

THE CHAPEL CLOCK

Muriel Brooks. September 2024

The chapel clock. Well, strictly speaking, the clock on Eastcombe Baptist Church. It is generally viewed with affection or at least tolerance combined with some amusement – though it may irritate some poor souls. I thought I'd put in a word for it. In the years of its youth it served the community well. Some households may have had a clock or watch, later some few may have had a wireless emitting Greenwich time pips – but for most people timekeeping would have been a matter of glancing at the sun and interpreting tummy rumbles. Then the Baptist church acquired a clock with a bell that could be heard for at least half a mile around. The modern obsession with accurate timekeeping had arrived (though admittedly before then Bisley church bells could already be heard and still can be when the wind is in the north, and no one is using garden machinery). At least people knew when it was Sunday.

It is hard for cynics now to accept that when the chapel was built at the beginning of the nineteenth century it was a revolutionary force for good when the Anglican hierarchy had lost sight, for a while, of its duties – and the majority of politicians had not recognized theirs. After being rebuilt in 1860, gaining its present grand size, it accommodated far more than the population of the village. Hundreds of people walked across the hills from miles around to come to Sunday services, and to school. They came for education and social contact and worship and music and mutual good. In 1860, writing about the rebuilding and reopening, the *Stroud Journal* published an article entitled 'Eastcombe Baptist Chapel.' In it we learn that 'The clock was provided by subscriptions among the people, apart from the chapel, as a public convenience.' (Now, now.) 'The turret for the clock bell rises from the point of the gable, with the cornice and parapet following the pitch of the roof, and finishing against the bell turret. The total height from the floor to the upper point of the pinnacle of the turret is 50ft.'

Another product of the 1860s is a pamphlet – you couldn't call it a slim vol – produced by Jephtha Young of King's Stanley, entitled 'Lays for the Cottage' and printed in Birmingham. I can't resist telling you about this period piece. 'Price Sixpence. Post free from the Author, as above, for Seven Stamps,' it has a bit of a disclaimer on the title page.

'Deal gently, critics, with these lays,
Think of their author's means and ways
Ere you pronounce their doom.
By nature's grandest scenes untaught,
Amid the shuttle's din he wrote,
The factory was his field of thought,
His study was the loom.'

I think I may adopt that. Well, hot on the heels of ten sonorous verses about 'Mighty Tom', the bell of Ebley Mill clock, Jephtha turns to Eastcombe with 'Eastcomb Chapel Clock's Address to his friends and neighbours.' This was probably published about 1865.

'Thanks to my worthy Eastcomb friends.
And all, both far and near,
Whose open hearts and generous hands
Have bought and placed me here.

To beautify this House of Prayer
You have come forward well;
This is a Temple, fair,
With Turret, Clock, and Bell.

Thanks to the friends who bought my bell
And plac'd it on these walls;
Though not so large 'twill sound as well
As Peter's, or Saint Paul's.

Should other clocks lead you astray,
And strike eleven for eight,
My bell shall sound the hour of day
In numbers loud and right.

Or should some robber venture near,
I'll do the best I can
To rouse the Lion and the Bear
To catch the gentleman.

And if old Boreas, from the north,
His frozen horn should blow,
My bell shall pour its numbers forth
Though earth be wrapp'd in snow.

True as the needle to the Pole,
The dial to the sun,
My wheels shall move, my centres roll,
My hands keep hastening on.

Young men, your feet are apt to slide,
Then harken to your clock;
Lay your foundations deep and wide,
And lay them on the rock.

Boast not of beauty, blooming maids,
Time soils it as he goes;
The only flower that never fades,
Is Sharon's deathless Rose.

Ye middle ag'd, your days and years
Are swiftly passing by;
You're half-way through this vale of tears,
Say, are you fit to die?

And you, with hoary hairs, whose breath
Seems short and painful too;
You're tottering on the verge of death,
Say, is it well with you?

But I must strike, for both my hands
Are almost on the stroke;
God, bless you all, my worthy friends,
Yours punctually, THE CLOCK.

The Lion and the Bear of course were Eastcombe's pubs at that time. The houses still exist – Red Lion House on Wells Road, and St Mary's on the main road... I am irritated to discover

that I cannot remember why I think that the bell came from Bisley church, but it seems quite possible as its bells were repaired, augmented and rehung as part of All Saints' rebuilding. I see that the new treble was cast in 1864, so that would fit...maybe. Our clock bell is undoubtedly cracked – a reject. My mother lived next door to the chapel from 1992 to 2004. She was, unusually, not annoyed by the chimes through the night but said fondly 'That lovely frying pan note!'

Work was done on the chapel clock in the 1980s, when schoolchildren and some adults in Victorian dress celebrated its restoration in 1984. At the time someone – Dr Lambert? – noted 'The chapel clock strikes again for the first time in 40 years.' Does that really mean it had been silent since WW2? This must have been followed with more work at the millennium as Malcolm Lambert's archive preserves a note from someone in Chalford Hill dated Midsummer 2000. 'I enclose a donation for Eastcombe Clock Fund, as I have missed the Chapel timepiece and hope the village will be glad to see it restored. If at any time you should be thinking of a motto to put on it, or under it, I would commend the one on the church clock at Harbury, Warwickshire.... "Time flieth. What doest thou?"'

Well, what Bob Brooks doeth is regulate the clock each month, and I think it is high time he explained its idiosyncrasies. In the inexplicable way of villages, Bob, who has no allegiance to the chapel, has inherited the responsibility of this important post. Although I assumed this had to do with his willingness to scale ladders he says not... Decades ago, however, Dr Malcolm Lambert was so shocked at the rickety condition of the old wooden ladders that Bob organized a replacement from a foundry in Stroud. This steel ladder is now firmly fixed to the wall, inside housing that rises from the back of the gallery in the chapel. This is where a relaxed attitude to the clock comes in. Some of our tolerance has to be for the mechanism's fairly whacky stab at accuracy. Using the time-honoured method of dealing with such waywardness, Bob sets the clock about five minutes slow as it has a tendency to gain over a minute a week – but not uniformly – and thus at some point in the month observers may be sure that the clock is correct – if they simultaneously look at their own timepieces. Their mobile phones, presumably? I had some officious impulse to ask Bob whether he could let us have a formula to ascertain when in the month that might be: but apparently the clock likes to keep him guessing too. This is not as *laissez-faire* as it sounds: a professional horologist is employed to attend to the clock's innards regularly – but is stumped by this problem. He has kindly provided the following instructions.

'Remembering to take a torch with you, just take the key off its nail and move the hands forward – ie, anti-clockwise on the inside dial – pausing at about 10 minutes to the hour when the strike side starts to rewind automatically to let it fully wind, and again at the hour to let the clock strike. Once it has finished striking, move the hands on again to the correct time, remembering to set the inside dial about 1.5 minutes fast. That will then be right outside. Remember to take the key off the clock when you have finished and hang it back on its nail. That's all you have to do.' All? OK, chaps? Actually, I seem to spot a *non sequitur* in there but never mind.

It took the coming of the railway to Stroud in 1845 to interest people around here in exact timing. Being about nine minutes behind Greenwich had never mattered before, but missing trains concentrated minds and Stroud soon acquired public clocks aligned with GMT. Must we really rush to follow Stroud's lead?