

# THE ADMIRAL'S CLOCK

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St. Martin's Church in Coney (Conyng = King) Street York dates from the end of the 11th Century; extensive rebuilding took place in the 15th Century following the benefaction in the Will of one Robert Semer when it became and remained until 1942 one of the finest Churches in the City. To the casual observer it was notable in particular for its fine stained glass windows and for the clock which projected over Coney Street from the East wall; it is perhaps convenient to mention that the hands of the clock are driven by a shaft connected to the mechanism inside the Church. The clock is surmounted by a figure commonly referred to as "the little admiral".

Volume 5 of the report of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (York: The Central Area 1981) tells us that in 1688 a clock was placed in the East wall of the Church and that in 1778 this clock was replaced by a new one "surmounted by a figure of a naval officer". This earlier date is confirmed by Francis Drake in his *History and Antiquities of the City of York* (1736) "Anno 1668 a new clock with a dial which projects into the street was set up in this Church at the charge of the parishioners; which since has had several reparations". C. B. Knight in his *History of the City of York* (1944 - but written prior to 1942) records that "In 1778 the clock of St. Martin's Church in Coney Street was repaired by having a new dial-plate put up in place of the old one. At the same time it was embellished by being surmounted with a figure of a naval officer holding a cross-staff upwards towards the sun; and which, moving by clockwork, followed the sun around in its course. The figure still remains but the clockwork movement has ceased to operate."

The Churchwarden's Accounts, lodged at the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, record that on 30th September 1778 "At a meeting of the Parishioners of this Parish held in the Vestry pursuant to a Public Notice given on Sunday last. It appearing by the examination of workmen that the Clock, Case, Dial and ornaments belonging to the clock are much out of repair and that the expense of repairing, ornamenting and painting the same will be very considerable, we therefore whose names are hereunder mentioned being the Parishioners then met pursuant to such Notice do unanimously agree and for ourselves and the rest of the Parishioners of this Parish fully authorize and empower the present Church Wardens Mr James Baker and Mr Joshua Oldfield to agree with such workmen as they shall think proper for erecting a New Clock, Case, Dial and ornaments necessary for the same in such manner as shall be thought most advisable by them." This was signed by eighteen Parishioners. Alas, these accounts do not give any detailed information of the "ornaments" referred to.

On 29th April 1942 the City suffered a German bombing raid and St. Martin's Church, which was set on fire by incendiaries, was so badly damaged that it has not been used as a parish church since that date. The "little admiral" although badly charred survived this disaster and eventually in 1966 was repaired with the clock and returned to its old position. What was left of the Church (the south aisle) was rehabilitated under a scheme prepared by the architect Mr. George Pace as a Shrine of Remembrance of the City's fallen in two World Wars. At some stage shortly after the raid it was clearly a possibility that the whole Church site would be cleared for the then Dean of York (Eric Milner-White) had an open letter printed, addressed to "The Lord Mayor and Citizens of York", urging the rebuilding of the Church. In view of the Dean's distinguished service in action during the First World War the compromise solution reached would no doubt have met with his approval.

There seems little doubt that the clock and naval officer we see today were put in position in 1778 and William Hargrove in his *History of York* published in 1818 (only 40 years after the 1778 rebuild) records the clock as having a "figure of a man holding a quadrant that always points to the sun".

Moving on to Victorian times the *Yorkshire Gazette* of 12th January 1856 reported that Mr. Cooke of Coney Street "mathematical instrument maker has received the order for the new clock which is

rapidly approaching towards completion at his extensive establishment on Bishophill". On 5th July that year the York Herald printed a report on this new clock and added "the figure at the top, of the old Admiral who holds in his hand the ancient sea cross staff which was used before the invention of Hadley's quadrant, has received a new coat of paint and his person has been otherwise beautified. The hands of the dial are moved by machinery inside from communication with the clock in the tower and the dials are lighted by two bat's wings gas lights which are turned on and off by an ingenious mechanical contrivance in the clock." The Yorkshire Gazette of the same day also carried a report on the clock but significantly neither of them mention the Admiral moving with the sun. The cost of the gas was paid for by the City although in both 1867 and 1872 the Churchwardens were threatened with having the gas supply cut off unless the clock kept better time!

The record of "Church and Turret Clocks etc. erected by T. Cooke and Sons, Buckingham Works, York" discloses "1856 — an eight day clock, striking the hours on a bell of 12 cwt. and the quarters on two bells, with two illuminated glass dials, 5 feet diameter; erected in the church of St. Martin-le-Grand, York". Their quotation for carrying out this work and to keeping the clock in order for the ensuing three years amounted to £180 (Borthwick records). This firm would have been competent to renew the revolving mechanism and, no doubt, would have been keen to do so; but Cooke's specification (dated 1855) makes no reference at all to the mechanism for the automaton and merely says "the admiral over the dial to be retained". Accordingly, one is forced to the conclusion that at some time between 1818 (Hargrove's History) and 1855, the drive for the automaton had either seized up and Cooke was told to ignore it or it had been removed. No authoritative mention of a moving figure seems to have appeared after Hargrove and if Knight relied upon that reference one begins to wonder whether in fact the Admiral ever "followed the sun". Further sums for work on the clock were paid to Cooke in 1872 and 1883. At some time between this latter date and 1925 the striking of the clock had been altered for on 16th November 1925 the Churchwardens paid to G. J. F. Newey the sum of £73-18.0 "for overhauling and reconstructing the clock and making and fitting new Westminster Chimes to the same". I have been unable to find any earlier reference to such Chimes.

It will be seen that the figure is holding a navigational instrument; it is in fact a cross staff which was used to determine latitude at sea by measuring the meridian altitude of the sun or a star. Dr. Allan Mills in his interesting article on this subject in Bulletin 24 of the Scientific Instrument Society 1990 refers to it as "a garbled version of a cross staff. All three transomes - incorrectly made of equal length - are shown fitted to the staff and the man is holding the end of the latter to his shoulder rather than against the infra-orbital margin of the cheekbone." In practice he would also be following a technique of using the cross staff backwards which obviated his facing directly into the sun. It will be recalled that Hargrove refers to the officer using a "quadrant" which would be in keeping with the date of 1778 for by 1750 that instrument had replaced the cross staff. However, if we are to rely upon the newspaper reports of 1856 the figure was by that date again holding a cross staff. Clearly the York Herald reporter appreciated that the cross staff pre-dated Hadley's quadrant. So why was the Admiral given this cross staff? A possible explanation is that when erected in 1778 the officer was (correctly) holding a quadrant and that when he was "otherwise beautified" in 1856 he was provided with a cross staff in the belief that a senior naval officer in 1778 would still have been using such an instrument. Or perhaps a cross staff was considered more aesthetically pleasing than a quadrant — which would certainly be the case!

By referring to the figure as "the little admiral" the man in the (Coney) Street may well wonder if it is a depiction of Nelson. Indeed, is the figure even that of an admiral? In September 1778 Nelson was just twenty years old and had served firstly as Third and latterly as First Lieutenant on Sir Peter Parker's flagship "Bristol" on the West Indies Station. Before the year was out he had been promoted Commander of the brig "Badger". It will be abundantly clear from this that the parishioners of St. Martin-le-Grand were not likely to surmount their new clock with the effigy of an unknown Commander serving in Jamaica.

We are left therefore with the final question: what uniform is this naval officer wearing? In 1767

officers' full-dress uniform was temporarily abolished and this Order (London Gazette July 1767) lasted until 1783. During this era paintings of flag officers sometimes show them wearing a kind of undress coat with white lapels and cuffs. (See *British Naval Dress 1960* by Dudley Jarrett.) It is a complication that our "Coney Street Admiral" falls within this period. The uniform of Captain and Commanders had been standardised in 1774. It was even possible to tell the difference between a Captain of over three years' seniority from those junior by the grouping of the twelve buttonholes on each lapel. The uniform of our naval officer, alas, does not in fact coincide exactly to that of any rank of 1778. It will, however, be noticed that the statue has gold-laced buttonholes and these were only ever worn by Flag Officers; it must therefore be concluded that the creator of this figure did indeed intend to portray an Admiral. Ideally the rear pocket flaps should have been more elaborately decorated with gold lace and the lapels and cuffs coloured white - perhaps when the next renovation is undertaken this alteration to the painting could be effected. Let us forgive the artist for not being totally accurate in depicting an admiral's uniform coat and later generations for failing to renew the automaton and for providing the wrong navigational instrument! At the end of the day, the Admiral's Clock gives much pleasure and adds a little style to this part of Coney Street.

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In preparing this article I have received encouragement and help from Hugh Murray, the York Historian, and advice on Georgian naval uniforms from Mrs. Blackett Barber of the National Maritime Museum; additionally Dr. Allan Mills of Leicester University has been generous in giving me navigational information and illustrations in addition to permitting me to quote from his article. Dr. David Smith of the Borthwick institute, kindly provided me with a copy of the extract from the Churchwardens' accounts and Lady Barron loaned me her late father's copy of Dean Milner-White's Open Letter. I am most grateful to all of them.