

AHS London Lecture Thursday 11 November 2021

Jonathan Betts, **Keeping Time: A Short History of Clock and Watch Maintenance**

As part of a new *General History of Horology*, soon to be published by Oxford University Press, a chapter was written outlining the story of horological maintenance over the centuries.

It is perhaps a surprising thought that this 'poor relation' of the horological world has, over more than seven hundred years, almost certainly employed more practitioners than all those involved in manufacture of clocks and watches. But strangely, their story, and the great variety and ingenuity of their work, has until now never been told.

From those responsible for winding and routine care (by no means always the owner) to those commissioned to undertake wholesale rebuilding and upgrading of mechanical clock and watch work, it is a story central to our world, but clock and watch repairing was rarely considered a professional practice in its own right. It is as though such work was taken for granted, a resort for those unable to engage in 'proper' clock and watchmaking. Those of us in practice have always known otherwise; as French watchmaker Pierre Vigniaux remarked in 1788: 'One normally regards repairing as a quick and easy job; Specialists and real artists have a very different view...'

As little was published about the practice until the nineteenth century, there are still many uncertainties on processes and materials used, but a review of historical records provides clues and enables reasonable conjectures on earlier practice.

Over the centuries, the reasons and motivations for clock and watch repair and maintenance have changed, reflecting the purpose of the objects and the attitude to them by owners and horological craftspeople. From simple function, a more recent antiquarian interest in 'originality' has now evolved among many practitioners into a greater acceptance of the objects for what they are today, returning to simple repair while retaining evidence of their history.



'A clock whose works have become dusty and refuse to go should be cleaned with a piece of absorbant cotton-wool soaked in paraffin.' Clock conservation 1920s style! Not all restorers followed best practice...

Jonathan Betts MBE is the Vice-Chairman of the AHS. He retired as Senior Curator of Horology at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich in 2015. In 2014 he was Master of the Clockmakers' Company and remains Horological Adviser to The National Trust and a number of other heritage organisations.

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