



## Right place, right time

Used and loved by generation after generation, antique timepieces sometimes need a helping hand. Jonathon Savill meets the men keeping our clocks ticking

Photographs by Millie Pilkington

**D**RIVING through the countryside, it's hard not to notice the punctuation of the landscape by church towers, but most of us are casual about 1,000 years of history. Time doesn't vary, yet our use of it does. The distance covered by car in two hours would once have taken several days, with travellers casting a weary eye at the clock as they passed each tower.

Chris McKay, however, is passionate about these turret clocks. He's at home in churches and one could easily picture him as a vicar or a monk—actually, he's the author of *Big Ben: the Great Clock and the Bells at the Palace of Westminster*, with his knowledge taking practical shape in the maintenance of several turret clocks.

One of his charges is in Wimborne, Dorset, reached by a narrow, twisting set of stone steps, worn smooth by centuries of use. A rope hangs down as a handhold and, at the top, in a square chamber, a clock movement about twice the size of a dishwasher sits in a corner. 'It had to be out of the way of the bell ringers,' Chris explains.

Legend has it that the original Wimborne clock was made in about 1320 by Peter Lightfoot,

a Glastonbury monk. Finials shaped like tulips on each corner of the current mechanism indicate that this was made by William Monk when it was supplied in 1742. Chris pats the green, metal frame and, as he does, you can almost feel a bond stretching back through the centuries to the piece's makers. 'Monk was a blacksmith as well as a clockmaker and it's quite likely he couldn't read or write, yet he could still do the calculations to make a clock work,' he marvels.

These relatively primitive clocks are both reliable and robust, with colourful histories. 'In the 1400s, lubrication was primitive—pig fat was common,' Chris explains. 'Every few years, the clock was taken down to the churchyard for cleaning and the easiest way was to remove the wooden barrel and set fire to the mechanism. Once the fat had burned off, it was put back together and left for another few years.'

**Ticking along:** Bournemouth-based restorer Mark Taylor (top) has been in business for 30 years



A late-Victorian French mantel clock awaiting restoration (left) and an exquisite French Boulle clock (above), fully restored by Mark

He believes that turret clocks came before domestic clocks and puts much of their development down to monks. 'The Cistercians were very technical and met at Clairvaux Abbey every year. Ideas and inventions spread quickly across Europe and clocks would certainly have made that intellectual journey.'

Sadly, he fears that time might be against them. 'Very few young people are interested in turret clocks,' Chris laments. 'Like

the pieces themselves, there is a slow erosion of the skills needed to maintain them.'

If Chris is a scholar, Mark Taylor is a merchant. He employs seven people at his Bournemouth clock shop, now celebrating its 30th year in business. The front of the establishment looks Dickensian, with a log fire and timepieces jostling for attention. In the back are the workshops and endless mugs of tea. To the untrained eye it looks chaotic, but Mark seems to know where everything is.

The market is generally healthy, he says, although the values have fallen steeply. 'A longcase now worth £200 might cost £1,000 to restore. People come in with repairs and always ask the value, but when I ask if they will still spend the money, they always say yes.' However, in polite clock society, you don't mention money: 'There's no relation between cost and value.'

Quite simply, Mark loves clocks. He shows me a blue James Linsley longcase from about

1760: 'See here? This worn patch is where people have put their thumb while winding the clock. Generations of them.' On a workbench is a scruffy-looking chamber clock from 1610. Would he polish it? 'Never, it's too important,' he stresses.

What amazes me about clockmakers is their casual skill. Mark picks up a tiny piece of brass, puts it into a lathe and cuts a finial. It's beautiful and I can hardly imagine having the skill to create something so lovely so quickly. This man is a master craftsman, but modestly dismissive of his craft. 'Anyone can make a clock—the real puzzle is repairing or restoring them,' he reveals. 'You have half a mechanism and have to figure it out.'

## ‘Anyone can make a clock—the real puzzle is repairing or restoring them’

Mark refers to makers such as Thomas Tompion, Joseph Knibb and Daniel Quare as 'the rock stars of their day'. Today, the rock stars are the likes of him and Tobias Birch, the men keeping the clocks ticking. Tobias, a dealer who restores timepieces at his home in the Cotswolds, has a client base that's more akin to a fan club. He's gained his reputation by having a good eye combined with a readiness to spend hours on the tiniest detail.

My Andrew Dobbie clock and I have shared 30 years of togetherness, but I would replace it with a timepiece from Tobias if I could. Whereas my own dings loudly 'it's 3am, wake up and doubt yourself', his chime a discreet and melodic 'the hour is three o'clock, your Grace, I hope that is satisfactory'. I think these clocks are inside out—the little brass universe of Tobias's work shouldn't be hidden by a wooden horological burqa.

I meet him at the British Antique Dealers' Association show and, while I'm there, a customer comes to buy yet another clock. 'One of my clients has more than 300, all beautiful,' Tobias smiles. 'Some own Tompions delivered in the late 1670s, still in their original position and keeping beautiful time. These clocks have a soul.'

During 20 minutes in his company, I have become an addict, I've fallen hard. I really get it—winding a longcase is surely a man's most satisfying experiences.

Chris McKay ([www.turretclock.force9.co.uk](http://www.turretclock.force9.co.uk)); M. C. Taylor (01202 429718; [www.bournemouthclocks.co.uk](http://www.bournemouthclocks.co.uk)); Tobias Birch (01242 242178; [www.tobiasbirch.com](http://www.tobiasbirch.com))



Chris McKay in Wimborne church tower and its astronomical clock (facing page)

### It's about time

- The tip of the minute hand on the Elizabeth Tower's clock travels about 117 miles each year

- The most accurate in the world is the strontium atomic clock—it keeps time to one second in 15 billion years

- When you look at a clock and the second hand seems to freeze, your brain is generating a false memory and your perception of time

stretches slightly backwards—this effect is called chronostasis

- Before mechanical clocks, sundials were used and, in the Northern Hemisphere, the shadow on the sundial would move clockwise—as a result, European clockmakers designed the hands to move in this familiar direction. If clocks had been invented in the Southern

Hemisphere, things might have been different

- In 1807, Eli Terry shocked the industry when he announced he would begin work on 500 clock movements, to be sold at \$5 each—no one believed it to be possible. In fact, over the following three years, he produced 5,000 clock movements, making timepieces available to the masses

