

London Meeting Lecture Thursday 15 July 2010
The Bowes Swan, an eighteenth-century automaton

by Matthew Read



The Bowes Swan is a late eighteenth century, life-sized automaton in the form of a Mute Swan. The body, neck and head of the Swan are formed in chased, repoussé silver. In operation, the Swan appears to swim on a river or stream of contra-rotating twisted glass rods.

Hidden below the rods, within a metal framework or chassis, are three clockwork mechanisms or movements. These mechanisms are a product of the eighteenth century clockmaking trade. The main mechanism causes the Swan to rotate and lower its neck, and to perform a display of 'preening', followed by the apparent trick of catching and swallowing one of the seven silver fish swimming in the stream below. The stream is driven by the second of the clockwork movements.

The forty-second-long performance is accompanied by twelve bells of music, the tune changing at the end of every cycle in an eight tune loop. The music is being driven by the third of the movements.

In 2008 the Swan underwent conservation projects consisting of complete disassembly and cataloguing. All this happened on public display in a museum gallery in the Bowes Museum (seen below) in County Durham, where it has been since 1872 and can now be seen in action again every afternoon.

Matthew Read is Clocks Programme Tutor at West Dean College. He was in charge of these conservation projects.

