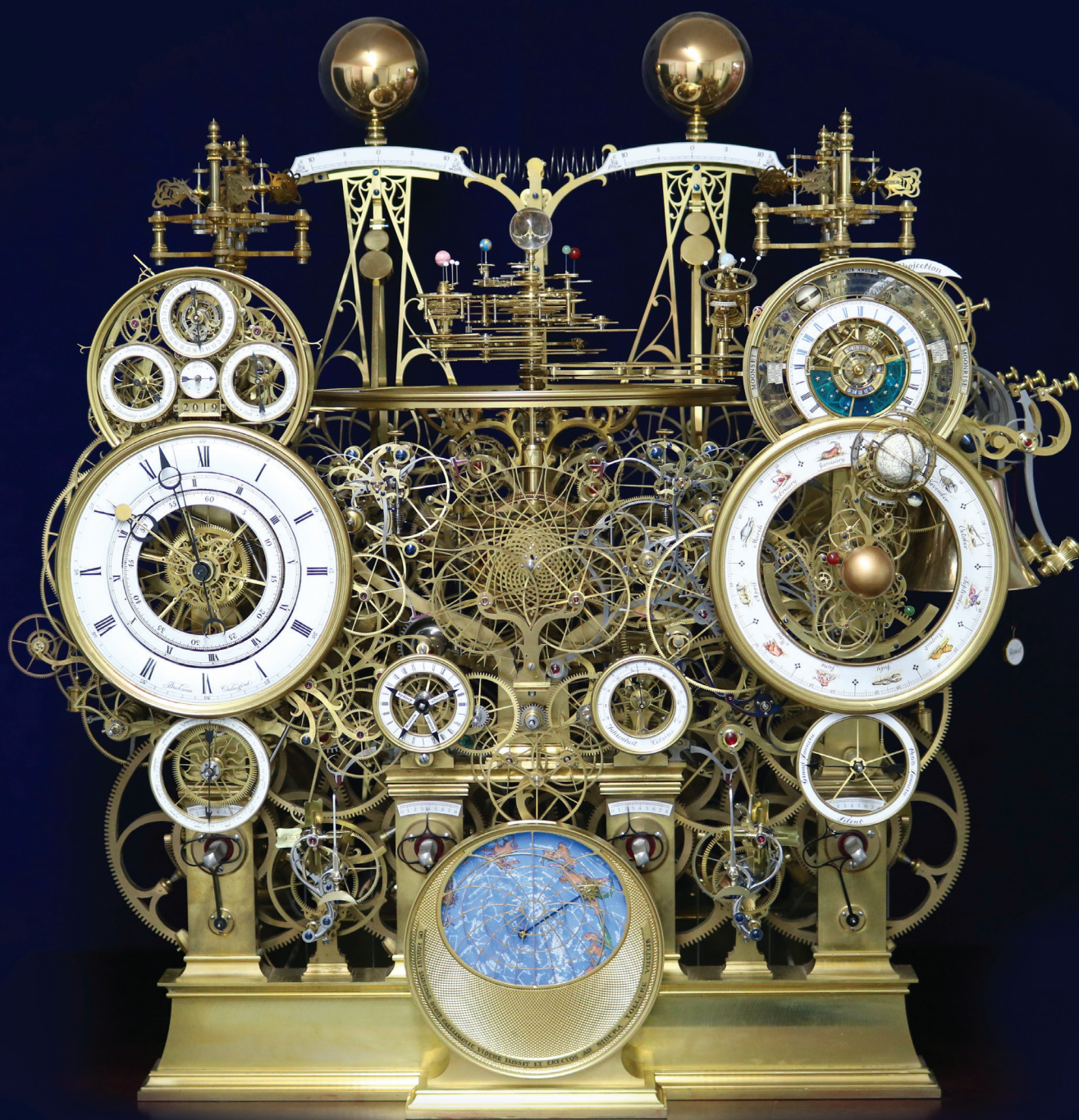


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From the Auction Room

Turret Clocks with Chris McKay FBHI

Richard Fox



Chris McKay FBHI needs little introduction. Those who collect, restore and conserve turret clocks, and indeed many of those who don't, will know his name. A professionally qualified chartered engineer, he has had a lifelong interest in turret clocks; by the age of 19, he was already working restoring one. The first he ever owned had a two-train movement and was made by J. W. Benson, circa 1880.

A member of the AHS Turret Clock Group, Chris has worked on a wide range of these clocks and has taught and published books on the subject. When Chris suggested an auction report on turret clocks this was a golden opportunity to get his thoughts on what new collectors might want to consider. There are also some examples of antique turret clock movements that have recently sold at auction.

Q&A with Chris McKay

The following Q&A is focused on those collectors buying for their own personal interest.

As Chris points out there are some important practical considerations you need to take into account about these fascinating clocks.



Q *What would you suggest that new collectors consider when buying a turret clock?*

A Go for something that looks nice and works. Complete smaller turret clocks tend to be at a higher price, but they can fit more easily into home, domestic-based spaces. While bigger timepieces look more spectacular, you must consider the practical aspects of how you will display or install any turret clock.

Decide if you want to buy an older or newer turret clock. Going for an older turret clock can give you a rarer one, but it could be more expensive once you have factored in any costs for restoration. You also need to consider the length of the pendulum and the going period.

Q *What are some key tips when examining a potential purchase?*

A Make sure it has got all its component parts, or as many as possible. Create a check list of parts and use this to tick off all those present or missing. Big ticket items such as the pendulum and the bob can often be missing. Does it have a dial, or dials, and hands? Again, dials are often missing. New replacement dials and hands can be purchased but you need to consider the cost for these. Other important parts to confirm for inclusion in the purchase are, for example, the pulleys, weights, bells, bell hammers, winding handle, flies, setting dial and frame.

Try to ascertain whether the parts on the clock are original or later replacements and if any repairs have been done satisfactorily. Has the clock been well maintained? Remember

that repairs and alterations are likely to have occurred over the life of a turret clock; for example, trains get re-wheeled. Does the clock come with any records about its provenance and service history? Ask for condition reports if buying at auction and for any purchase, always check that the clock is for sale legitimately. Do not buy one that has been removed from a building or church without permission.

Q *What is a typical number of trains in a turret clock?*

A Most commonly available at auction are two trains; single trains less so. Three trains start coming in generally from the late Victorian period; that is, the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Q *What do you suggest for any collectors who are considering restoring a turret clock that they have just purchased?*

A Hold off starting any restoration project straight away. Think about the clock and the plan for the restoration project first. Take your time. Learn as much as possible about the clock, particularly with older and rarer turret clocks. Talk first to experienced restorers of turret clocks and understand the principles about restoration and conservation. Leave the clock in as much of its original condition as possible. Don't start polishing it up, painting it and replacing parts until you have carefully considered the effect on the clock. Much of the value of older clocks is in their originality and how they look after years of use. Old repairs are part of the clock's history.

Q *What things should one be aware of in particular when collecting and working on turret clocks?*

A There are health and safety issues and practical ones that collectors must consider. For example, some turret clocks come with long pendulums — how is this going to work practically if you intend to install a turret clock in a home or domestic setting? Turret clocks can also have weights that range from 50 to 500 pounds. If you are thinking of installing a turret clock you must factor all the weight issues and load

bearing requirements. Any installation, display or even storage, must be safe for you, others, the building, and the clock. You can replace weights with automatic winders, but decent quality automatic winders can be expensive, so you need to consider these costs too. Parts on turret clocks can be large and heavy; you need to take particular care when working on them.

Additionally, factors such as the supporting frame, wires, pulleys, access issues, height issues and any hazardous materials must be considered. Working safely is a priority. If in any doubt seek help or advice. (Building consent from the local Council might also be required for installation projects).

Q *Apart from auctions, you also follow turret clocks on eBay. Are there any basic tips from your perspective when either listing or buying there?*

A If you are listing a turret clock on eBay, give a full accurate description with a good set of detailed photographs. This can save so much time later and help avoid disputes. For buyers there are bargains to be had there, but you must do your research. Know what you are looking for and remember 'buyer beware'. Ask questions, ask for more photos if necessary. As I mentioned, do not buy a clock that has been removed from a building or church without permission.

Collecting a purchase in person can be a good idea. This gives you a chance to see if the clock is what you had expected.

Take a check list to make sure it has everything that was described to you. Think in advance about how you will get the turret clock and any accessories home safely including parts such as the pendulum, weights and bells.

Q *What helpful resources are available for new collectors?*

A There are organisations including the Antiquarian Horological Society (AHS), specifically its Turret Clock Group (TCG). The Church Buildings Council (CBC), the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers and, of course, the BHI. There is also a Turret Clock Forum, last held via Zoom in September 2020 (a report appeared in the October 2020 issue of the *HJ*, page 406).

Some books to consider include Lord Grimthorpe's from the mid-1800s, *A Rudimentary Treatise on Clocks and Watches, and Bells for Public Purposes*.¹ Beeson's book, *English Church Clocks 1280 – 1850* is useful.² There is also *Turret Clocks: Lists of Clocks from Makers' Catalogues and Publicity Materials*, edited by Chris Pickford and *Joyce of Whitchurch Clockmakers 1690 – 1965* by Steve and Darlah Thomas.³⁺⁴

(Chris has also written his own books on the subject, including *The Turret Clock Keeper's Handbook* and *The Maintenance, Repair, Restoration, Conservation and Preservation of Turret Clocks*.⁵⁺⁶)

Turret Clocks in Recent Auctions

From Chelsea Embankment, London, circa 1880

Lot 141, Sold by Dreweatts at its 'Fine Clocks, Barometers and Scientific Instruments' sale on 21 April 2021

Estimate: £2,000–3,000

Sold for: £4,800 (hammer price)

Catalogued as a Victorian cast iron turret timepiece, formerly installed at 'The Clock House' 8 Chelsea Embankment, London and made by Gillett, Bland and Company, Croydon. The four train wheels have five crossings. It has a dead-beat escapement regulated by a substantial wood-rod seconds pendulum with a heavy cast cylindrical iron bob. It is signed 'GILLETT, BLAND & Co., CROYDON. 7915'.

According to Dreweatts, the firm of Gillett, Bland & Co. of Croydon can trace its roots back to the clockmaker William Gillett, who moved from Hadlow, Kent, to Clerkenwell in 1837. In 1844 he relocated again, this time to Union Road, Thornton Heath, Croydon. Charles Bland became a partner in circa 1854 and the company

subsequently traded as Gillett & Bland. In 1877, Arthur A. Johnston bought a partnership and shortly afterwards the company established a bell foundry. The business became known as Gillett, Bland & Co until Bland's death in circa 1884, when the name was changed to Gillett & Co. The name Gillett & Johnston appears from around 1887. The company still trades today as Gillett & Johnston (Croydon) Ltd.

The company ledger records the installation of this clock at the Clock House, 8 Chelsea Embankment, on 10 March 1880. Eventually the clock movement was removed and substituted for an electric movement while the building was being converted into flats during the 1980s.

The lot has a full complement of accessories including winding handle, line and weights (including one for the maintaining power), a key for the setting hand, pulleys, motion work, leading-off rod, and an 18-inch skeletonised dial.

The movement is 49cm (19.25 inches) high. The movement and stand together are 144cm (56.75 inches) high overall.



A Rare William Clement, Turret Clock Movement, circa 1672

Lot 177, sold by Dreweatts at its 'Fine Clocks, Barometers and Scientific Instruments' sale on 21 April 2021

Estimate: £2,000–3,000

Sold for: £3,500 (hammer price)

Listed as a fine and rare Charles II forged iron and brass turret clock movement. It is signed 'WILLIAM CLEMENT + LONDINI FECIT + 1672 +' on the rail above the hammer pivot. The clock has a posted wrought iron frame with finely forged polyhedral finials and a three-wheel going train.

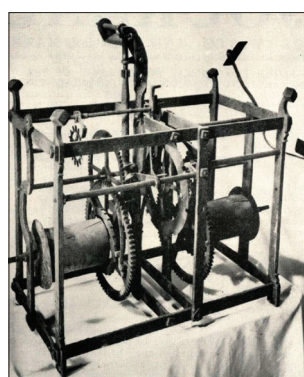
Interestingly, an article was written about this clock by The Hon. G. W. Bennet, 'A Turret Clock by William Clement', published in the June 1956 issue of the *Horological Journal* (pages 348–350, 367).

This movement was sold at Christies in London on 7 October 1981 (as Lot 99) for £4,800 (hammer price).

Dreweatts notes that the brass wheels are now reversed due to wear and laid out end-to-end opposing each other, pivoted with brass bushes set into vertical movement bars. It also records that there are some incomplete parts and alterations to the clock; for example, the escapement is a replacement. However, the auction house notes that its configuration is believed to mirror that of the original. There are no pendulum, weights or other accessories.

The frame measures 67 × 69 × 41 cm (26 × 27 × 16 inches). It is 77.5 cm (30.5 inches) high overall.

William Clement is particularly noted for supplying a turret clock to King's College, Cambridge in 1671 which was an eight-day clock with an anchor escapement and long pendulum.



A MANTELPIECE is a bad place for a clock but a clock tower is even worse. Birds and bats share the damp and draughty clock chamber and help to stir dirt and stone dust into the movement, would have been in this case. Next it was both trains and

This clock featured in the *HJ*, June 1956 in an article by The Hon. G. W. Bennet with the following image caption:

Fig. 1. The recently-discovered Clement clock which is fitted with an anchor escapement. The unusual layout provides space for a central pendulum, the crutch and part of the suspension spring for which can be seen. Also near the centre of the movement is a vertical arbor to drive the hand or hands from the going train on the left. A worm integral with this vertical arbor raises the lifting piece on its arbor (to be seen in front of the locking plate) until it drops oil the worm edge, when it releases the striking train on the right. The worm action is rare. There are other examples in the clocks at Shottesbrook and Risham, both in Berkshire.

The original image that appeared in this article was courtesy of Dr. F. A. B. Ward, and the AHS.

A Two-Train, Small Turret Clock Movement

Lot 2012, sold by Gardiner Houlgate at its 'Fine Clocks & Related Items Auction' on 27 May 2021.

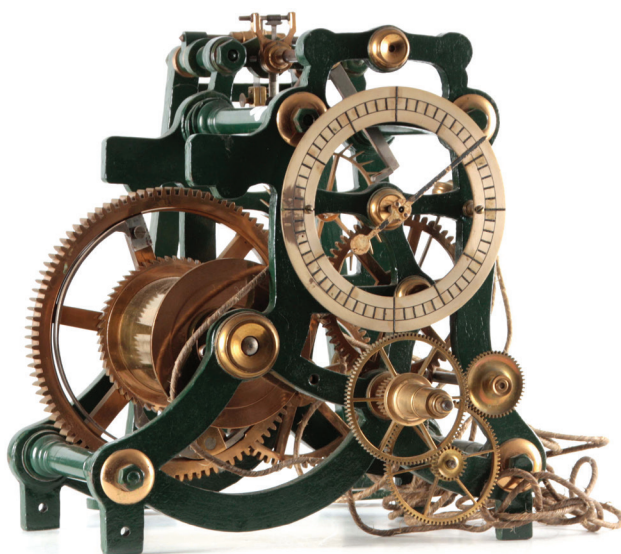
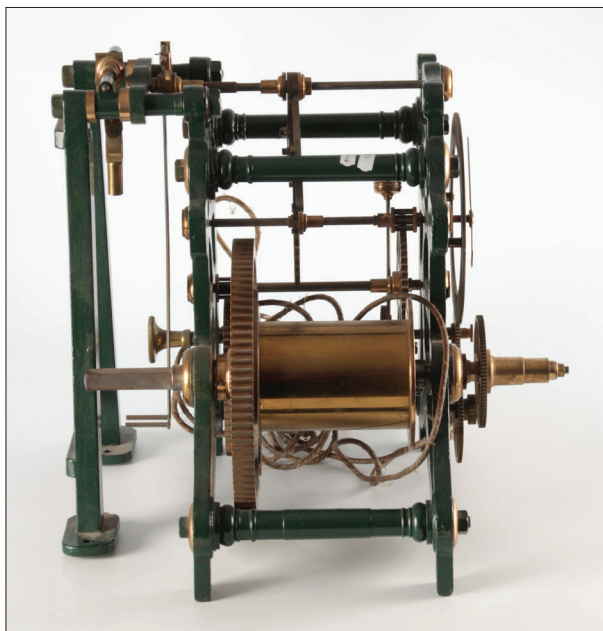
Estimate: £650–850

Sold for: £1,600 (hammer price)

Catalogued as an interesting late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century, two-train, small turret clock movement with a bronze bell and winding handle. It has accompanying hands, pendulum and later lead-off work.

The frame is 21 inches high, 16.5 inches wide and 11 inches deep (53 × 42 × 28 cm).





Attributed to Gillett & Johnston

Lot 857, sold by Hutchinson Scott Auctioneers at its 'Fine Art and Antiques Spring Catalogue Sale' on 15 May 2021

Estimate: £1,500–2,000

Sold for: £1,450 (hammer price)

Listed as a nineteenth-century brass and iron turret clock attributed to Gillett & Johnston. It has a painted frame, turned pillars and brass end stops. With an eight-day weight-driven movement fitted with a dead-beat escapement. The movement has adjustable pallets, wheels with six crossings throughout and an adjustable crutch. The pendulum is missing. It is 39 cm (15 inches) high.

ENDNOTES

1. Lord Edmund Beckett Grimthorpe KC, FRAS, *A Rudimentary Treatise on Clocks and Watches, and Bells for Public Purposes* (London: Crosby Lockwood & Co, 1903). Facsimile reprint of eighth edition by EP Publishing, 1974.
2. C. F. C. Beeson, *English Church Clocks 1280 – 1850* (Antiquarian Horological Society 1971, Brant Wright Associates 1977).
3. Chris Pickford (editor), *Turret Clocks: Lists of Clocks from Makers' Catalogues and Publicity Materials* (AHS Turret Clock Group Monograph, No 3, 1995). Second edn., 2009.
4. Steve and Darlah Thomas, *Joyce of Whitchurch Clockmakers 1690 – 1965*, (Inbeat Publications, 2013).
5. Chris McKay, *The Turret Clock Keeper's Handbook* (self-published by author, produced by CreateSpace, USA, 2013).
6. Chris McKay, *The Maintenance, Repair, Restoration, Conservation and Preservation of Turret Clocks* (self-published by author, printed by CreateSpace, USA, 2016).

Acknowledgements

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Download the original article by The Hon. G. W. Bennet (*HJ*, June 1956).



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