

# BAMPTON CHURCH CLOCK – 100th Birthday



At the end of 2019 we celebrate the 100th birthday of our church clock. It was formally set in motion for the first time at 7pm on 2nd December 1919. “The Rev EV Cox conducted the special service. Mr WH White (Lord of the Manor) presented, on behalf of 360 subscribers, the new clock to the Vicar, who in turn handed the custody to the wardens, Major Moutray Read (Castle Grove) and Mr JC Rockett. The clock and its erection had cost about £230 (about £13,000 today). A social was afterwards held at the Drill Hall and was largely attended. Mr Townsend, in proposing a Vote of Thanks to the collectors and Rev JH Prince, said ‘he hoped the clock would prove as perfect as the number of the hour when it was set going by the parish warden Mr Rockett’. Mr White said they were all grateful to the Vicar and Mrs Cox for the energy they had put forth to make their stolid old tower look again attractive by such a beautiful clock.” (Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, 4 Dec. 1919)

Very little is known of the previous church timepieces, but church accounts suggest that in 1728 Mr Lewis Pridham supplied a new clock in the tower at a cost of £22.6.0! In 1808 a serge-maker of Castle Street gave as a gift a replacement for the 1728 clock. This new version only struck on the hour, and a square dial plate 7 feet across was fixed across the belfry window; its face was ‘spangled blue with gilt numbers’ and was a joint gift from Daniel Badcock and Thomas Newte of Duvale. This can be seen in many of the old photographs we have in the archives which show the church tower before 1919. This photograph is we think the oldest one in existence and is dated around 1880 – you can see also the old oil-lamp lighting the pathway. We can see that it had only one face which was on the east side of the tower, and in a rather higher position than the current clock.



Of course, in order for a new clock to be installed, permission must be granted by the Bishop of Exeter in the granting of a ‘Faculty’. The old clock had not been working for many years, and in the “humble petition of Ernest Vyvyan Cox, Vicar of the Parish of Bampton and Perpetual Curate of Petton”, the request is made “to remove the old and worn-out clock from the church tower, and to erect a new clock in the tower of the church at Bampton.” The Faculty was granted by William, Lord Bishop of Exeter, on 19 September 1919. Remarkably, in the Devon Archives is the hand-written specification for the clock which accompanied the request for the Faculty:



*Makers of the Clock: John Smith & Son, Derby*

*Details of the Clock: Two 6' skeleton dials showing time on the east and west sides of the tower, striking the hours and Cambridge chimes on 4 bells at the quarters, to be erected on the first floor of the tower and immediately below the bell chamber, together with a 12" dial to be fixed in the north wall of the tower (vestry) inside the church and about 9' from the floor of the church.”*



Few people get to see the beautiful mechanism which has been serving the people of Bampton reliably for a century – indeed most of us take for granted that the clock will be telling the right time and sounding out the hours and quarters on the bells. The pendulum is huge, about a metre and a half long and with a massive iron bob on the end. It swings slowly and majestically, taking two and a half seconds for each full oscillation. The pendulum, being iron, does respond to changes in its surroundings, in particular temperature, so as it expands and contracts, timing has to be tweaked by putting pennies on a little platform on the pendulum rod. For any clock nerds, the clock



has a double 3-legged gravity escapement which is often used in large 'tower' clocks to produce a reliable and consistent push to keep the pendulum swinging accurately.

The connections to the bells are made by a series of levers and hammers which are actuated by pegs on a drum in the mechanism which is very much like a giant musical box. The hammers being quite heavy, this part needs quite a bit more energy so requires big weights to power them.

Like a grandfather clock, the church clock was powered by three weights which were really massive and descended on cables through a considerable height from bell chamber above to ringing chamber below. Unlike an 8-day grandfather clock, these needed winding up every 2 days! This was no mean undertaking as



the steps to the clock needed to be climbed, then a big crank handle fitted to the 3 different winding drums, and for each a considerable weight had to be lifted. For decades this task was undertaken by various members of the local community acting as 'clock-winders'. Fred Leach recalls "I cannot remember just when I joined the clock winding team, but it was around 30 years ago when John Scott was Vicar. I believe that he looked after the clock himself as he left details of the working of the clock when he left, together with warnings of what *not* to do when winding! It was through his enthusiasm that the ringing chamber was constructed below the clock room; before that the bells were rung from floor level." However, in 2000

it became clear that in our modern world, the job of winding the clock was too great a commitment for one or two people, so a team of over 12 local volunteers were organised as a team with an allocated winder being assigned to each month; if anyone was unable to do any part of the schedule, there were 11 others with whom they could arrange to swap. This worked quite well with only a few mishaps.

In 2015, another chapter was begun in the clock's history. The team of winders was replaced by three electric motors which now allow us to use very much smaller weights and wind them up more often, resulting in far less wear on the mechanism. Modern technology has also replaced the need to keep adjusting the accuracy by means of pennies – a clever piece of electronics compares the clock's time to a radio time signal, and either speeds up or slows down the pendulum by a tiny amount. Smiths of Derby (Established 1856) still exist, and our church clock is serviced annually to keep it happy for the future. All this has been done very carefully so that the integrity of the original mechanism is maintained, and all the changes are in fact reversible, should that ever be required.

So next time you are walking through the Bampton churchyard, or are hearing the clock strike, just think about that wonderful, old, yet very reliable machine which is in the church tower. In the last 100 years, it has struck the hour bell 5,697,900 times if my maths is correct! (Except for those times when the bell-ringers disabled the hammers to peal the bells!).



To find out more, check out our website <https://www.bampton.org.uk/history-churchclock.html> or watch the video on YouTube "Bampton Church Clock".

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