

De Grey House Clock: GJF Newey 1906

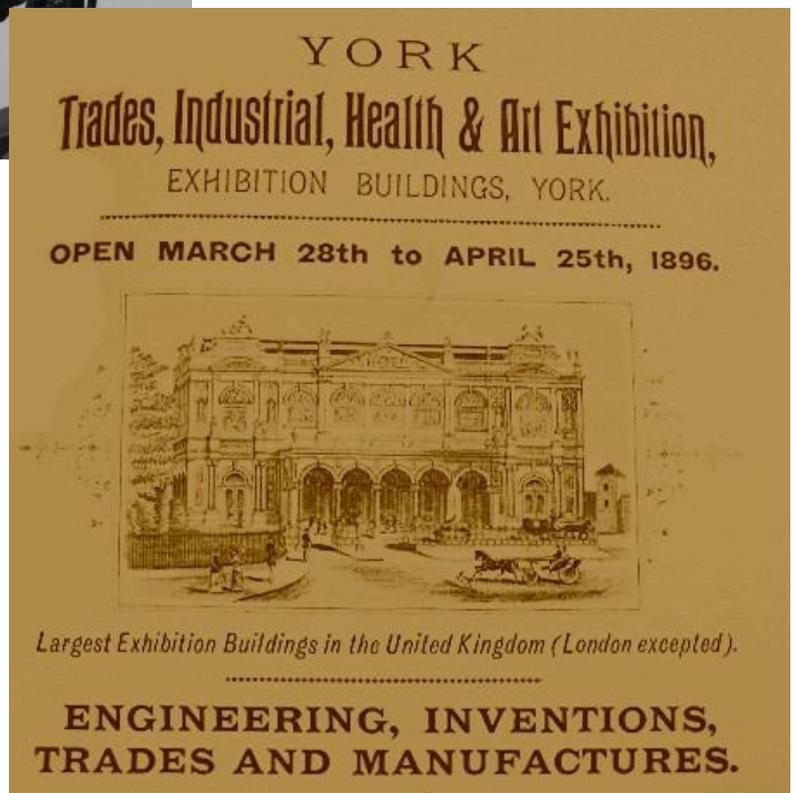


An account of its origins and subsequent history

by **Andrew Carter**

Perched attractively on the front elevation of De Grey House, close to the Theatre Royal, is a bracket clock whose own fascinating history sheds light on several other aspects of York's past. It was built by 'Grandfather' Newey – the George Jabel Frederick Newey who set up shop, just round the corner through Bootham Bar, in the early 1880s.

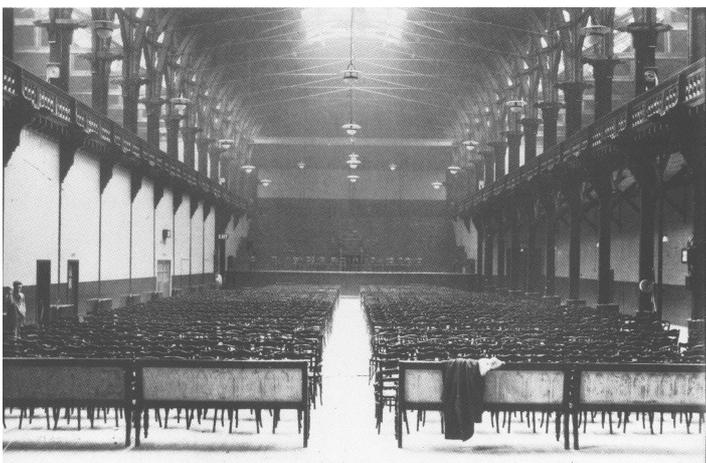
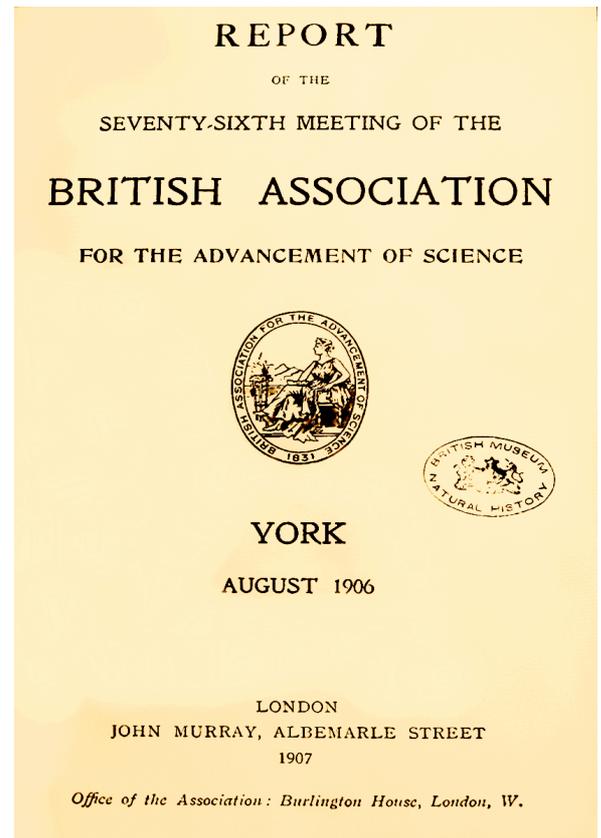
GJF Newey was already nicely established at 7 High Petergate, with a growing reputation as a turret (tower) clockmaker when he was awarded a gold medal at the 1896 Trades, Industrial, Health & Art Exhibition, held just across the square from his workshop at the Exhibition Buildings. Inspired by the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851, such events had been promoted in many of the larger cities. Then, as now, York could benefit from its position on the railway network. Newey was not slow to record the prize on his subsequent letterhead, though the particular timepiece, regulator or clock that won it remains unknown.



The 1906 Exhibition Clock

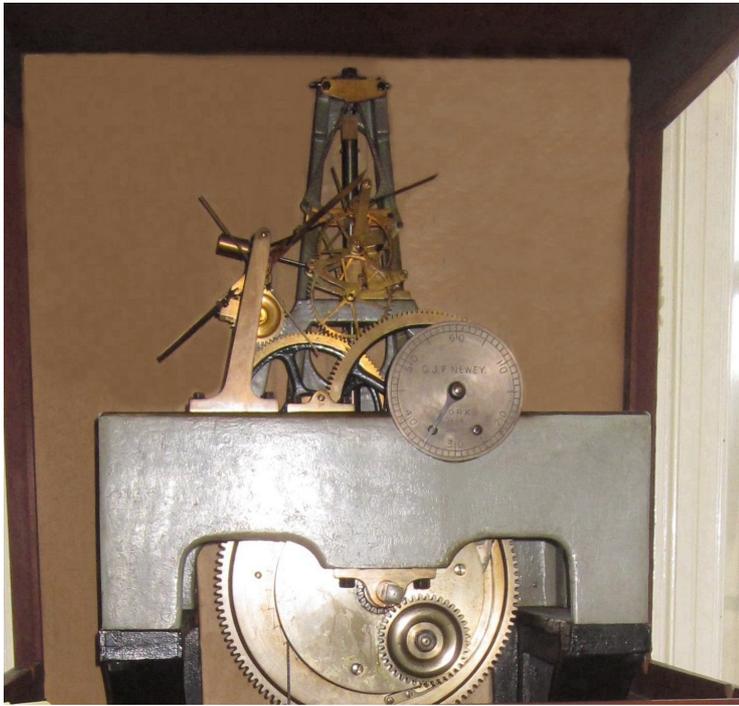
Ten years later Newey was invited by the British Association for the Advancement of Science to provide a number of wall clocks for its 1906 gathering in York. Well aware that this event attracted the great and the good of the scientific community, both nationally and from abroad, George Newey naturally saw this as an opportunity to enhance and widen his reputation. Indeed, Thomas Cooke and Sons of York, with whom George had served his apprenticeship, had 'provided time' for several previous meetings of the Association in York since its inception here in 1831.

The British Association's meetings were not merely a sequence of erudite academic lectures, nor just an opportunity for what we might now call 'networking', though there was doubtless plenty of each; they were much more substantial occasions, lasting over a week and promoting a large and impressive public exhibition of the latest mechanical gadgets and engineering expertise. As with similar events this was housed in the Exhibition Buildings. Known simply by York people as *The Exhibition*, this was an extensive series of spaces, including a large concert hall with its own organ, which stood behind the present Art Gallery and after which our Exhibition Square is named. The main hall, remembered for its perfect acoustics, was the nearest thing York had to a Town Hall in the sense of a venue for orchestral concerts. Its demise in 1942 has left succeeding generations of York concert goers much the poorer.



THE GREAT HALL OF THE EXHIBITION

more eye-catching creation was called for, and at floor level. The engineering buffs could then examine not merely the dials, but the intricacies of the innards - the wheels, pinions, arbors and escapement - in short, every unusual detail of the movement.

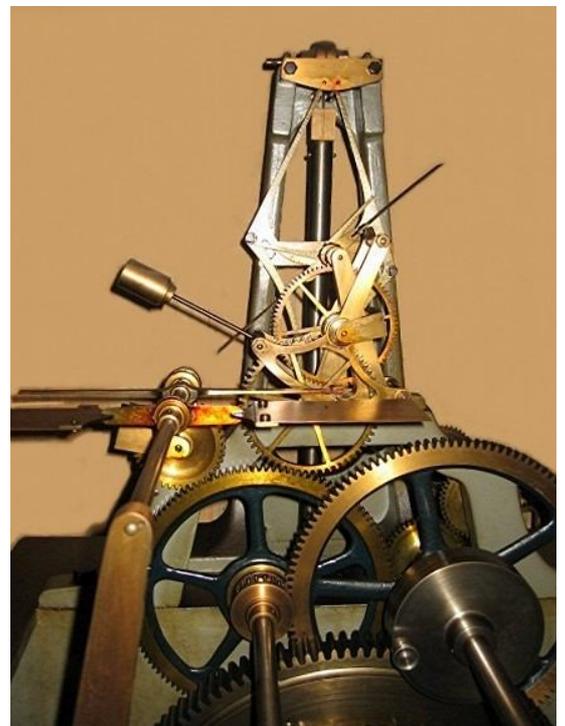


This timepiece has survived intact as the clock we now see gracing De Grey House. The external drum and dials sit neatly on their elegantly scrolled bracket, given a faintly cheeky air by the little knave's hat above. To drive the dials, and with his eye on another medal, Newey produced a beautifully engineered flat-bed movement which combined Lord Grimthorpe's celebrated gravity escapement with a Swiss remontoire.

If this sounds intricate and complex, it is, but both elements are well-documented and defined and can easily be looked up. Briefly, Edmund

Denison (Lord Grimthorpe) made his device famous by using it in Big Ben in 1859. In governing the precise movement of the pendulum it gave much greater accuracy to the time-keeping and soon became the norm in tower clock production. This aspect would come as no surprise to the Exhibition's adjudicators, though the sheer beauty of its movement and design would be a constant fascination to the general public, able to see the clock at eye level and from all sides.

Even more intriguing to anyone with a mechanical eye was the gravity *remontoire*, almost a little clock in itself, piggybacking atop of the big brother. Invented by the Swiss clockmaker Jost Burgi as long ago as c.1595, it isolates the main body of the clock from the effects of wind and weather (or pigeons) on the hands, further contributing to reliable running and accurate timekeeping. Visually engaging, the device constantly winds and rewinds itself as it rations the power of the main clock through to the hands at thirty second intervals. If you stand on the pavement below the De Grey House clock, you will see the hands advance by a small hop every half minute – this is the Remontoire first saving up and then discharging the clock's energy.



Before we leave the mechanical side of Newey's clock to follow its adventures through to the present day, it may be worth stating the obvious: it is a weight driven machine, and the weights are wound up once a week with 145 turns of the winding handle. Only recently has George Newey's grandson Geoffrey Newey MBE retired from this task which is now carried out by York Clock Group.

A familiar face in High Petergate

If George Newey had set his sights on his new clock winning a medal *and* attracting a buyer, he was to be sorely disappointed on both counts. As the academics boarded their trains back to Edinburgh, London and the rest, and as the crowds drained away from the Exhibition halls, the immediate task was to dismantle it and carry the pieces back across Exhibition Square to his workshop. Whether he already had plan B in mind, or whether it was spur-of-the-moment, his solution was typically imaginative. Created as an exhibition piece, the clock could remain just that. Up went the drum and dials above his Petergate shop front and - stroke of genius - into the shop window went the movement. For nearly fifty years, and long after George's death in 1929, Lord Grimthorpe's gravity escapement and Jost Borg's piggyback remontoire were a unique attraction in York, a brilliant bit of advertising still remembered by those who grew up here. Centre stage stood the main character, pendulum gently arcing, flanked on each side by a supporting cast of French mantel clocks. George and his wife Alexandra lived above the shop, bringing up their four children there, so he added an extra brass dial, housed in a grandfather clock case, to run off the main drive in their first-floor living room.



No photographs have surfaced of the 1906 movement in the shop window. But York City Archives preserve a sequence of shots looking towards Bootham Bar showing the familiar drum and dials projecting over the Petergate pavement. Newey's clock remained a constant in rapidly changing times, through the upheavals of WW1, the Great Depression, and WW2 to the more settled and optimistic 1950s.

Then, all of a sudden, in the mid-1950s, the clock was gone, prompting an immediate response in the local press: (*Yorkshire Evening Press* c. 2005 in their '50 years ago' column. *Original not yet traced*)

Many York people would have noticed that the clock which so 'brazenly' displayed its inner mechanism to the world from its place in the window of GJF Newey's Ltd, in High Petergate, had disappeared. This unusual clock, which was known to many as the 'timekeeper of York', had accurately informed York citizens for nigh on fifty years. At the end of the previous year its owner transferred his business to 31 Peaseholme Green, and with him went the clock. It now lay in pieces in his new premises - but not for long he hoped. There were arrangements being made to transfer the clock to some public building in the city, though these plans were on the 'secret list'. "For nearly fifty years it has served the city" Mr Newey said, "and it is my great desire that it should continue to do so." The *Evening Press* agreed that it would indeed be a shame if this unusual timekeeper was to disappear for ever from the public view.

The reasons for Basil Newey, George's younger son, vacating the GJF Newey Ltd premises are unclear. It may be that the Dean and Chapter who owned the property put up the rent, or that they needed it again for the purpose of the original bequest: to house a Minster songman. (GJF Newey's obituary refers to his Minster songmanship, i.e. an alto, tenor or bass singer in the daily Minster services. Basil's part-time position as organist of St Olave's did not entitle him to a tied Minster house, though he was of course the sitting tenant.)

What is clear from the press extract is not only Basil's intention to have his father's clock restored to public use, but his assertion that plans were already afoot to bring it about. We can almost sense that he never willingly left the Petergate shop and that now he was determined to do what he could to restore the clock's fortunes. After all, it had been a family companion from his childhood.

Equally abruptly, or so it seems, there is another gear change. Almost as quickly as the clock disappeared from the Petergate street scene, so Basil bowed out of the story. With his wife Ruby, he left his birthplace to live out the rest of his years in Folkestone.

Consequently it fell to his elder brother Roland, who ran his own rival clock business in Clifford Street, to erect their father's clock into its present position, ably assisted by his own son Geoffrey. It was an inspired choice of location, made by the City Council of the time, to site the clock close to the Art Gallery and the erstwhile *Exhibition*, and but a few steps from the workshop where George Newey had designed and engineered it.

A lick of paint

In the autumn of 2011 the De Grey Rooms and adjacent De Grey House were scaffolded for repair and redecoration. This was an opportune moment for renovating the exterior drum, dials and hands, and York Conservation Trust readily took up York Clock Group's suggestion. Though the outside of the drum had been painted regularly, fifty or more years of weather had taken its toll on the inside. York Clock Group members Edward Bacon and Mike Waters renewed the reflecting white paint, replaced old electric wiring and installed new long-life bulbs.



At the same time they cleaned, painted and greased the all-important motion work driving the hands. The distinctive hardwood hands themselves were carefully stripped and restored.



Before the dials were replaced, the motion work and hands were coupled up to the drive rod and put on test for several days. Only then were the chapter rings and the glass finally fixed.

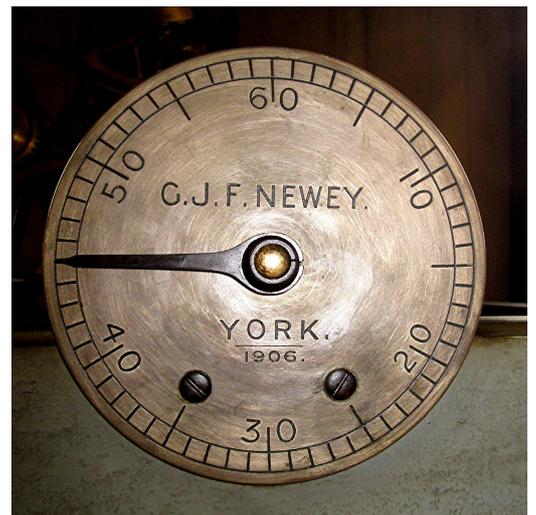




An interesting conservation question had arisen when the decorating contractors overpainted the familiar mid-blue colour of the drum with black, to match the bracket and other ironwork. For its first fifty years in High Petergate it was almost certainly black, favoured by turret clock makers because it is less prone to fade. At what point the clock first received its blue livery no-one recalls, possibly on its arrival in Exhibition Square. The jollier blue won the day and an extra two coats were applied.



Left: Edward Bacon of York Clock Group gives the pendulum bob a dust. The hardwood cabinet dates from the mid 1950s when Roland and Geoffrey Newey installed the clock in De Grey House.



Above: The setting dial, an essential aid for adjusting the time on the external hands, is also a traditional place for the maker's name and year of manufacture.



With its back lighting fully restored, GJF Newey's 1906 Exhibition Clock announces the time to a January evening, 2012. The scene seems settled and content, but who knows what is in store for its second century?

