

Steyping Clock, Turret and Tower - 185 years of Bickering and Confusion



Introduction

The preparation of this note has required us to scrutinise years of records in our Steyping Parish Archives, records held by Steyping Museum and also West Sussex Records Office in Chichester and to read carefully a series of submissions made to us. We would also like to thank members of the Steyping Community who have helped us.

It is important that a Parish Council follows a robust process, therefore all relevant records have been photographed, scanned or printed out and are held on file by the Town Clerk.

In concise terms the assertions that have been made in social media and elsewhere are that:

- That SPC has always historically owned the Clock Tower as well as the clock – and that SPC should initiate a process to alter the current freehold title of 72 High St (WSX164986).
- That SPC not owning the Clock Tower represents a “loss” to Steyping residents

The value of the Tower

The premise that SPC *not* “reclaiming” ownership of the Tower represents a loss to Steyning residents does not bear close examination.

Irrespective of its ownership the Tower – like much of the High Street - is Grade 2 listed. It cannot be altered or removed and it must be maintained with original materials where possible. This is enforced by the relevant Local Planning Authority (currently Horsham District Council). So residents cannot lose the aesthetic “asset”.

As to the financial asset value – there isn’t one in practice. We have in our research managed to find one for sale on eBay for £9,950! But to realise that sum you would have to remove the Tower from on top of No 72 the High St. Which you cannot do – see Grade 2 listing.

The clock tower is essentially a metal clad box which is fully filled by our clock mechanism which must remain there (We know, we have been in there). It has no alternative commercial or residential use, and therefore no realisable financial value. What it is instead is, technically, a liability. If SPC could “reclaim” ownership the cost of maintenance would fall on Steyning residents’ shoulders in perpetuity – when it didn’t need to. Not much of a victory.

In fact, as we turn to considering the historical record of ownership what will emerge is that virtually all the historical arguments over the Clock Tower revolve around maintenance – maintenance required to protect what is undoubtedly ours and undoubtedly valuable – the actual Clock itself. Contesting the ownership of the Tower has, until now, been a by-product of the need for the Tower to be maintained.

Early history

The history of the Clock Tower dates back to the 1840’s. The Steyning Museum recently had an excellent exhibition on this subject.

Details of the very first “spat” over Clock ownership, which occurred in 1869, are contained in Janet Pennington’s excellent article “Our Town Clock in a State of Siege” in the Steyning Museum Newsletter October 2008.

In summary the new owner (The Rev John D Goring) locked up the Tower and attempted to sell the clock to the local clockmaker. Suffice it to say protests about its public ownership were published, break ins were organised, revenge plotted, and it all definitely has the character of an Ealing Comedy.

From our point of view there was one important outcome. In the following year, 1870, the Wiston Estate (the owners) obtained what must have been an expensive legal opinion on 72 High Street from a Mr Butterworth K.C. A legal opinion which made a key contribution to a decision in 1985 (some 115 years later) that the Tower did indeed belong to the owners of 72 High St. Sadly this document, like so many others, is now lost.

Steyping Parish Council is created in 1894.

Steyping Parish Council, created by Act of Parliament, did not come into existence until 1894 – 25 years after the first “spat”. Contrary to some people’s belief the Council did not automatically assume all public property but had to elect what it absorbed under its control.

We know from a Parish report written in 1896, 15 months after the first meeting of the council, that ***“the Town Clock hitherto under the management of a Committee has been transferred to the parish Council and is now under the control of that body”***.

(Note no mention of the Tower itself. Also note “ Management” not “ Ownership”)

More detail is contained in a February 1896 letter written by the Town Clerk, Mr Drewett, to Captain Mostyn of Arundel (probably the Duke of Norfolk’s lawyer or “Agent”) which states:

“The council, as you are aware, is taking over control of the Town Clock. I remember it was your wish that the views of the Revd John Goring should be obtained on this matter. This has been done, and Revd John Goring is quite willing that it shall be transferred and he acknowledges that the turret and Clock belongs to the Parish Council. On the other hand the Parish Council acknowledges that the building on which the clock is fixed belongs to Revd John Goring. I have been instructed to send you these decisions and ask you to be (kind?) enough to let the Council have the deeds etc”

Unfortunately, these deeds seem to have been lost.

In May 1896 a letter from the Clerk to E Cripps Esq (probably lawyer for SPC) notes ***“the following resolution was carried unanimously “that the Parish Council acknowledges that the building on which the turret and clock are fixed belongs to Mr Goring””***

This all seems relatively clearcut.

Except for Two issues:

- The first issue is all the 1896 references are to the ***“clock and turret”***.

To the modern layman Turret and Tower are interchangeable terms. But Turret does not necessarily mean Tower.

“ a turret clock ... is a clock designed to be mounted high in the wall of a building, usually a Clock Tower” Wikipedia

“ The term “Turret Clock” refers to the mechanism inside the Clock Tower” Smith and Derby, Clockmakers.

Our Clock does indeed sit on a platform within the Tower with linkages up to the upper level and also, of course to the clock dials and pendulums. There is much more

there than the basic clock mechanism. (*For more information see:*
<https://www.buildingconservation.com> Jonathan Betts – consultant to the National Trust.

Several plausible possibilities present themselves:

- Maybe Mr Drewett was familiar with clock terminology (much more likely in 1896 than today) and was only referring to the clock mechanism and attendant structures.
- Maybe for him the terms were interchangeable – and Turret did indeed mean Tower.
- Or maybe the Rev John D Goring, not backwards in protecting his interests (see references to allotment land, setting of rates etc), kept the Tower (the first bigger “box” on top of number 72) as part of the building he claimed - but not the turret (the smaller box on top – which contains the chimes).

Tellingly, according to Wikipedia **“Turret also refers to the small towers built atop larger tower structures”**. Certainly, if you search for a Clock Turret today you are offered something that looks remarkably like that (About £1,200 if you are interested in one).

Given all these alternatives are possible – then it is **not** possible to be clearly conclusive about Tower ownership based on 1869 documents.

This opinion will be reached again 100 years later by a lawyer in 1986.

- The second, and even more important issue is that in August 1896 the Town Clerk, Mr Drewett , wrote to E Cripps¹ Esq (SPC lawyer?) thanking him for “... ***services in connection with the conveyance of the town clock from the Duke of Norfolk to the Parish Council of Steyning***”.

Again no mention of the Tower.

Significantly, if the Clock required a conveyance from the Duke of Norfolk then it couldn't have been in public ownership before 1896. Which raises a question mark about any pre 1896 evidence of ownership.

All we can be reasonably sure of is that such (circumstantial) evidence we have from this period for a conveyance is **only** for the Clock.

Whatever the original truth it is the nature of the original 1869 deal between the owner of the property and the Parish Council that sets in train the disputes of the next 140 years. Our valuable clock sits within, or on top, of someone else's building – and that has led, inevitably, to conflicts of interest.

The following 98 years (1896 - 1994). Some highlights:

The records mostly reveal uncertainty about ownership and issues related to maintenance.

- In June 1926 ***“The Clerk asked if the Council did not (possess) a proper deed box for the custody of documents and if same was deposited with Mr Flowers Solicitor. As no member of present council had any knowledge of one Clerk was instructed to make enquiries and report to Chairman.”***

This is not reassuring – and it may be that the deeds documents had already been mislaid just 30 years after they had been requested. A possible explanation is the sad fact, noted by anyone reading the minutes from the first half of the 20th Century, is that no minutes at all were taken during the 1914-18 Great War. The disruption caused by that terrible event, even on the Home Front, should not be underestimated.

- In April 1948 Council minutes it was noted that before work on the clock could proceed repairs to the Tower would be necessary. ***“The Clerk was instructed to write to Mr John Goring asking him to have the repairs to the Tower carried out with urgency”***. Obviously the 1948 Council did not believe they owned the Tower – but then again neither did the owner of No 72 (John Goring). In 1950 he was prepared to contribute 50% of the costs of Tower repairs but ***“he did not admit liability but would do so as an act of Grace”***.

Clearly neither side placed a very high value on owning the Tower. Up to 2009 owners, councils, and lawyers mainly didn't want responsibility for the Tower. The only occasion, on record, of the Parish Council explicitly wanting Tower ownership, briefly, is 1986 – and why? To secure Tower maintenance.

- The September 1948 minutes also provide a clue as to why SPC might insure the Clock Tower – even when they didn't own it ***“ The Town Clock has been repaired ... the workman on completing his work fell through the ceiling of the office below and in consequence damage was done and a letter received from the Wiston estate”***
- However, as the decade passed this was forgotten and it became a common belief that the SPC owned the Clock Tower – almost a kind of folklore.

A good example of this is British History Online where a 1980 article claims “the clock and turret were parish property”. Track this back to the specific support for this (MP 172 in the West Sussex Records Office) and it turns out to be 'Steyning Within Living Memory' (W.I. Scrapbook) Date: 1958 ! Hardly legal proof.

The Mid 1980's

On the 16 Aug 1984, 72 High Street was sold to Dell and Loader and the conveyance confirmed that the Parish Council had a right of way ... ***"for the purpose of winding, maintaining and repairing the clock"***.

The Parish Council found out about this from a newspaper (!) and, uncertain of the content of the 1896 Duke of Norfolk conveyance immediately briefed their lawyer (Mr Bennett) to establish ***"exactly what the Council do own"*** (FGPC 26-11-84)

At the next meeting ***"The Chairman explained that Mr Bennett's reply had been inconclusive."***

The Chairman also ***"referred to Mr Bennett's letter that the clock is owned by the Council who have a right of access to it"***.

"There followed some discussion, and it was finally agreed to write to Mr John Goring asking if the Council might have sight of the document of 1870". (FGPC 28-1-85)

The next month (FGPC 25-2-85) the minutes record ***"Town Clock. Opinion of Mr W.H. Butterworth, K.C. dated 28th October, 1870, Letter from Mr R.H.Goring dated 4.2.85, letter from J.E. Dell & Loader enclosing letter from Wiston Estate's Solicitors dated 20.2.85, all read by Chairman."***

These documents made it clear that the Parish Council's rights were only to the clock and a right of entry to the clock.

It was agreed to place copies of this correspondence with the deeds and to advise Mr Goring and Dell & Loader that this action had been taken, and apologise for all the work that had been caused."

Sadly, the documents mentioned, which seemed so compelling, have disappeared.

At this point it would appear the issue had been settled.

However, three months later in May of 1985 the council was repairing the Clock faces which had become dangerous. (SPC AGM 13-5-85)

"Town Clock. At this time it appeared that there was some further danger to the public from the condition of the clock tower, and the clock had informed Mr Warner of Dell and Loader accordingly."

Mr Warner had sent his builder up to look at the tower but had advised the Clerk that in his opinion the clock tower belonged to the Parish Council."

The Clerk had referred Mr Warner to correspondence earlier in the year that had proved to the satisfaction of the Council that their ownership was of the clock alone."

“The Chairman then read letter from Mr Warner stating that the clock tower was the responsibility of the Council, and it was unanimously agreed that this letter be passed to the Council's solicitor for reply that this was not so”.

We assume both parties were trying to avoid the cost of Tower repairs.

Five months later there was still stalemate. Clock repairs continued but,

“Mrs Payne read letter from Mr Bennett regarding responsibility, right of repair, etc. to the clock tower.

It was agreed that the Council have the slabs replaced whilst the scaffolding was in place, and the Clerk to write to Mr Warner, copy to Mr Bennett, that in order to protect the clock the Council were having the slabs replaced however the Council did not accept any responsibility for repair of the clock tower.” (Parish Full Council 11-11-85)

Change of Direction

Two months later the Council changed direction (FGPC 27-1-86)

The Chairman, herself, did not claim ownership:

“Clock Tower. The Chairman reported on the meeting with Mr Bennett, stating that it was obvious that, regardless of ownership, for the well-being of the clock the Council would not let the tower fall into disrepair and that the Council could repair the tower to protect the clock at any time without prejudicing ownership”

But others wanted to go further ***“After some discussion Mr Millman proposed minuting acknowledgment of ownership and responsibility for maintenance of the tower in which the clock is housed, this proposal was seconded by Mr Lawrie for recommendation to full Council.*** This proposal was passed

At the subsequent Full council meeting (10.2.86)

“Clock tower was discussed and Mr Millman's proposal that the Council acknowledge ownership and responsibility for maintenance of the tower in which the clock is housed, was put to the Council.....The proposal was therefore carried and the matter referred back to F.& G. P. for further action.”

It was this meeting that was reported in the West Sussex County Times (14-2-86) as “Takers for Towers”. One Councillor, Mr Gordon Lawrie is quoted as saying ***“We were faced with a situation where the owner of the building denied that he owned the Tower and the council denied that it owned it. It then came to light that it was owned by the people of Steyning”*** – an impression he possibly garnered from his 1984 research at the West Sussex Records Office into the original minutes and reports of the SPC in order to celebrate

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years of the SPC's existence.

However, as we have demonstrated above, that evidence is far from clear and such records that survive do not pass the threshold of “proof”.

This may explain what happened almost immediately afterwards.

The Retreat

The next month (FGPC 24-2-86) it was recorded that ***“Clock Tower. Referred back from Parish Council and after much discussion it was agreed that Mrs Payne be asked to speak to Mr Bennett as to whether the Council might approach Mr Warner direct regarding contract to be drawn up.”***

It seems odd that the Council was asking their lawyer to draw up a “contract” rather than an alteration to the Land registration.

Two months later the initiative weakened still further ***“Clock Tower. The Chairman reported that Mr Bennett was happy for the Council to approach Mr Warner for a lease and Mr Bennett would look at the resulting document. Clerk to write to Mr Warner”*** (FGPC 1-4-86)

This is key. Asking for “a lease” clearly implies that the Council, after taking legal advice, is recognising that the Clock Tower is owned by the owners of 72 High St. Councillor Lawrie’s bold initiative lasted about 2 months!

Negotiations didn’t improve by the end of the month (FGPC 28-4-86) ***“Clock Tower. The Chairman read correspondence between the Clerk and Mr Warner who declined to draw up a lease.***

It was agreed to ask Mr Bennett to draw up a Lease for Mr Warner's approval.”

The SPC lawyer did draw up a proposed lease, (FGPC 26-8-86)) ***“Clock Tower. Draft document drawn up by Mr Bennett was passed to members to read, item to be taken at end of meeting.”***

And after that. Nothing. No record of a lease being signed or of debate on Clock Tower ownership in Council minutes up to the end of 1990.

A possible explanation occurs to us. From 1986 the Parish Council was extremely busy – preparing for the construction of the new Steyning Centre, liaising with Horsham over the construction of the new Leisure Centre, acquiring land at St Botolph’s for new burial grounds, organising a Festival etc. They may have simply decided the Clock Tower issue was not a good use of their time.

This Millennium

The issue did resurface again in 2007 when there was a healthy debate as to whether to electrify the clock mechanism. As a side issue the Council sought to confirm that they didn’t own the Tower. The owner (Mr Timms) confirmed ownership of the Tower – and also received legal advice (Mr Cohen) endorsing this view. Incidentally the same lawyer had once proposed transferring ownership of the entire clock tower to Steyning Parish Council in order to transfer repair obligations! This demonstrates again the non-existent commercial value of the Tower.

Conclusions

1. There is insufficient evidence to contest the Land Registry title of No.72 High St. Indeed, much that supports it.
2. This is not just our view. At least 4 lawyers have looked into this issue in the last 40 years and none has supported anything other than the Tower belonging to the owners of No.72 High St, or any initiative to alter the ownership. Why would a fifth reach a different conclusion?
3. This issue was settled, in effect, 40 years ago
4. There is no current issue with Tower maintenance – the historical prompt to ownership debate. We have a good relationship with the current owners, and the backstop of the Grade 2 listing.

Ending on a final constructive note, two proposals:

One. Over the years Steyning residents have paid considerable sums of money to repair and maintain our historic clock. And although they can see the dials, hands etc and hear the chimes, they cannot see the historic mechanism. We suggest that it would be an excellent idea to install a webcam inside the Tower which will livestream the mechanism in action – so people can actually see what they are paying for. Plus, possibly attract keen horologists to our town!

Two. Most of the early records of the SPC (up to 1964) have been transferred to the West Sussex Records Office. It is an excellent place for scholarship – where our old and irreplaceable files are indexed, fire protected, and well supervised. It is difficult for us to provide access to them at the SPC as we do not have the space or resources to supervise their safe usage. We propose transferring all our Minutes files up to the Year 2000 to WSRO at the earliest opportunity.

Compiled by Cllr Andrew Sharp

With assistance from Cllr Joanna Norcross

Presented at the SPC Full Council meeting dated 17th Feb 2025