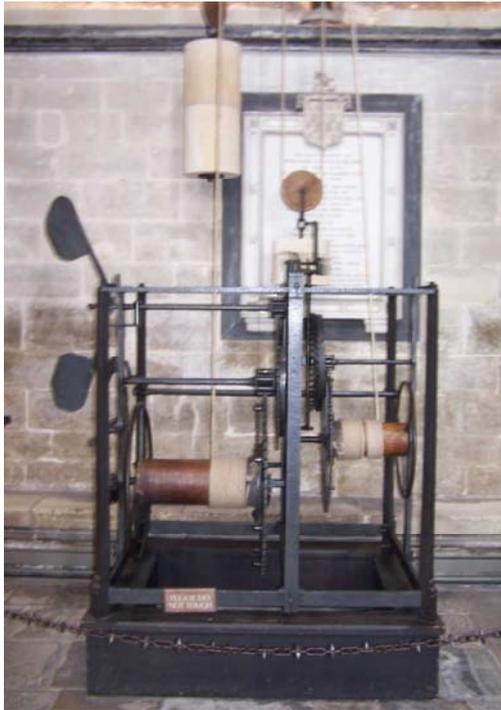


Why do Churches have clocks?

Most churches are at the heart of the village or town and are a natural place of congregation. It would therefore seem logical that if there was to be a public clock, the tower of the local church would be the ideal place to display it most clearly to parishioners. Perhaps more importantly mechanical clocks had a religious link from the beginning, being developed in the monasteries, the centres of learning and wealth in the early fourteenth century. The monks, (and church congregations), had a very real need for clocks, in order to signal prayer time at various times of the day and night. Prayer times, (matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers and compline), had been regulated from earliest times using candles, sand glasses and water clocks to indicate to an attending monk when a bell should be rung to call the monks to prayer.



The first mechanical clocks were probably quite small, about the size of a domestic clock. They rang a small bell, which alerted the attending monk, who in turn rang the large monastery bell to summon the monks. As the mechanisms were improved they became larger and more powerful and were able to ring a large bell directly, a great improvement on the previous primitive timekeepers.

The earliest surviving tower clock, (shown left), is reputed to be the Salisbury Cathedral clock, dated to about 1386 and which can be seen in the nave of the Cathedral. Slightly later is the Wells Cathedral clock, on display in the Science museum.

Many of these early clocks did not have a dial and some still do not, especially those in rural areas where the hour bell could be heard more easily by workers in the fields.

Wealthy individuals would often donate funds to their local church to install or replace a clock, and that is why some dials are sited to face the local manor house, rather than the centre of the village. Eventually, as the country grew more prosperous, and clocks became more widespread the church clock became less important. Finally the introduction of railways necessitated the adoption of a uniform time across the country and the time signal was passed to each station from the Royal Greenwich Observatory. Church clocks were then regulated by this time signal and ceased to set the standard for timekeeping in village and town.

Yet even today, when the means of telling the time are everywhere, it seems natural to glance up at the familiar dial of the church clock, to check the time as we pass by.

Brynn Hodgson