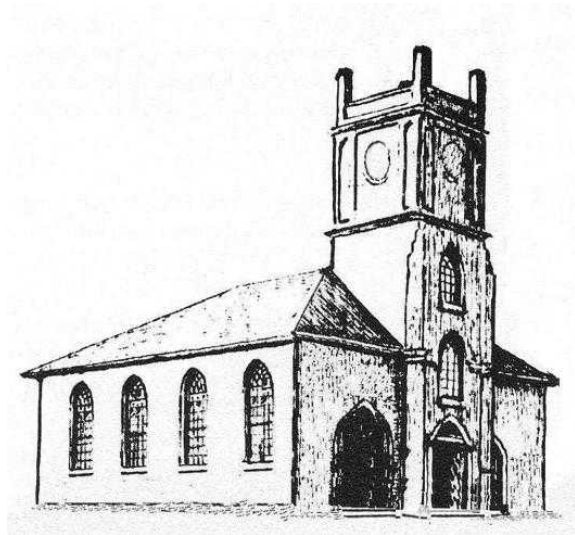


The Controversial Clock of St John's Church – Blessing or Burden

An illustrated presentation by Jenny Gill
at St John's Church, Launceston 8th May 2016

The theme of this special month of May is *Discoveries and Re-discoveries* and I would like to share with you a quick glance at some of the things I have found out concerning our church clocks.



Artist's impression of the appearance of the tower
in its earliest format – 1825-1830

In the early years of Van Diemen's Land there was a need for public clocks. Few people had watches but it was important that they should be on time for business, church, entertainments and court appearances; hence THE TOWN CLOCK.

This is a look at a prominent mechanism and its troubled reign in the public service of Launceston in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Firstly there was the installation of a short-lived single-dial clockworks in the convict built church tower installed during the building period 1824 to 1830.

I have not found any shipping information that ties in with a repeated legend about the first clock and how it came to Launceston, which says;

"In the bowels of a convict ship coming to Van Diemen's

Land lay a quantity of iron as ballast. This iron was assembled into a clockworks by a convict who was rewarded with two years cut from his sentence."

Possible origins for this first clock

It is not an English structure. It may have been made in Sydney.

It may be that the Reverend Youl had it sent from Sydney in the early 1820s.

It may have been a gift to Youl from Governor Macquarie or the Reverend Marsden, for services rendered in Sydney, and shipped over without record on one of the many Government vessels.

The convict of the legend might have been one assigned to Youl and a bargain was struck. This would be in keeping with the generous nature of the Reverend Youl.



The original clock mechanism – 1825-1830

What about the Bell?

In August 1829 the Launceston Advertiser ran an advertisement;

*FOR SALE by Mr Richard White, a large brass bell.*¹

How large was it? And was it acquired for the church in Launceston?

In the *Launceston Advertiser* of November 1829 it was reported that '...the church has lately received an addition of a clock facing to the North, on which side the principal part of the town lays ...'²

This became the TOWN CLOCK for Launceston.

¹ Launceston Advertiser 17 Aug 1829 p.3

² NLA, Trove Launceston Advertiser 30 November 1829 p.3

A clock and watchmaker, Mr Hughes of Elizabeth-street, in 1834 was the earliest person recorded that I have found in the churchwardens' correspondence, receiving payment for attention to the clock. Hughes' payment came from the Colonial Government.

In 1830 correspondence passed between the Colonial Secretary and churchwarden William Kenworthy with a view to sending this clock and bell to Norfolk Plains and replacing them with better ones placed in the octagonal chamber one level above their present situation.

Kenworthy was clearly not in favour of that idea and the clock at least, stayed put.³ He replied;

Sir,

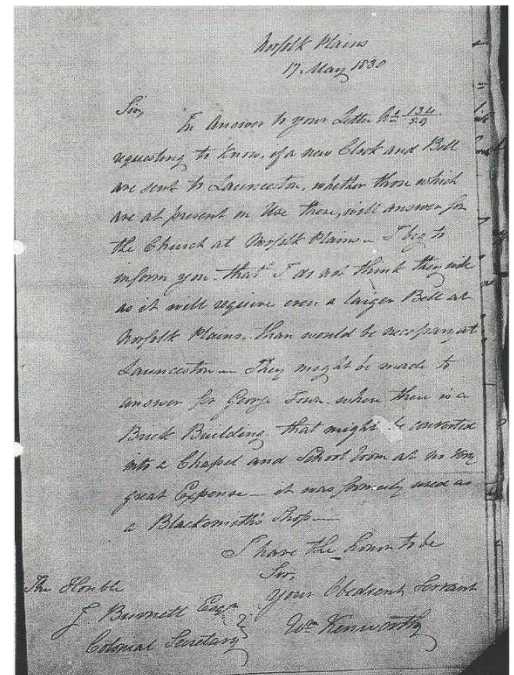
In answer to your letter requesting to know if a new clock and bell were sent to Launceston, whether those that are at present in use there, will answer for the church at Norfolk Plains. I beg to inform you that I do not think they will as it will require even a larger Bell at Norfolk Plains than would be necessary at Launceston. They might be made to answer at George Town where there is a Brick Building that might be converted into a Chapel and Schoolroom at no very great expense, it was formerly used as a Blacksmith's shop.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

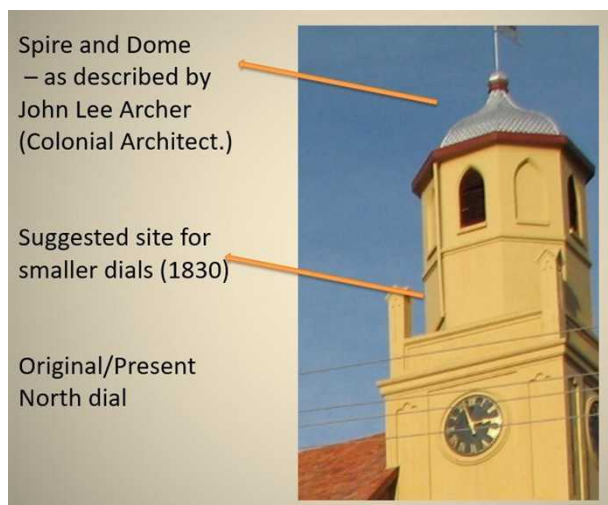
Your obedient Servant

Wm Kenworthy

The other churchwarden at this time was Theodore B. Bartley Esq.



The Second Clock



In a few years Launceston began to grow in a southerly direction and our first clockworks was replaced by a larger clockworks, cast in 1823 by Thwaites and Reed of London and bigger bell by Mears (a subsidiary of Whitechapel). The works was capable of supporting several dials.

This second clock with bell was one of six consignments transported to Van Diemen's Land on the 'York' in 1829.⁴

These were gifts from King George IV. They were official instruments of the government. Three were installed in Hobart churches, one at St Luke's Richmond, one at Christ Church Longford and number six was installed at St John's but not until 1835.

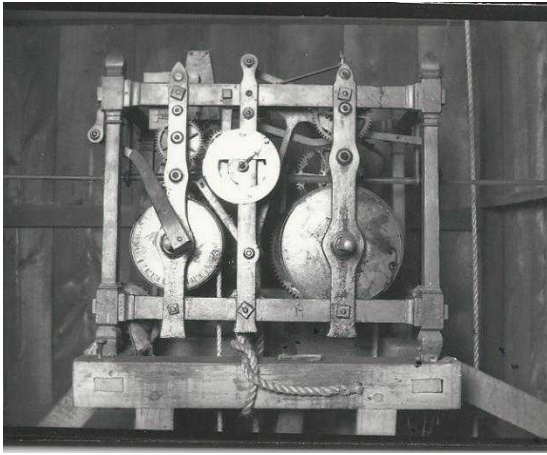
The dial of the new clock was erected on the south side of St John's to keep everyone residing on that side informed of the passage of time. Both the north and south dials were made of copper, as were the hands, and after all these years there are no signs of wear or decay. The hands are very thin and it is surprising that they have not been bent or twisted by the weather.

This new clock was powered by gravity from 1835 up to 1970. Heavy weights hung from a stout rope. One was brought to the top by hand- cranking to wind the rope onto a drum (a big piece of tree-trunk) to allow it to descend as time passed. Another drum carried the rope to power the bell chime.



³ CSO , Arthur Correspondence, letter W. Kenworthy to Barnett (Col Sec.) 17 May 1830 p.171

⁴ Nicholson, I.H., Shipping Arrivals and Departures Tasmania 1803-1842 p.35



The present mechanism before it was electrified in 1970

The clock was regulated by controlling the pendulum, and the position of the hands on the dials outside were controlled by adjusting the hands on a small dial on the mechanism.

The great bell of St John's still in position but silent today, except when hand-rung.

The church and clock became a focal point for settlers on Sundays, and baptisms, marriages and the 'lying in state' of significant persons prior to burial were other special occasions. Such offices were read on any day of the week when attending on time was important to the flow of life in Launceston and especially when some years later the railway was established.

St John's was a Colonial Government building. The Architects, builders other workers, a staff of at least six and all maintenance were paid from the Government coffers. This included the clock, its operation and upkeep. The clock weights were positioned for each cycle. It was all government responsibility.

The church was also a public building and the public paid for the use of seats in the large 'horse-box' sittings, as much as 15/- per annum for best front seats.

Mr Hughes continued in his task to wind the new clock, which performed quite well and was maintained in good order, for a few years.

The end of Government Funding and the start of Controversy



The great bell – as seen in the 1930s

At the end of 1837 however the *Cornwall Chronicle* published a statement issued from the churchwardens of St John's announcing a set of 'taxes' (charges) to be imposed on the congregation. These included a tax for burying the dead, a tax to pay the pew-opener, and a tax for maintaining the clock. This came about when the colonial government proclaimed that all places of Divine Worship should pay their own way and withdrew all financial assistance, including staff wages

The Reverend Dr William Henry Browne was the Chaplain of St John's who delivered this grim news to his congregation. The immediate response was outrage! Mr Hughes resigned as the government had stopped paying him and the clock ground to a halt.

All these 'taxes' were equally as bad but Hughes was a professional gentleman and was entitled to his due. The churchwardens argued that some of these 'taxes' could and should be met by Dr Browne as he had private income and received payment for each burial and rent from the glebe lands near Elphin.

All salaries were now to be paid from the church plate; Dr Browne, the clerk, sexton, pew-opener, organist, bell-ringer, clock-minder and the grave-digger.

In a move to bring in extra monies, the churchwardens got rid of the convicts from the two galleries in the late 1830s, freeing space for new seating to attract more pew rents.

When news of the 'taxes' spread among the townspeople, some opinionated persons began a campaign of bullying and embarrassment directed at the churchwardens and Dr Browne in particular and the state of the clock.

A public meeting was held at the church in January 1838 which was reported in the *Cornwall Chronicle* as;
Church Extortion!

*... the Rev. Dr. Browne, himself, at a public meeting, held at the vestry at the commencement of the year, proposed that the cost should not be inflicted upon the Church! 'I do not think,' says the Doctor, 'that the expense of keeping the Church clock in order, can reasonably be inflicted upon the pew-renters. it is a public convenience, lent by the Government to answer other purposes than that of the Church and I think the Government of the townspeople ought to defray all charges connected therewith.'*⁵

The finances of Browne were examined thoroughly and a comparison between Browne's income and that of the Presbyterian minister was published in the newspapers and openly discussed there, but without resolution or response from Browne. However the newspaper did good trade with men signing as 'Justitia' and 'A.B.C.' neither of whom belonged to any church body but expressed their opinions anyway.

Comparison of Episcopalian and Presbyterian Ministers' incomes 1837

The salary of the Presbyterian minister is shown also at £250; and he receives £45 forage, and a house.

Their respective incomes will be about as follows —

Government salary to the Episcopalian Minister	£250
Salary by the congregation	£000
Rental of glebe	£100
Forage [and a house]	£ 45
Salary as ordinary of the gaol ...	£ 45
	<u>£445</u>

Government Salary of the Presbyterian Minister	£250
Salary by the congregation	£150
Forage[and house]	£ 45
	<u>£445</u>

To this list was added another item, that of marriages, baptisms, executions and burial events, all at £1 1s each for Browne. Free if you were Presbyterian.

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Gaol, factory & hospital attendances "Contingencies"	£1 1s per event
	<u>£445</u>

Government Salary of the Presbyterian	£250
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Among the letters published there seems to be little written support from St John's churchwardens, but everyone else had an opinion.

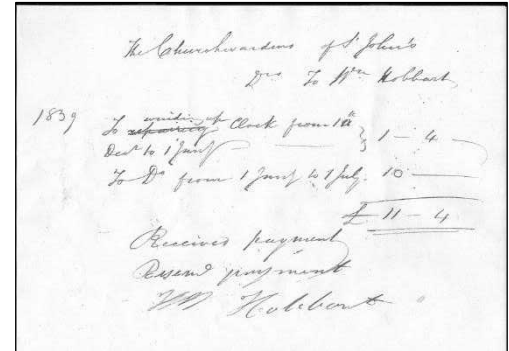
The clock lay idle or ran an erratic course perhaps wound by volunteers who did not pay much attention to regulating or clean operating surfaces. Everyone in town was inconvenienced.

⁵ Cornwall Chronicle 27 Jan 1838

Clockmakers and Clock Winders

In 1839 a Mr William Hobbart received some payment for 'clock repairs and attention.'⁶ He had a house and watchmaker's shop in Charles-street. He arrived from London on 20 August 1836 on the ship *Amelia Thompson* with his wife, Ann and family of five.

The financial situation of St John's and its people was much debated in the press of the day, carrying on into the 1840s and an advertisement appeared in the *Launceston Advertiser*



TO BE SOLD by PUBLIC AUCTION

By Mr. J. C. Underwood, at his Rooms, corner of Charles and Cameron streets, on TUESDAY next, the 17th instant, by order of the Churchwardens of St. John's Church, **THE old TOWN CLOCK**. A number of red curtains and iron rods for ditto. Terms- Cash.⁷

The wardens were worried; they needed funds, but the old clock did not sell, even with repeated advertisements. So this was not a source of funds, and the old clockworks and other pieces are on display in the church museum.

The sad situation was to become routine. The clock would be allowed to lose or gain time through inadequate care when regulating or just stop because of non-payment of wages to the 'clock-man' Mr Hobbart. In the opinion of the settlers, it was the sole responsibility of the church to keep it working well and on time. The church people said they could not afford the cost and the Reverend Browne said it was not his responsibility. It was the town clock, so the people should pay. The argument shifted back and forth over many years.

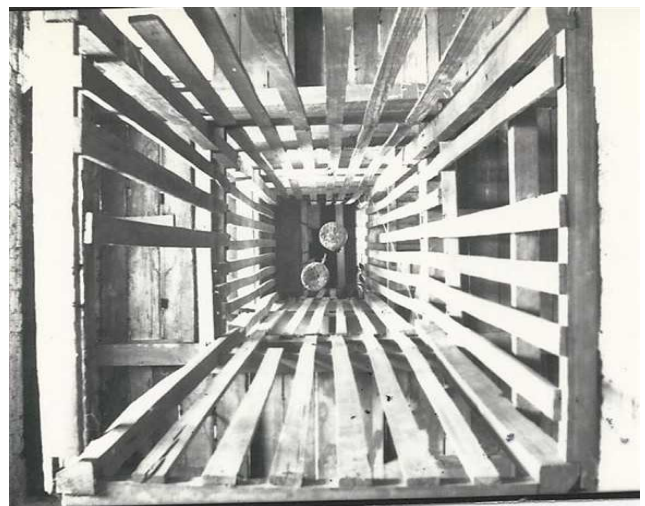
One reader of the *Cornwall Chronicle* wrote;

*A stranger coming to reside in this town, and bringing with him a good timekeeper, one to whose faithful performance he had been perhaps himself the witness for some years previous, would doubtless at first be a little puzzled to account for its apparent eccentricities on arriving in Launceston. Regulate it as often as he might by St. John's clock, he would daily see the futility of so doing; nothing but continual aberrations being the result.*⁸

His quaint Victorian comments continued at great length, loaded with sarcasm and cynicism aimed at everyone involved with the clock.

There was always some-one quick to send a letter to the press editor complaining that the clock was out of sync with men's pocket watches and other timepieces. This discussion continued ad nauseam for almost a half century and was the controversy in my title. No-one wanted to own the clock. No-one wanted the responsibility. I shall leave the letters and finances for those of you interested to examine using the *Launceston newspapers* on TROVE.

I said before that the Town Clock also stopped because the mechanism was not kept clean. Dirt and dust brought in by wind and bird droppings would all contribute to the poor functioning of the works. The chamber housing the clockworks was open to the elements so the townspeople could hear the chimes.



View upwards in the weight shaft inside the tower.
1930s picture, with the weights still in place.

⁶ St John's c w docket & correspondence Box A-54

⁷ NLA *Launceston Advertiser* **16 July 1840 p.2** Trove

⁸ NLA *Cornwall Chronicle* 8 July 1840 p.2 Trove

The growing numbers of jewellers and watchmakers in Launceston competed with one another by hanging a 'good clock' at their shop door. But then there was plenty of disputing as to whose clock was correct.

Back to Mr Hobbart. He left town with his family and his rented premises was advertised by the owner for some time;

TO LET, THE SHOP AND PREMISES

now in the occupation of Mr. Hobbart, Watchmaker, in Charles-street, Launceston.

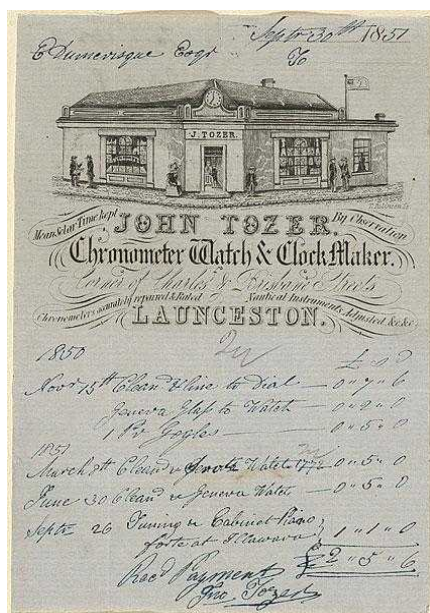
Enquire of HENRY JENNINGS.

Through the 1840s there were a growing number of clock and watchmakers in Launceston; Mr Barclay, Mr Courtney both in Elizabeth Street, Mr Duchene, a Frenchman of Charles Street and Mr J. Robe in the same street.

I found no reference to anyone in particular attending to the clock until 1843 when yet another comment appeared in the Examiner; showing that it was being looked after.

*The **TOWN CLOCK**. - This piece of machinery loses about five minutes every week; but, either to save trouble or make the difference more marked, it is regulated only once a month to the confusion of all punctual people.*⁹

Something was being done, if only winding.



In October 1843 we find that a Mr John Tozer had put in an application to wind and maintain the Town Clock¹⁰ and from the church records, he was paid by the church wardens.¹¹

He and his wife and three children arrived on the brig, *Magnet* in 1828.¹² They lived in Hobart for some years. Then in Launceston he took on the Town Clock. To aid the churchwardens Mr Tozer helped establish a subscription to which anyone could contribute towards the upkeep of the Town Clock, a sort of "Friends of the Clock". This kept the clock running and the clockman paid and everyone was on time and happy!

It was Mr Tozer who made and installed the western dial facing St John Street in 1857. It is made of an unidentified metal and is painted BLUE at the moment. It is convex, where the other two dials are



concave, something to do with the slant of the sun, I'm told.

The Reverend M.B. Brownrigg was appointed Rector in August 1868. He was a man of God and a man of science and inherited the Town Clock and its problems. He built an observatory in the new Rectory grounds behind the church for his own fascination with the night skies. His equipment enabled him to regulate the clock through solar observations. This work he and Mr Tozer adapted to the church clock and Tozer's shop clock with much success for the people of Launceston.

After Mr Tozer there was Mr James P. Parker who was paid £5 for regulating the clock for three months in 1862 and again in 1863. Soon it was Mr Davey's turn then came a Mr Allen in 1870 and in the papers in July 1871, Mr John Day announced that he had been appointed Town Timekeeper to the Mayor and Council, of

⁹ NLA Examiner 29 April 1843, Trove

¹⁰ Churchwardens Dockets and Correspondence Box B-101

¹¹ Churchwardens Dockets and Correspondence Box B-123

¹² Hobart Town Courier 17 Sep 1828 p.2

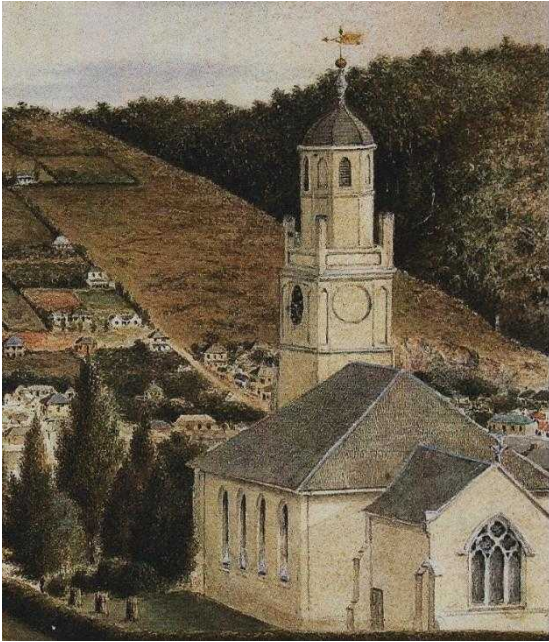
Launceston who paid him to keep the Town Clock in good working order.

John Sparrow took over towards the mid 1880s and continued care of St John's clock until the end of the century.

Then there is a big gap until I found Mr A.E. Ford being paid for '*work on the clock.*' in 1935 and may have been under contract. So hopefully he was a long-serving clock-man.

Sometime in the 20th century the clock management was taken over by responsible volunteers, possibly during WWI or the Depression when the economy was at a low ebb and it is now accepted procedure for volunteers, with professional attention when needed.

In the 1960s and 70s Mr Jones was in charge until age confined him to ringing the bell on Sundays and funerals, then George Swinnerton took over and more recently David Plumridge. He was replaced by our present clockman, Kevin Rixon.



Just to step back a little way this is a painting of 1879 showing the position for an eastern dial at the back of the tower which has never been erected and within the building periods of the 1930s the church roof was raised and the housing for it came under the canopy of the new ceiling where it is visible today.

In 1926 electricity was connected to St John's at a cost of £97 but it was not until 1970 that the clock received an electric powered motor. At this time the weights were disconnected and set aside with the old pendulum and the crank-handle.

The life of this 1835/present clock has stood the test of time and seen many great events.

Its semi-retirement came early in the 20th Century with the installation of a new tower over a new post office at the corner of St John and Cameron streets complete with four dials and full Westminster Chime. The two clocks never seemed to be synchronised and they were also out of tune

with each other, so St John's was limited to striking the hour during the day.

This was further curtailed sometime in the 1980s at the request of St Vincent's Hospital, Frederick Street, but the bell still cries out its message of welcome to worshippers on the occasional Sunday.

In spite of everything, our dear old clock ticks quietly into the future. What events it has seen in the years since 1835 with the passing of thousands and thousands of people young and old, free and bound. The glories of sweet prayer and music offered in service to God. Launceston has grown from a rough settlement to a town now city under the clock's gaze.

I think the single most important event of our history, that really changed everything, took place under our church clock's gaze on 10th August 1853; when the celebrations were held in the church square to mark the cessation of convict transportation to Van Diemen's Land.¹³

Thank you.

2025 Footnote

This article was a talk given at St. John's in 2016 as part of the National Trust's "Discoveries and Re-discoveries" series that year. The author and presenter, the late [Jenny Gill](#), was prominent in historical circles at the time, and for many years prior and afterwards. We are indebted to her for the enormous amount of work she put into discovering, organizing and cataloguing the history of St. John's Church, and indeed, many other churches and organisations around Launceston.

Since the time of writing, the clock has been switched off due to the poor condition of the internal stairs of the tower. There has been discussion (in 2024) about installing electronic clock faces that would look like the traditional ones, but keep accurate time.

¹³ Examiner 13 August 1853 p.5