

NEWSLETTER 131

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Price 20p, free to members

The timely story of Loughton's first public clock

The parish church of St John the Baptist is celebrating the 150th anniversary of its foundation and consecration (in 1845 and 1846, respectively): as befits a building intended to be at the centre of village life it was equipped with a public clock.

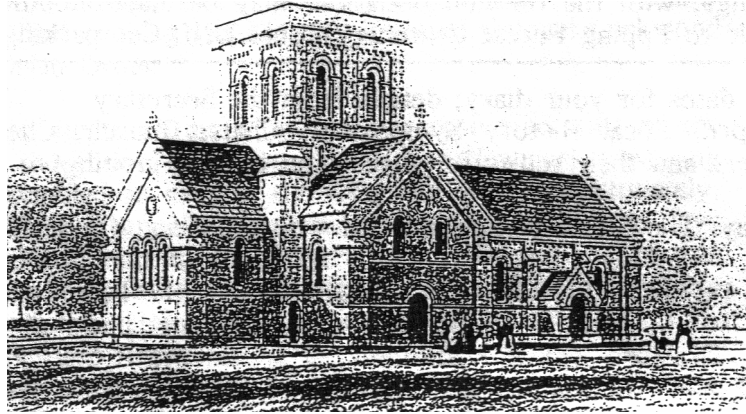
This was no ordinary clock, however, as it was electrically driven. There was, of course, no mains electricity supply when it was installed so the power was derived from what was known as an earth battery, consisting of two large plates (one zinc, the other copper or carbon) buried a short distance apart in moist earth. A voltage was produced across the plates sufficient to provide current to flow through an electro-magnet arranged to cause a pendulum to swing to and fro, which by means of a suitable mechanism drove hands to show the time in the usual manner. The dial was positioned in a circular aperture in the end wall of the north transept of the church, with the clock movement on the inside of the wall above it and the earth battery outside nearby.

How was it that a place like Loughton should have such a novel clock? The story involves two Scotsmen and their chance meeting in London in 1842. The inventor and manufacturer of the clock was Alexander Bain, who has been called 'the father of electrical horology'. Born in 1810 into a crofting family near the village of Watten, in Caithness (thirteen miles from Thurso), he was apprenticed to a watchmaker in Wick, and had a reputation as a day-dreamer. In 1830 he attended a lecture in Thurso on 'Heat, Sound and Electricity' which led him to conduct his own experiments and began a lifelong fascination with electricity. He went to Edinburgh, then eventually as a journeyman clockmaker to Clerkenwell in 1837. London provided the opportunity to attend more lectures on electricity and by 1840 Bain had invented a printing telegraph and an electric clock which he showed to Charles Wheatstone, who was also active in electrical development. This meeting was to lead to much bitter argument over who had invented these devices, and Bain had very little money or influence to defend his claims.

At this point John Finlaison enters the story. Finlaison, Actuary of the National Debt Office and Government Calculator, lived at Alghers House in Loughton. Having served in the Admiralty for seventeen years, he was familiar with the semaphore signalling used to convey messages between Portsmouth and Whitehall, and in 1842 saw Bain's printing telegraph exhibited at the Royal Polytechnic Institution. On learning that the inventor came from near his own birthplace in Thurso, Finlaison befriended Bain and supported him in his efforts to obtain recognition for his inventions. He also provided facilities for experiments and in 1842 Bain successfully demonstrated his earth battery in the grounds of Alghers House in the presence of witnesses, leading to a patent in 1843. Bain married in 1844 Matilda Bowie, a widow and sister of Finlaison's second wife, and went to live in Edinburgh where he set up in business. Finlaison later advanced a loan of £3,000 to enable a telegraph line between Edinburgh and Glasgow to be erected and demonstrated in early 1846.

Impressed by Bain's idea of a clock which would run without winding, Finlaison persuaded the Rector, Archdeacon Hamilton, to install such a clock in the new church, and paid for it himself. He must have been disappointed when the clock proved to be unreliable, even though Bain had sold several which gave satisfactory performance. By 1848 Hamilton was considering replacing the clock. Bain was in America promoting his invention and his wife wrote a letter on his behalf, in November asking the Archdeacon

to wait a little longer to have the church clock put right. It would seem that Bain was the only person capable of dealing with whatever was causing the clock to misbehave, not surprising considering the limited use of electrical instruments at that time. John Finlaison had probably left Loughton by then, if White's 1848 *Essex Directory* can be taken as evidence and he does not appear in the 1851 census for Loughton. By 1856 there is evidence that he had a house in Richmond, Surrey.



Lithograph of St John's Church, 1846
(Passmore Edwards Museum Collection, Ref No 0133)

Archdeacon Hamilton decided not to wait for Bain to get the clock in order and in 1850 ordered a 'conventional' weight-driven striking clock which was installed in the same year. A public subscription had raised the funds to pay for this clock but John Finlaison did not contribute.

So ended Loughton's brief encounter with a pioneer of electrical timekeeping. No details of the clock have survived so there is little point in speculating on the reasons for its poor performance. The main characters in the story departed not long afterwards: Archdeacon Hamilton retired as rector in 1851 owing to poor health and died in 1853. John Finlaison died in 1860 and is buried in St Nicholas churchyard. Alexander Bain enjoyed some business success in the 1850s with his telegraph systems, but went to America in 1860 and lost his money in legal battles with Samuel Morse. He came back to England but failed to win support for his inventions and returned to Scotland where he died at Kirkintilloch in 1877.

IAN STRUGNELL

Source note:

Most of the information appeared in two articles by Charles K Aked in *Antiquarian Horology* of December 1974 and September 1975, published by the Antiquarian Horological Society. This society had a display at an exhibition in London in January 1995, which included an electrically-driven pendulum. A copy of the September 1975 magazine with the article on St John's church clock was on sale. Chance has played its part again.

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Notes and jottings

Helping to populate the Colonies

On 24 January 1890 the Epping Union Guardians further considered a letter from the National Association for Promoting State Colonization and were of the opinion that it did not apply to this District as there were few unemployed able-bodied labourers with families within it.

Paupers

A report in the *Woodford Times* dated 30 January 1903 gave figures for the increase in the number of paupers in the Epping Union: 1901 – 133; 1902 – 147; 1903 – 174.

A housing need

According to the census conducted in 1871, in a tent on forest land near the Wheatsheaf Inn lived Loughton-born Thomas Street, an agricultural labourer aged 25; his Barking-born wife, Hope, and their six children: Moses, aged 9 years, Walter and George both aged 5 years; Esther aged 3 years; James aged 2 and four-days' old Anne. With the exception of Walter and George, who were both born in Chigwell, the children were born in Loughton.

Teetotallers

The Loughton branch of the Women's Total Abstinence Union had a successful meeting in Lopping Hall in March 1903 when about 50 members, under the presidency of Miss Palmer of Chigwell, were present to hear an address by Mrs Servante. Tea was served after the meeting.

Fun and games

In the same month about 3,000 persons attended a display by Sanger's Circus in a field on the Habgood Estate. A football competition between an elephant and a member of Loughton FC was won by H Pearce, who was awarded a silver cup.

Fun of a different kind

In January 1923 advertisements in the 13 January issue of the *Woodford Times* gave the programme for Wanstead Empire cinema. In the first part of the week it was possible to see 'Where is my wandering boy tonight?' featuring Cullen Landis, and later in the week Anita Stewart in 'Sowing the Wind' and Mollie King in 'The on the Square Girl'. Admission was Adults 6d, 9d, 1s. and 1s 3d (i.e., 2½p to 7½p) and children 3d, 5d and 8d (i.e., about 1p to 3p). At South Woodford Cinema 'The Passionate Friends' by H G Wells was showing along with 'Tillie's Punctured Romance' featuring Charlie Chaplin. In the second part of the week 'The Great Spectacular Production' of 'Antony and Cleopatra' was being screened along with Episode 13 of 'The Three Musketeers', plus Aesop's Fables and newsreels – and all for 6d to 1s 3d. Children 2½d to 9d, matinees only.

Workhouse days

The meeting of the Epping Union Guardians on 21 March 1851, considered the tender of Messrs Morgan & Andrews to supply the Union House with Ale at thirty shillings per barrel of thirty-six gallons, and Table Beer at twelve shillings per barrel of thirty-six gallons. On 20 March 1891 the Guardians again had tenders to consider. Mr Thomas L King offered to shave and cut the hair of the inmates of the workhouse for the sum of £12 for the period of twelve months. Mr John Clark offered to carry out burials for the workhouse at 39s and 19s while he, and Mr George Charter, tendered for burials in other districts at prices ranging between ten and twenty-two shillings (one shilling = 5p)

As further evidence of price levels compared with a century later, Mr Edwin Butcher was prepared to supply hair brooms at 26s per dozen; hand brushes at 18s per dozen; scrubbing brushes at 8/9d per dozen and bass brooms at 24/6 a dozen. Given the chance, those members of the Society still burning coal would undoubtedly hasten to accept an offer like that of Messrs Sworder & Co, accepted by the Epping Guardians on 1 May 1891, to supply (from probably long-forgotten collieries) 30 tons of Babbington Hards (Colliery Weight) at 19s 8d per ton and 30 tons of Sun Beams Wallsend at 20s 9d per ton.

At the meeting of the Guardians on 10 July 1891 it was resolved that ten of the Workhouse boys be allowed to accompany the porter to Loughton on the following Sunday, the Rev J Whitaker Maitland having undertaken to provide them with tea. In August they were allowed to attend the Sunday School treat accompanied by the matron and also to go to the Rev Buckmaster's annual school treat.

The Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria

The non-resident poor belonging to the Union were granted one penny for each adult and 6d for each child to celebrate the event. The Relieving Officers were authorised to grant the same sums to every pauper in their respective Districts.

From the Minute Books of the Epping Union

Bagging birds at Lambourne

On Monday and Tuesday, October 30 and 31, 1905, King Edward VII was the guest of his close friend, Colonel A R M Lockwood, MP (later Lord Lambourne), at Bishops Hall, Lambourne. Most of 'Teddy's' first day was spent at a shooting party on the Bishops Hall estate. A participant in the day's events, under the pen name 'Touchstone', wrote a report for the *Epping Gazette and Loughton and Ongar Record*. The King, he reported, drove from cover to cover in a horse-drawn carriage, and was one of the most successful shots. By lunchtime, 590 birds had been shot.

The beaters and other helpers 'were regaled with a cold collation' at the Blue Boar, Abridge. The King, and a small company of his friends, enjoyed 'a more elegant meal' provided at Bishops Hall by Colonel and Mrs Lockwood. After lunch, shooting began again and the day closed with a bag of about 1,100 birds. That evening His Majesty invested Colonel Lockwood with a personal honour, the Royal Victorian Order.

'Touchstone', who joined in as a beater, wrote an amusing and perceptive account of the King's visit to our area. The day after the shoot, the King set off for Newmarket passing through Epping where children were assembled to sing to the King but who, unfortunately, sped by on his way to the races: ' . . . their disappointment was pathetic . . . poor little boys and girls sitting on the market rails, and still waiting – waiting, for they did not realize that the King had gone – the King for whom they prayed and of whom they sang, and of whom they heard so much . . .' The inmates of the 'Union House' (later part of St Margaret's hospital) were rather more fortunate. They were gathered at the junction of the A11 and the North Weald Road, and perhaps contritely after his scant treatment of the townspeople, the King graciously asked for his car to slow up a little as he passed them.

With acknowledgements to 'Teddy's visit to the Epping area' by A A Rumble, Essex Countryside, April 1975.

CHIGWELL & LOUGHTON HISTORY SOCIETY Registered Charity No 287274

President: J I Besent, FRICS,

Chairman: Dr Chris Pond, Forest Villa, Staples Road, Loughton IG10 1HP (0181-508 2361)

Secretary: John Howes, 97 Staples Road, Loughton IG10 1HR (0181-508 0776)

Treasurer: Vic Russell, 231 Fencepiece Road, Chigwell IG7 5EB (0181-500 4829)

Membership Secretary: Mrs Emelie Buckner, 88 Alderton Hall Lane, Loughton IG10 3HD (0181-508 0427)

Editor: Edwin Dare, 21 Ibbetson Path, Loughton IG10 2AS (0181-508 6250)

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