

The History of the Clock at St Thomas à Becket Church, Cliffe

Thomas Woollgar records the origins of the clock in his *Spicilegia* begun in 1761:

‘In 1670 James Looker, a blacksmith of Ditchling, agreed to make a new clock for Five pounds ten shillings. He was to keep the same in repair for three years. To find all the materials except the Dial. This was originally in the loft where the clock stands, but being worn out a new Dial was added within my memory and placed against the Bell loft.

The new clock may have replaced one noted by Woollgar as ‘repaired in 1650-1 by Mr Gorynge of Lewes’. In 1697 the Churchwardens’ accounts record, says Woollgar, ‘cleaning and mending the Clock, Paid 10s 6d’. Fifty years later the accounts said that ‘Ringing the Bell and winding the Clock cost £1 10s.’ – a task now open to us all to try.

The clock works are set in a wrought iron frame with scrolled finials and two side-by-side trains. One train drives the hands, and one operates the hourly strike via the clapper of one of the bells in the belfry a storey above. The frame is mounted on a modern platform in the clock-room, 42 steps up from the base of the tower, behind the attractive gold-and-blue external dial. The cast iron weights for both trains hang from pulleys in the belfry.

Repairs to the clock in 1886 by William Tanner, watchmaker of the Cliffe, ‘caused the expenditure of a considerable sum’ the *East Sussex News* told its readers. In the late 1990s when the ring of four bells was re-installed, after extensive and expensive repairs, one was connected to the clock so that it would once again chime the hours.

In 2016 the entire mechanism was overhauled and the clock-face repainted and gilded by Thwaites & Reed Engineering Ltd of Rottingdean, who will be re-commissioning it on 25 November.

The latest work included a new handrail for the 42-step spiral stair to the clock room and up to the bell chamber (another 15 steps), new stone flooring at the base of the stair, and new lighting, incorporating emergency lighting. Many local people and visitors to the town responded to the Church’s appeal for funds, as well as organisations including the Friends of Lewes, Lewes Town Council, the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, the Rugby Group Benevolent Fund and the Ian Askew Charitable Trust.

Peter Varlow
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