

A Brief History of Time – or how Goring got its clock

Goring Parish Church Room, now the Village Hall, dates from 1900. It was built by voluntary subscription. Sadly very few records have survived between 1900 and 1925 which is when the story of the clock begins. The original building had a turret but no clock, probably because the funds were insufficient.

Mr Lacey Smith

At Eastertide in 1925 Harry Albert Lacey Smith died in a Reading nursing home at the age of 53. Born in Goring, he had devoted his life to village activities and local organisations. He never married and was a churchwarden for 21 years and church organist and choirmaster for 35. Like his father before him, he was a postmaster, grocer, wine merchant and proprietor of Ye Olde Thames Fancy Stores in the High Street (now Albert Fields).

Harry made a very simple will in 1903, soon after he inherited the shop on the death of his father, leaving his entire estate to his widowed mother Ellen Lacey Smith. He must have been taken seriously ill suddenly in 1925, for on his deathbed on 2 April Harry added a codicil to his will making specific cash legacies to a number of people and the following:

£500 to the Parish Church Room, Goring, Oxon, for the erection of a clock (chiming if possible) to be erected in the Turret.

On 3 April, he died.

Trustees, dilemmas and delays

It seems that in 1925 when a new minute book was started, the affairs of the Parish Church Room were in something of a mess and the building was in a state of dilapidation. The first mention of the turret is on 18 January 1926 when it was reported that it was letting in rain water and in need of repair. Thus from early years, the design of the turret appears to have caused maintenance problems.

The Lacey Smith bequest seems to have been put aside whilst more important issues were resolved relating to the Parish Room. A note in the Goring Parish Magazine of March 1927 says that the enactment of the legacy is awaiting the decision of the Chancery Court. Later minutes make clear the dilemma faced by the Trustees. The bequest was for £500, yet the purchase and installation of the clock was unlikely to cost more than £150, leaving about £350 in hand, money which they needed desperately to make other improvements to the Room. However they could not vary the terms of the will without recourse to the law and the case was taken to the Chancery Division of the Court of High Justice.

Whilst the Trustees waited for the decision, they obtained four tenders for a turret clock. On 13 October 1927 they considered the estimates for four dial and two dial clocks, with or without one hour striking gear. The estimates varied widely from £108 to £208 for the preferred option of a four dial, chiming clock. John Smith & Sons, who gave the cheapest estimate, but who were nationally renowned church clockmakers with St Paul's Cathedral on their books, were chosen to supply the clock. Local watchmaker Mr Barrs, who had given the dearest quote was to be paid a 5% fee to superintend the installation. He was later to be put in charge of winding the clock at 15 shillings a quarter.

Finally the good news came through that the Chancery Court had sanctioned the variation of the legacy. The bad news was that, before work could begin on the clock, they also had to approve the scheme to use the balance of the money. George Turner, a trustee who was also an architect, produced plans for an annex on the back of the hall providing a gentleman's cloakroom and lavatory and also a scullery at a cost of £300. Almost as an afterthought it was agreed to include the costs of erecting a permanent stage in the small room at the back of the hall.

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Nearly two years went by before the Chairman of the Trustees was able to announce on 27 May 1929 that the Master in Chancery had approved the scheme submitted, less the deduction of £50 for various costs. £450 was immediately paid into a special new account at the Midland Bank. They sent an order to John Smith & Sons of Derby to make and erect in the turret a four faced striking clock complete with a 1 cwt bell at a total cost of £131. The dials were to be black faced, with gilt figures and hands and to commemorate the donor, his initials H A L S were to be put in each corner of one face and the date of his death, 1925, also on the clock. The bell was to be hung in a simple iron frame on the ridge of the building, near the turret. Mr Higgs was told to start on the extensions to the back of the hall and make the permanent stage as per his estimate of £319.

All the improvements were done by autumn. The turret clock was completed and put into action on 1 September. According to the October Parish Magazine *'It was ceremoniously started in the presence of a few interested people on the morning of Sunday, September 1st. This was a most fitting date, for it was the birthday of the donor.'* Three and a half years after probate was granted on Harry Lacey Smith's will, his wishes had been fulfilled. His legacy had also enabled other significant improvements to be made to the hall. The stage is still in use. In November 1930 the special bank account was closed.

Despite it being a 'great boon' to the populace and a wonderful time-keeper, there was one little problem with the clock. It could not be seen from Goring High Street! Trees in the garden of the Old Rectory obscured the view and the tenants refused to have the offending branches cut off. It was April 1932 before agreement was reached and the lopping carried out.

In 1990 the turret was in a poor state of repair with finials missing and struts rotted away. Boshers of Cholsey were contracted to carry out repairs including repainting the dials, replacing rotted & missing timbers and replacing some lead and adding an automatic electric winding mechanism. The contract was awarded in May and completed in November 1991. The cost is believed to have been approximately £20,000.

2015-16 Restoration

Although there is some evidence of issues regarding water ingress through the tower roughly every 25 years, the underlying design fault was not fully recognised until 2015 when water began entering the roof space around the tower. It was decided to erect scaffolding around and over the entire structure so that it could be inspected and repaired without further water ingress.

The inspection and subsequent removal of the entire lead cladding and much damaged wood revealed that the original design had never ensured that the tower was watertight. Having replaced all suspect timbers the lead was replaced with a higher grade than before and covering almost all of the timber with just a few pieces of non structural timber showing to enhance the look.

Making subtle changes to the lead cladding has slightly altered the original 'look', but some enhancements were added to compensate in the way of cast lead roses, finials clad in lead with the knob cast and finials gilded.

The clock itself was not damaged, but the opportunity was taken to have the dials stripped and re-enameled, the hands and metalwork re-gilded and the drive mechanism & gearing serviced. The work cost just shy of £40,000, mostly raised through local grants and fundraising.

The current Trustees are confident that the tower will be waterproof for at least 80 years.

The future

The hourly chiming of Harry Lacey Smith's clock is still a familiar sound in Goring and the Trustees of the Parish Church Room made a wise decision to buy a timepiece from John Smith & Sons of Derby way back in 1927. The firm is still thriving and looks after many public clocks throughout the country.

Janet Hurst

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Sources: Goring Parish Church Room minute books 1925 – 1945, Goring Parish Magazine and papers in the Goring Gap Local History Society archives. GVH records 2015-16
