapement, the part of the clock which reduces the power from the weight and governs the accuracy of the passage of time, used a Dead Beat escapement. Invented in 1715, its use was widespread. The power, transferring through the gear train, is allowed to advance one tooth at a time as the pendulum swings. The Palace of Westminster movement is a double three-legged gravity escapement. Designed by Edmund Dennison, it is capable of far greater accuracy yet difficult to describe. The Thwaites & Reed movement at St John’s not only incorporates this design but also has an



additional benefit. Without dials, less power is needed to the movement and neither inclement weather nor birds perching on the hands can affect the accuracy of time keeping.

The research continues, as I try to uncover the manufacturer of the drum clock of Yeovil Town Hall. There are issues with viewing the clock, in its new home, at Reckleford School. Asbestos, access and health and safety become a barrier to the curious. I would like to see if Tyte also put his name to it. As both the clocks of St John's PC and St James, Preston Plucknett, bear the name of John Tyte despite both movements having been logged in Thwaites & Reed of Clerkenwell, London day books. Unusually, St John's cites Tyte as 'contractor'.

Nevertheless, I hope this information explains why the Parish Church clock movement is an interesting and important timepiece that needs to be restored. Since that unfortunate day in September 1935, the Thwaites & Reed in St John's Parish Church has been the only public Borough clock.

Acknowledgements and sources:-

Newspaper reports reproduced by kind permission of the Western Gazette, Yeovil and the Bristol Evening Post. Thwaites & Reed's records in the Clockmaker's Guild Library in the Guildhall, London. Images courtesy of Somerset County Library, Heritage Museum and the Leslie Brooke Archive.

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