Face Value
East Ilsley's church clocks

Most family histories have stories or legends passed down from generation to generation which over time become regarded as true, when in fact, although they may have a glimmer of truth in them, quite often are found to have been greatly embellished, or even turn out to be complete fabrications. It is the same with stories connected to a particular locality, which, because they have been repeated so often down the generations, become local folklore.

In the case of East Ilsley there is the story, that to mark the rebuilding or restoration of the tower in 1625, the rector, Richard Wightwick, (*pictured right*) gave the tenor bell, and two years afterwards a local blacksmith made the church clock which struck the hour on this bell, and this gave rise to the verse

"Sleepy Ilsley, drunken people,
Got a church without a steeple,
And what is more, to their disgrace,
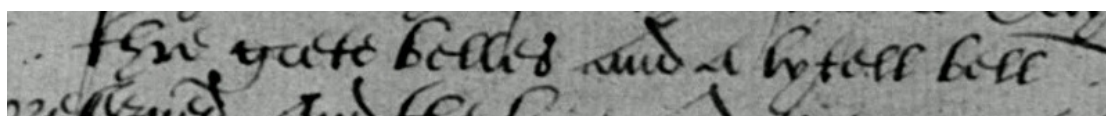*They've got a clock without a face!"*

If this verse was written soon after 1625, it is conceivable that the author may have had some actual memory of a steeple. There is documentary evidence that one existed in the late 16th century. But why then should it be deemed a disgrace for the clock to have no face when this was quite normal at that time. If, however, it was written toward the end of the 17th century it could be thought a disgrace because it was then becoming normal for clocks to have faces, and therefore the Ilsley clock would perhaps have been thought old-fashioned.

I started out with the intention of speculating on the name of the local blacksmith who is supposed to have made the old church clock at the time of the rebuilding or restoration of the tower in 1625, but once I started to check my known 'facts' I found myself researching the actual date of the clock itself.

A church without a steeple

During the East Ilsley Rectorship of Richard Wightwick, co-founder of Pembroke College, Oxford, the church tower was clearly in a poor state of repair and in need of restoration.

Inside the church, an inscription is to be found carved into the stone on the south side of the tower arch which gives the date '1625' and underneath, the words 'WAS BU[IL]T'. This almost certainly refers to a restoration, or partial rebuilding, as the architecture of the tower, especially the windows, suggests that it dates from the 14th Century, We know that the church had four bells by this time as an inventory taken in 1547 records '*Thre grete belles and a lytell bell*'.

Further documentary evidence is found in the will of Thomas Spicer, made in 1504, where the bequest, *'to the stepull of my p[ar]isshe churche xx s.'* suggests that a steeple existed at that time. In 1558, Edward Moore gave 20 shillings *'towards ye repacons* [reparations] *of the church of East Ilsley,'* and a reference in the undated will of the widow, Agnes Keate, suggests that the steeple itself was in need of repair. *'I gyve and bequyth to the church of Estylleslye my cowe toward the reparying of the steaple & belles.'* The intention, no doubt, was that the *'branded cowe'* which she inherited from her late husband in 1585, was to be sold, and the proceeds donated to the repair of the steeple. The mention of the bells here suggests that the structure of the tower was perhaps not capable of supporting them. This is just 40 years before the restoration of 1625, although as late as 1622, a certain William Hildesley left ten shillings to the ringers.

What is not in doubt is that to mark the occasion of the restoration the rector presented the Tenor bell which weighs 10 cwt and bore the inscription *'Richard Wightwick gave this bell, 1625'*.

A clock without a face

Two years after this, so the story goes, a local blacksmith made the famous clock which was installed in 1627 and kept going for over 250 years until it was replaced in 1885. This clock was famous for having no face or hands, but told the time on the hour by the striking of Richard Wightwick's bell, and so gave rise to the above verse.

However, the clock (*seen right*) which was replaced in 1885 is not as old as supposed. It dates from after 1670, and has two weight-powered wooden barrels for driving the clock and striking gear chains. The clock is governed by a pendulum with anchor escapement, unknown before 1670, while the striking mechanism is governed by a two vaned air-brake. The clock has been in the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford since 1955 (though at present it is not on public display). I recently had an opportunity to examine the clock at close quarters and take photographs of it in the museum's store. Its construction suggests that it was certainly made by a blacksmith rather than a clockmaker, though the attention to detail is commendable.

Neither the fact that it was made by the local blacksmith, nor that it had no hands, was unusual. The word 'clock' comes from the German word '*glocke*', and originally meant a mechanism for striking the hours on a bell. Few clocks of this period would have had faces. In fact St Mary's church at Uffington, a dozen or so miles from East Ilsley boasts a clock made in 1701 and a very similar rhyme, the first line being '*Oh Uffington - poor people'*. However, the church steeple at Uffington blew down in a storm in 1740, therefore, their rhyme must postdate that. The steeple at East Ilsley disappeared 150 years earlier, begging the question, 'where did the rhyme originate?' It seems that it is not even peculiar to Berkshire. There are many variations in other counties. The earliest published reference to the Ilsley version, found so far, is in an anthology called, *'Berkshire book of song, rhyme & steeple chime'* published in 1935 by Arthur L. Humphreys, though a garbled version appeared in the local newspaper in 1901.

The name of the local blacksmith who made the mechanism for the Ilsley clock cannot be known for certain, but it is possible that he was one of the 'Sussex' family, who were blacksmiths in East Ilsley for many generations between 1600 and 1750. Four generations of the descendants of Thomas Sussex (who died in East Ilsley 1635) were blacksmiths, his son, Thomas (1617-1686), his grandson, Giles (1647-1726), great- grandson, Thomas (1682-1760), and 2 x Great- grandson, Giles (1711-1748). It is more than probable that the first Thomas was also a blacksmith.

I originally thought the maker could be the first Thomas. However, since the clock must have been made after 1670, it was probably his grandson, Giles Sussex, who made it. Giles Sussex made a will in 1726 giving his occupation as blacksmith. His name also appears as witness or executor in several other wills, so he may have been a churchwarden or Parish Clerk. He died aged 79 on 24th October 1726 and is buried in the churchyard near the east end of the church.

We could speculate whether the first Thomas made a clock at the time of the rebuilding around 1627, which was replaced by the one which survives in the museum, but there is absolutely no evidence for this.

This detail of a painting of 1841 is the only existing picture of the church before the North Aisle was completed in 1845 It clearly shows the tower without any sign of a clock.

Two and a half centuries after Wightwick's restoration of the tower the outside had again fallen into a bad state of repair. The outer coating was renewed, and the work, which started in 1885, was finished in 1886. At the same time, a 'handsome new clock' was installed, on 27th October 1885, the gift of W. H. Woodhouse, of The East Ilsley Hall. The donor's name and the date of its presentation are engraved on a small disc inside the clock. W. H. Woodhouse was a local benefactor, who worked as a dental surgeon with a Practice in Hanover Square, London.

This clock, now over 125 years old, shows the time on a five foot convex copper dial, originally painted black and gold. The clock is the work of Messrs Lund and Bockley of Pall Mall, London. The bed is of cast iron, the wheel and carriage of the best gun metal, and the pinions of hardened steel. The pendulum weighs over 80lbs and the hammer for striking weighs 28lbs.

The works of the present clock are installed in a wooden cabinet on the first floor of the tower. The drive to the clock hands is a shaft extending through the cabinet roof and the clock chamber ceiling into the bellchamber, and across the bellchamber floor to the clockface. The striking of the hours is operated by an arm extending from the left side of the cabinet and a linkage running under the ceiling, and through it to a hammer at the base of the tenor bell. Striking can be suspended by retaining the arm with a hook attached to the side of the cabinet. The linkage also extends down

through the floor to the ringing chamber, where a toggle can be secured to allow the ringers to suspend the strike independently.

The striker and the hands are separately driven by weights travelling the height of the tower and require winding at least once a week. This is presently done by John Hibbert, a great-grandson of the original donor. The hands are driven by weights totalling 180lbs. After a week's travel it requires 61 anticlockwise turns to raise the weights to their full height, in which position they can be seen and inspected in the bellchamber. The striker weights total 500lbs and after a week's travel require 292 clockwise turns to raise them to their full height.

In 1948 Richard Wightwick's bell was recast in memory of Richard Tom Hibbert, local bellringer and Secretary of the Oxford Diocesan Guild for 29 years, and bears an inscription to this effect in addition to the original inscription.

In 2009 the clock face was restored in memory of Samuel & Dorothy Field, and is now a deep blue colour with gold lettering. Samuel was a grandson of the original donor, W. H. Woodhouse.   E.S.

Bibliography

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