



South side of the church tower showing the clock face, after the style of the one at Malines cathedral in Belgium.

The Cooke clock of Penshurst Part 1

The present clock is an eight day clock, striking the hours on a bell of 17 cwt, erected in 1858 by T. Cooke & Sons of York.

After the installation of the company's first four turret clocks by T Cooke & Sons between 1852 to 1858 – three to Yorkshire churches and one to a chemical works at Gateshead – clock number five went to the church at Penshurst in 1858. Clock number seven went to a church at Betteshanger (near Deal) in 1860 and clock number 11 went to

South Park, the Penshurst family seat of the Hardinge family, later in 1860. In 1956, when South Park was sold for demolition, the Cooke clock was auctioned to the Roman Catholic church at Rottingdean. All four Kent clocks by this maker are directly linked, however, my interest here is clock number five.

After Thomas Cooke's death in 1868, T Cooke & Sons continued in business until taken over by G J F Newey of York somewhere around 1900. The Penshurst clock

was one of their first designs and four years before the company was awarded a first class medal at the International Exhibition of 1862.

The Cooke clock of 1858 was not the first clock installed in the Penshurst church, for the winding of a previous clock is mentioned as early as 1721. In 1722 a William Harris was paid £1.9s.0d (£1.45) for '...mending and cleaning the church clock and looking after it'. While in 1723 Robert Tye, the carpenter, was

paid £1.18s.0d (£1.90) for ‘...a chest and making a fence around ye clock weights’. The original clock presumably had a verge escapement for in 1728 a pendulum was added by Richard Harris who was also paid during the years 1721 to 1729 for winding and general maintenance.

In 1732, for the sum of £26, George Sommertun entered into a Bond with the church for the addition of chimes to the clock. In the words of the agreement he was to ‘...Hath erected set up and affixed a new set of chimes in ye tower or steeple of ye parish church of Penshurst aforesaid performing three or severall tunes and repeating either of these tunes every third hour both in the day and in the night upon six bells there hanging in the said tower and whereas the said George Sommertun hath also ... for the time being that the said George Sommertun shall and will at his own proper costs and charges excepting only the weight ropes or lines belonging to the said chimes and the clock in the said tower being ...’ In other words, after installation he would be responsible for repair work according to proper market charges but that the items requiring regular attention (such as rope lines, cleaning, winding and oiling) would be attended to separately (for example Mr Pinyon, see later).

The Bond mentions that George Sommertun was from Tonbridge. I can neither find any sign of him in the various authorities nor is he referred to as a business and it seems very likely that the churchwardens, possibly from hearsay, felt a Bond to be essential for their own protection. If so, it was with good reason, for in 1738 Mr Sommertun had to be reprimanded for ‘...his failure to keep the clock and chimes in order’.

In the early years, the clock was well tended and the ropes were replaced regularly but by 1858 the chimes had been out of use for some years and the clock itself as generally unreliable. The church underwent major restoration pre 1860 and it seems possible that,

to compound matters, the old mechanism did not quite match the new image.

To trace some history behind the new installation of 1858, my initial approach was a quick examination of the mechanism looking for any attached label.



The name of the clockmaker and the date of the clock are shown on the two-minute dial.



A plate recording the clock's restoration in 1935 by John Smith & Sons of Derby. Also a second reference to J Smith & Sons on a separate unit a few feet away from the main clock mechanism.



This second mechanism is for the Cambridge chimes which were added in 1917 and is only connected to the clock proper via a single line.

On the chancel wall of the church there is a brass plate with the inscription:

“To the Glory of God and to commemorate the long and faithful ministry in the parish of George Maberley Smith MA, Curate 1856 – 1869, Rector 1878 – 1916, Rural Dean of Tonbridge 1884 – 1912, Hon. Canon of Canterbury. Parishioners and friends caused this tablet to be

placed here and chimes be added to the church clock as a thank offering 1917”



The original decision to add chimes was taken in 1858 but after this there is no further mention of it until 1917. As a new curate, the content of the decision of 1858 would have been known to Maberley Smith, indeed he may well have had an influential part in the decision. For his parishioners to decide on the addition of chimes as an offering of thanks in 1917 rather suggests a well-remembered and oft-expressed regret on his part. It is to be noted that the new chimes were not to the liking of everyone; there was an agreement made at the time to the effect that the chimes would not be sounded while the DeLisle family were in residence at Penshurst Place.

Clearly, I wanted to know more. The source for further information is mainly the minutes of the Vestry (parishioners) Meetings and the Churchwardens' Accounts. The first consists of the discussions and decisions, while the second records the payment of bills, the tithe rent charge, and details of the 'ratepayers' from whom the charge was collected. Incidentally, it was not until 1818 that recorded minutes of vestry meetings were required by law, while the payment of the tithe in money (as opposed to kind) was established by an Act of 1836.

Today, a church vestry may be used for little more than housing the vestments, however it was originally the room where the vestry meetings were held. Notwithstanding, the Penshurst church of the 9th century was particularly civilised and all their meetings were held in the Leicester Arms-known in the past as the Porcupine due to the presence of this animal on the

Sidney family's coat of arms. Membership of the vestry usually consisted of the minister, churchwardens and elected parishioners who could be co-opted (closed vestry) or elected (open vestry). As was typical, Penshurst had two elected churchwardens (one elected by the parishioners and one by the incumbent: This continued until fairly recently). In England, the powers of the vestry were much curtailed in 1834, while in 1894 the civil functions of the parish were transferred to the parish councils. Nevertheless. Even until 1868, churchwardens were empowered to levy a tithe on all householders for the upkeep of the church. In 1858 the Penshurst vestry was therefore still an important wheel in the smooth ordering of the parish, and a parish in which the church was the social hub.

The vestry meeting to discuss, among other things, the proposed new clock, met at seven o'clock on 11th November, 1858, at the Leicester Arms. From the minutes of the meeting referring to the clock, it was agreed '...to take into account the state of the church clock and whether it be advisable to raise the necessary sum for a new clock, two thirds of the estimated cost having been liberally subscribed..resolved that the chimes be added to the church clock, funds by private subscription...agreed that Mr Nasmyth be requested to kindly undertake the general management of putting up the new church clock...agreed to raise the clock face to make it generally more serviceable [readable].'

The reference to the two thirds intrigued me. Cash is shown reserved for the new clock at the churchwardens' meetings in 1859: first a sum of £20, and later in the same year a sum of £25. If two thirds had previously been donated, this would suggest a price in the order of £150 for the whole clock.

Unfortunately, I can find neither further reference to the two thirds nor to the donor(s). In fact, I believe the donor to have been the 2nd Viscount Hardinge who

was married to the Sidney heiress. Superficially, the donation could have been to mark the death of his father, the 1st Viscount Hardinge (1856), or the birth of his two sons (1857/8). The date on the clock, 1858, rather suggests that T Cooke & Sons has already accepted the order when the two sums were reserved.

I am left with the impression that the old clock had been a long running nuisance and that the matter was finally settled at *senior* level, both by deciding on the supplier and by settling most of the bill. If so, then the purpose of the meeting was simply to formalise that decision.

Minutes tend to be a shorthand *precis* following involved discussion. The detailed to and fro of the decision making is invariably lost, while it is assumed that anyone reading has a grapevine knowledge of the underlying background. But who on earth was Mr Nasmyth? Was he an employee of the Cooke company? Further data was available on microfilm, so out of curiosity I looked up the list of tithepayers for the year in case he was included- incidentally, he is mentioned in the church's in-house booklet, *Penshurst Church & Village*.

A Mr James Nasmyth was indeed listed and had recently bought 'Culver Hill House', which he renamed 'Hammerfield', from the two broken hammer shafts on the old Nasmyth family crest.

James Nasmyth (1808 – 1890) was a famous Scottish engineer who is probably best known for his invention of the steam hammer



James Nasmyth's steam hammer 1839

After a distinguished career, he retired to Penshurst in 1865 a relatively rich man, achieving

further fame for his work on astronomy. His autobiography, edited by Samuel Smiles, was published by John Murray in 1883. On moving to Penshurst, he obviously made contact with the social life of the area via the church (about a quarter of a mile away from Hammerfield on the road from Leigh) and one can be certain that his opinion would have been eagerly sought. He was therefore doubtless responsible for the final decision about the old clock as well as managing installation of the new. Incidentally, the nucleus of the 19th century church organ was built in 1857 and Nasmyth is specifically listed for his large contribution of £50.

As one enters the church, on the left above the table holding the visitors' book, pamphlets etc, there is a lovely stained-glass window, the Becket window (Lawrence Lee, 1970).



Right of the centre can be seen Nasmyth's steam hammer, however, the bearings shown should be seen as artistic symbolism rather than armorial.



As a matter of interest the Nasmyth family were well known artists – his father's famous painting of Burns is in the Scottish National Gallery and his brother was known as the English Hobbema.

Looking from the outside of the church, there is today a simple skeletonised clock dial over the South porch.



Simple it may be, but a great deal of history lies behind this statement. It was not unusual for early clocks to be without an

external dial, relying on the sounding of a bell, and it seems possible that this was the state of the clock in 1721 – though the carpenter's bill could have included a wooden one. The first recorded reference I find to a dial is in 1761 when one Thomas Winnifrith was paid 32.15s.2d (£2.76) as '...part of his bill for the dial of the clock' – an anonymous benefactor may well have funded the initial start to the work, in any event the rest of the bill is not recorded. Finances in general terms seem to have been in some disarray at this time, for in the same year a Richard Burgis had to be paid £9.10s.6d (£2.12) for four years back upkeep of the clock.

In 1793 there is a mention of a subscription of £1.10s.0d (£1.50) '...towards the new dial of the clock'. In addition there is a list of the copper plate used, while the quantity indicates that the whole dial and not just the numerals were made of copper. It is likely

that this was the origin of the diamond shaped dial which can be seen in the old picture on the front of the in-house booklet, *Penshurst Church & Village*.

The copper dial would doubtless darken quickly and the presence of nearby trees contribute to the difficulty in reading it. Anyway, the meeting of 1858 '...agreed to raise the clock face to make it generally more serviceable'. In 1860 there is the recorded note '...from Mr More for the old clock face £3.10s.0d' together with '...Mr More's bill for smith's work at church £9.14s.7d'.

The implication is that £3.10s.0d represented the scrap metal value of the old dial while the smith's bill may have included a new dial and hands. Apart from this, I can find no direct mention of any replacement dial between 1858-60, but likewise, there is no recorded bill for the clock itself during this period.

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