

The history of Prior Castell's Clock, Durham Cathedral

Prior Castell's clock dominates the south transept of Durham cathedral like a giant golden carriage clock. It is crowned by a set of pinnacles similar to the spires of Newcastle and Edinburgh cathedrals. Beneath the pinnacles are three astronomical dials topped by a carved thistle. At eye level, on the door panels, is a painting of a seventeenth-century church interior. The clock as it stands today is the result of a long and eventful history.

The first version of the clock was set up on the east side of the Rood screen during the time of Thomas Castell (1494-1519), the penultimate prior of the Catholic monastery. It was dismantled during the Reformation but erected in its present position in 1593.

The clock was renovated in the 1630s under Dean Richard Hunt and consequently it is sometimes known as the Hunt clock. In the autumn of 1650 three thousand Scottish soldiers were imprisoned in the cathedral after the battle of Dunbar. Unsurprisingly they broke up the cathedral's woodwork to fuel their fires. The clock is thought to have survived the destruction because it was stored away until 1655. It is popularly suggested that it was spared because the soldiers liked the carved thistle.

In 1809 the clock was painted chocolate brown. In 1845, during architect Anthony Salvin's work on the cathedral, the clock was judged to be unNorman and taken down yet again. The clock face and mechanism were let into the wall and parts of the case were stored in the cathedral library and crypt. The door panels went to the monastic community in Monk House, Northumberland¹. Some parts of the clock case are thought to have gone to a chapel in the Farne islands. The National Trust warden of St Cuthbert's chapel on Inner Farne was unable to confirm this in Autumn 2000.

The Friends of Durham cathedral resurrected the present version of the clock in 1938. The architectural plans, drawn up by John Hunt and now in the cathedral archive, show that well over half of the clock's oak case dates from the twentieth century. This includes the thistle and tracery around the astronomical clock plates, the major part of the pinnacles, the panelling above and below the doors, the column supports and the central panels on the top and bottom of both the east and west sides. The clock's dial and hands were also replaced. Mr. Boulton of Chester-le-Street replaced the clock's mechanism in 1808.² The words 'Repaired and altered by T.Cook&Sons, York, 1869' are engraved on one of the mechanism's brass plates.

The clock case's doors open up to allow the choir to pass through. The unsigned and undated painting on the door panels is believed by Nicholas

¹ My thanks go to R.W.T.Thorp, relative of the Canon Thorp responsible for the transfer of wood from Durham to Inner Farne for the information on Monk House.

² Notes by Canon Pattison in Palace Green Library, Durham University

Pevsner to be 'no doubt by a Dutchman'³. The painting strongly resembles the seventeenth century genre of Dutch church interiors. Some hopeful scholars have suggested that the painting is a depiction of Durham. It is far more likely that the picture is based on the simple churches of the Netherlands rather than Durham's then highly decorated interior. The date of the painting is a mystery. A nineteenth century guidebook to the cathedral asserts that it was placed on the clock as part of the 1632 renovation.⁴ The figures in the painting are dressed in a style from the later seventeenth century. Could it be that the painting appeared on the clock in the later seventeenth century? Or are the costumes the work of a 1938 restorer or someone at Monk House? A layer of nineteenth-century brown paint had to be taken off the panels but large traces of it remain and some figures are still obscured. It is not improbable that the figures' original details were removed with the brown paint.

Two seventeenth-century descriptions of the clock fail to mention the painting, which suggests that it might be a later addition or that it did not impress its early modern viewers. Three soldiers from Norwich visited Durham in 1634 and wrote that it was:

'A rare and rich Clocke and Dialle, wth seuerall Globes whereby to know the age of the Moone, the day of the Moneth, the Moneth of the yeere, &c.'

Celia Fiennes visited Durham in 1697 and described the clock in her journal:

'a fine clock in which is the change of the moon and the seven starrs and signes with chimes'

Dean Hunt's renovation

The clock was renovated during a period in which high-church clergymen who followed Arminian thought dominated the Church of England. In Durham this way of thinking had emerged in the 1620s and spread so rapidly under Bishop Neile (1617-28) a leading proponent of it, that by 1625 it could be said to hold the diocese.

The dominance of Arminianism led to large-scale refurbishment and ceremonial changes in Durham cathedral and many other English churches. In opposition to the low-church desire for simplicity of worship and unadorned interiors, the Arminians believed that churches should be made beautiful and services more magnificent. One Durham cathedral prebend, the Calvinist Peter Smart, was in fierce opposition to these changes, believing them to be too Catholic. He complained in a treatise written in 1629:

'the setting up of altars and images, with a multitude of superstitious ceremonies, changing of services, and corruptions of sacraments; which beginning in Durham, have since that time spread themselves all over the

³ Nicholas Pevsner and Elizabeth Williamson *The Buildings of England- County Durham* (London, 1938) p197

⁴ James Raine *A Brief Account of Durham Cathedral* (Newcastle, 1833) pp29-30

cathedral, collegiate churches, and colledges in this realme; yea and many parish churches have set up altars, images, and organs, where they were never before since the reigne of K.Phillip and Q.Mary*;

It was in this context that the decision to renovate the clock is recorded in the minutes of the cathedral chapter. On 16th March 1631 it was decided that:

‘It is Decreed and enacted by the Deane and Chapter that a new frame shall be made for the clocke in the church by Christopher Richardson att the rate of twentie markes to be paid him by the Treasurer.’

Twenty marks was the equivalent to £14, a considerable sum of money in 1631. Christopher Richardson was supervisor of works at the cathedral.

The chapter minutes show that Richard Hunt, Ferdinand Morecroft, Augustine Lyndsall, John Cosin and William James were at the meeting. Lyndsall and Cosin were undoubtedly Arminians. James and Morecroft had ‘elastic consciences’⁵ and accommodated themselves to the dominant regime. In the 1630s, John Cosin (who later became Bishop of Durham and was responsible for a great deal of new woodwork in the cathedral and the castle) also oversaw refurbishments at Brancepeth, Sedgefield and Peterhouse, Cambridge.

There is less certainty about Dean Hunt’s commitment to Arminianism. In 1631 Bishop Howson found it necessary to deal with ‘the rupture in relations between Dean Hunt and the Arminian militants.’⁶ This is not to say that Hunt was uninterested in the cathedral’s interior. The three Norwich soldiers attributed some of the changes to Dean Hunt, whom they met personally and found to be most agreeable. The following anecdote has also been uncovered:

‘Supposedly, Cosin as treasurer in 1627-8 had had a dispute with Dean Hunt about which color angels should be; they kept ordering the repainting of each other’s work until their painter, a recusant [Catholic], suggested that as nothing was too good for the church, gold was the best color.’⁷

The clock is next mentioned in the Chapter Minutes of 15th November 1632.

‘The Expenses laid forth this yeare by the Treasurer about the new cope, and the new Clocke be paid.’

The cathedral Treasurer’s books show that money was spent on the clock in 1634 but this may have been for something unrelated to the renovation.

⁵ M.J.Tillbrook *Aspects of the Government and Society of County Durham* (University of Liverpool PhD, 1981) p494

⁶ Tillbrook p543

⁷ J.C.Hoffman *John Cosin, 1595-1672: Bishop of Durham and Champion of the Caroline Church* (Michigan PhD, 1977) p113.

*At that point in time they were the last Catholic monarchs of England.

Beyond these statements it has not been possible to find primary evidence for what work was carried out on the clock in the 1630s. However, it is possible that more documentation survives hidden away in the cathedral archive, for in 1892 J.R.Boyle wrote:

'In 1632 the works and dials were renewed at a cost of £18. 9s. 6d; and at or about the same time parts of the carving were restored.'⁸

Unfortunately J.R.Boyle did not say where he found this information.

Durham cathedral was founded in the year 999 A.D. It is beyond all imagination to speculate how many other histories it holds.

Further reading

The accounts the three Norwich soldiers and Celia Fiennes.

The Journeys of Celia Fiennes edited by Christopher Morris (London, 1947)
Reprints of Rare Tracts and Imprints of Antient Manuscripts, and c. Chiefly illustrative of the history of the Northern Counties vol. Misc edited by M.A.Richardson (Newcastle, 1848)

Church of England history

The Church of England 1570-1640 by Andrew Foster (London, 1994)

Accounts of the clock's history

Fifth Annual Report 1937-1938 of the Friends of Durham cathedral (Durham, 1938)
This Sumptuous Church: The story of Durham Cathedral by C.J.Stranks (London, 1992)

Peter Smart's tirade

The Acts of the High Commission Court within the Diocese of Durham edited by W.H.D.Longstaffe (Durham, 1857)

Durham Cathedral

This Sumptuous Church: the story of Durham Cathedral by C.J.Stranks (London, 1973)

⁸ J.R.Boyle *Durham: Its Cathedral and Surroundings* (London, 1892) p241