

A brief history of mechanical clocks

700 years in the making

The mechanical turret clock has called monks to prayer and people to worship for the past seven hundred years.

Before the advent of the mechanical clock bells were tolled by hand to keep time and thus the word for 'clock' derives from the Latin 'clocca' meaning bell. The first mechanical clocks appeared in the late thirteenth century and were designed to sound an alarm that woke the monk who would then ring the bells.

We know very little about these early tower clocks but there is a record of a fire at St Edmondsbury Abbey in 1198 in which the monks used their cowls (the hood of their cloaks) to carry water - taken from the well and the clock; - so the Abbey almost certainly had a water powered clock!

Later the clocks became large enough to strike the bell in the tower themselves - and so was born the turret clock. The turret clock works by having a mechanical movement (the clock itself) separate from the actual dial with the numbers on - with an iron rod connecting the two.

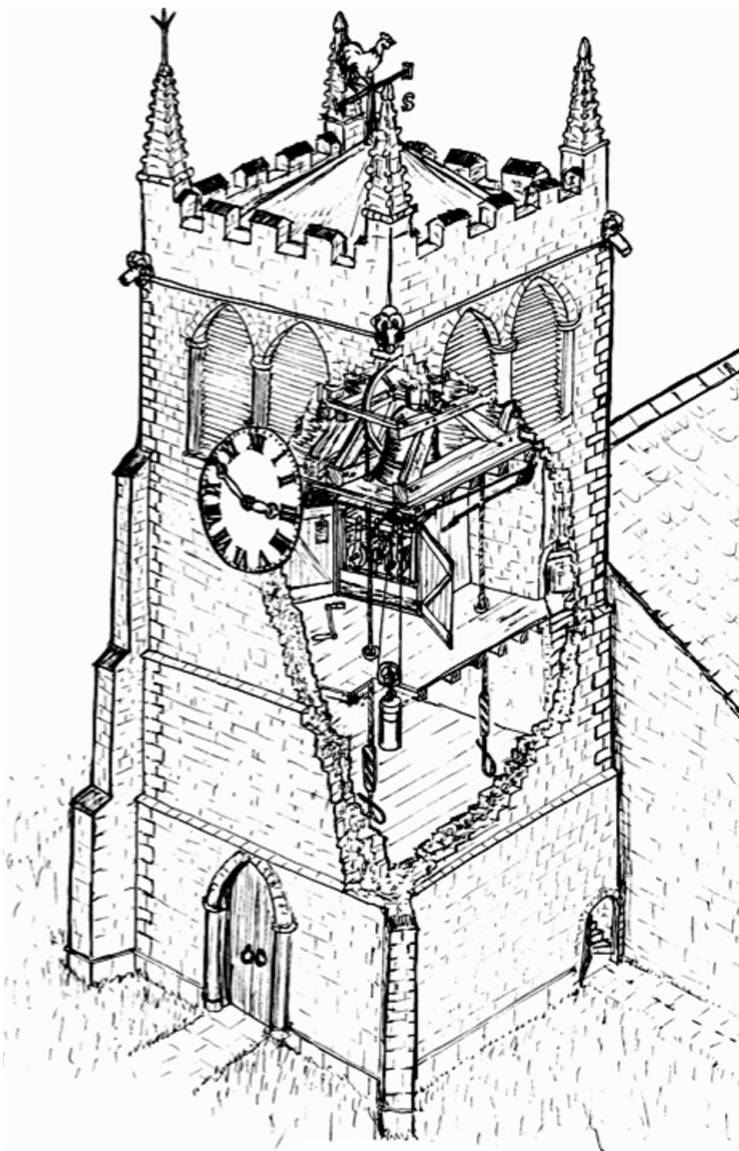
The mechanical movement drives the rod which in turn turns the handles on the dial. The medieval turret clocks of Salisbury Cathedral dated to 1386 and Wells Cathedral (1389) survive today.

The use of turret clocks spread throughout churches and monasteries in Europe but also to country houses and royal palaces where they regulated the life of all the inhabitants.

Soon Army and Navy barracks had turret clocks as did the early factories in the nineteenth century.

Villages and towns also kept time by the church clock and the nineteenth century can be seen as something of a 'Golden Age' with thousands of turret clocks being built throughout the world.

The decline of the turret clock dates from the late nineteenth century, resulting from the improvements in general time keeping and decline of the need for public clocks as the local standard of time.



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Once upon a time

Up until the early 1800's all clocks had been set to local time using sundials, which meant that the time in one part of the country was not the same in another (Even today 'Oxford Time' is kept at Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford and is five minutes later than Greenwich Mean Time!).

In the 1830's as trains began running across the country a common time was needed for the setting of reliable timetables and in 1850 Greenwich Mean Time was agreed.

As a result personal time keeping became more important than it had been in the past and improving technology meant that pocket watches were being made at home and also imported from the United States and by the First World War wristwatches had become popular.

These timepieces were not only cheap but convenient allowing people to keep their own time. Since then watches have become cheaper and more accurate still and sadly the turret clock is no longer needed to keep local time. However, surviving turret clocks are an important part of our heritage and thankfully more and more are being restored and preserved for their historical interest.

