

The History of the BHI (Part 1)

Clerkenwell and the Angry 1850s

As we enter our 150th year, we begin a series of articles concerning the origin, foundation and progress of the British Horological Institute.

Here Alan Middleton, BHI Curator, begins with the events that led up to its formation.

It was the most remarkable and spectacular public show that London had ever seen. Organised in just months and assembled in weeks, The Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park brought together arts and manufactured goods from all over the world which millions flocked to see. Such was its success in financial terms that the profits funded the foundation of the Albert Hall and the great museums along Exhibition Road, South Kensington; thus the influence of the Great Exhibition remains with us to this day.

But however successful in popularity and financial terms, the Great Exhibition was – and was intended to be – a wake-up call for the manufacturers of Britain, many of whom had surrounded themselves in an aura of apathy and complacency and were failing to see that the public were increasingly looking to buy manufactured goods from abroad, particularly from France and Germany. Enlightened members of the Society of Arts had been aware of this for decades and had been staging small exhibitions during the 1840s in a bid to encourage a more serious interest in Britain of the importance of design and art in industry. Central to this endeavour was the recognition that the quality of industrial education in Britain was seriously deficient as compared with our competitors and improvements in this area were not merely long overdue but now essential.

The artisan watchmakers of the Clerkenwell district of London were not immune from the threat of foreign competition, but, convinced of the superiority of their products, they were generally dismissive of the watches produced on the continent. Furthermore, when a totally new watchmaking venture using machine tools for the entire construction of a watch was established in London in 1842 by the Swiss national, Pierre Frederick Ingold, it was met with hostility, even violence, from the men of Clerkenwell. The closure of Ingold's factory, the British Watch and Clock Company in 1845, and Ingold's departure for the United States was no doubt celebrated in Clerkenwell as a victory but it was a pyrrhic one at best¹. The fact that Ingold chose the United States as his next destination should

also have sounded a warning bell, as it was known that here, too, this new method of watchmaking was being developed. If this was not enough, the world of British horology had advance warning of what could happen on the other side of the Atlantic. In the same year that Ingold's factory was established in London, the first of Chauncey Jerome's Connecticut clocks began to arrive in Liverpool. The effect was dramatic. As was pointed out to the men of Clerkenwell in 1856, "*The English had lost the clock trade which they had fifteen years ago ...*". The speaker was a man on whom the venom of the trade now descended – John (later Sir John) Bennett².

John Bennett was a third generation watchmaker and retailer, originally from Greenwich but now with an established business at 65 Cheapside, in the City of London. More than just a successful businessman, Bennett had something of the circus showman about him, had a flair for publicity and was well aware of – and made good use of – the power of advertising. His shop premises with their giant exterior automaton of Gog and Magog added an air of vulgarity to the staid atmosphere of the City – a fact which possibly prevented his rise through the City hierarchy to the position of Lord Mayor, as did an extra-marital liaison and a second family of seven children – while his outspoken criticism of the English watch trade in comparison with their foreign, especially Swiss, competitors was enough to attribute demonic status to him from the working men of Clerkenwell and beyond. Such criticism was a little unjust and had, perhaps, as much to do with his undoubted and rapid attainment of wealth, position and fame (always viewed with suspicion in England) as with his championship of Swiss watches. In fact, it could be said that Bennett was only trying to do for the English watch trade what the Society of Arts had been trying to do for the whole of British manufacturing – alerting them to look to their laurels, for which he should have been thanked rather than criticised.

Bennett was an amusing and accomplished public speaker and was not shy about airing his views in many meetings around London. However, in October 1856, at the invitation of the Clerkenwell Temperance Society, he spoke in the very heartland of the watch trade and to an audience very largely made up of members of this trade. Perhaps nervous of the reception that awaited him, Bennett did not concentrate on the superiority of the Swiss watch over the English but, instead, spoke on "*the introduction of female labour into the watch manufacture ..*", which, although marking him out as a remarkably enlightened man for the time, proved an additional cause for hostility among his audience. He launched into an attack on the present "*degradation and misery*" of working women and, "*... so long as nearly every remunerative employment was engrossed by men only, so long must the wretchedness and slavery of women remain what it is*". He then gave details of the important work done by women in America, Germany and Paris, and went on to propose the employment of English women in the making of watches, adding that in Switzerland, the watch industry "*... trusted chiefly to female labour for its further development*". This was anathema to the conservative trade in England but Bennett ended even more controversially. "*Working watchmakers have no need to fear the introduction of female labour, as the large demand that necessarily would ensue when watches were materially cheapened in price, would doubtless more than compensate any loss they might temporarily sustain*". This tactless remark was a double insult. English watchmakers would have to lower their standards and accept



A watch movement from PF Ingold's revolutionary London watch factory, from the BHI collection

lower prices for their products because women watchmakers could be employed at a lower price.

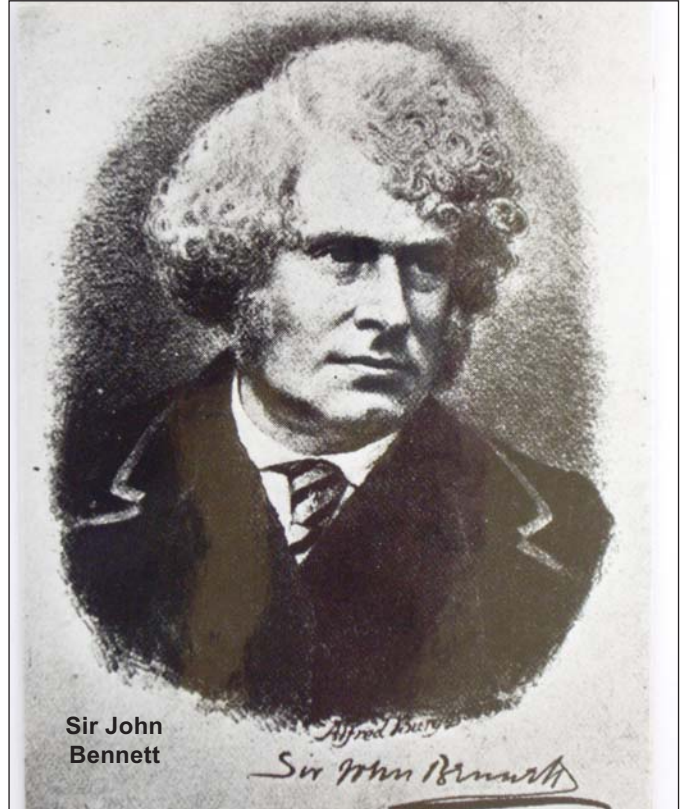
The report of this meeting, published in the newly established *Clerkenwell News and Daily Intelligencer*, aroused the interest of the Editor Mr William Farmer, who, no doubt smelling a good story, undertook the extensive reporting of developments over the coming years, including the formation of the British Horological Institute. Although a legal shorthand writer by trade, he had abandoned this to support and report on the Anti-Corn Law League and subsequently, having settled in Clerkenwell, he turned his attention to the watch trade, befriending manufacturers and workmen alike. His detailed interest in and reporting of the events in Clerkenwell over the coming years earned him the distinction of becoming the very first Honorary Member of the BHI. Today, we remain indebted to Mr Farmer as his verbatim reports not only allow us to hear the authentic voices of the men of those distant days, but the inclusion of the reactions of these men to speakers adds an atmosphere of the Music Hall, even Pantomime, to the proceedings³.

The simmering resentment towards Bennett among members of the trade resulted in the formation of a committee of Clerkenwell watchmakers and, within a month, of a meeting held at the Shakespear's Head in Percival Street, "...for the purpose of refuting the statements contained in Mr Bennett's lectures upon the Manufacture of the Watch". Bennett was invited to attend but declined to come to a public house (perhaps in deference to the Clerkenwell Temperance Society), but added in a letter to the committee that he had already agreed to a public discussion at the London Mechanics' Institute, conducted by a chairman. "This would have secured an orderly meeting, and would have protected me from personal insult, (Cries of "Oh, oh!") against which I have, at recent lectures, had reason frequently to appeal to the great body of the audience."

In the absence of Bennett, the meeting was addressed by a watch finisher, Mr Clifton, who, despite his claim that he was not a public speaker, did prove to be something of a rabble rouser. He condemned Bennett on two counts in particular; his insistence that English watchmakers abandon the fusee like the Swiss, (something that was to occupy the pages of the Horological Journal for the rest of the century), and secondly, the inaccurate figures based on the Hall returns used by him as confirmation of the number of watches manufactured in Britain. "I ask you, as members of the trade, whether there are not many watches made up and exported without cases. (Cries of "Yes; thousands.") Do the Hall returns give any account of them? (Cries of "No") Does not Mr Bennett well know that there are large numbers of watches sent in this manner to America, for example? Certainly he does." William Farmer reported that, "The meeting was of the most enthusiastic description", and it ended with Clifton moving the resolution, "That this meeting, composed of members of the watch trade, having heard the statements put forth by Mr Bennett in his public lectures, hereby expresses its disapprobation of the same, as betraying a want of sound practical knowledge, and as only calculated to mislead the public mind." (Loud cheers.)

Insults had now been traded on both sides but no head-on clash. However, the Clerkenwell committee was not going to give up without a fight and so persuaded the London Mechanics' Institute to allow the long-talked-of contest to be staged in their Hall in Chancery Lane on the evening of Tuesday, 19th May, 1857. According to Farmer, "Probably so large a congregation of watchmakers was never before assembled" but Bennett, well aware that he was entering a bear pit, had taken the precaution of marshalling his own supporters including retailers like himself and representatives of the Swiss watch trade. He had also persuaded his friend, Mr T S Duncombe, Esq., the MP for Finsbury, to take the Chair despite the rather pompous proviso of the MP that "...he had made it a rule not to interfere with, or take part in, any of the parochial squabbles that might occur in the borough".

In his opening remarks, the Chairman reiterated the charges made against Bennett by the committee; namely, his preference for foreign



watches and recommendation of the employment of women in the watch trade. Furthermore, "One of the charges preferred against him was, that somewhere or other he had called the watchmakers 'a drunken rabble, a degraded ignorant set,...". Duncombe warned the watchmakers, "As Mr Bennett contradicted it, they were bound to take his statement; any further reference to it could only lead to other angry and abusive expressions". If the Chairman hoped that this remark would diffuse any simmering resentment from the watchmakers, he was to be disappointed. Their anger had been mounting for too long and they no doubt realised that this was their one chance to mount a sustained attack on their enemy.

The secretary of the committee, Mr Johnston, was called on to speak first for the watchmakers. Although his full name is not recorded in the report and he is variously referred to as Johnston or Johnson, there is good reason to believe that this was Edward Daniel Johnson, watch and chronometer manufacturer of Wilmington Square, Clerkenwell, who was to play such an important part in the formation and development of the BHI in the following years. Beginning in the time honoured fashion, "Wholly unaccustomed as I am to public speaking ...", Johnson was forced onto the defensive at once by revealing that he had been introduced to Bennett by Mr Duncombe earlier in the day and had been persuaded to modify his address to the meeting at this late stage by confining his remarks to what he had personally heard Bennett say rather than what others had told him they had heard him say. By agreeing to this, he had had to re-write much of his address leaving him somewhat unprepared for the contest. It was a clever move by Bennett who gained a distinct advantage in round one before even uttering a word.

Johnson undertook a précis of Bennett's lectures which included all the usual grievances and also, "... the causes of the smaller cost of Swiss watches, which he refers to a more systematic mode of manufacture and measurement of parts – the intellectual superiority of Swiss artisans (sic), owing to their superior education – and afterwards he proposes to elevate the English workman to an equality with the Swiss by a compulsory system of education, a very minute sub-division of labour, a decimal system of measurement ...". Having thus suggested that English workmen needed educating which was hardly calculated to endear him to them, Bennett had gone on to say that both the English and the Swiss made good watches, the English using the lever escapement and the Swiss the horizontal escapement. As both were equally good escapements, it was immaterial which was used. "We have set about this in one way, and the Swiss in another, and so well have they succeeded, that for beauty and accuracy they are unrivalled" – a debatable point at best.

Then, Johnson claimed, Bennett would bring out of his pocket one of the best looking gold cased Geneva watches he could find; “Here, said he, is what the Swiss make; is it not beautiful? Look at its elegant proportions, and the exquisite taste displayed in its decorations &c: this is what the Swiss make. Now I will show you what John Bull makes, pulling out an immense thing cased in either silver or white metal, something like a carriage clock – a perfect curiosity in its way. Now the question is, did Mr Bennett know, when he pulled out this thing, that it was not the sort of watch that watchmakers in this country usually make. If he was so ignorant as to believe that it was, he was wholly unfit to lecture”.

Since Bennett had criticised the English for continuing to use the fusee and for insisting on the more expensive lever escapement, Johnson now went into great detail into the technicalities of the subject and the reservation he had made at the beginning of his speech and the amendments necessary to it became apparent. He was not a great public speaker, and went into considerable detail concerning the technology of the watch, much of which was irrelevant to the matter under discussion. According to William Farmer, “He went very minutely into the subject ...” (on escapements) and, later, “He then entered equally minutely into the mode of action of the mainspring ...”. It was clear to the committee that he had “lost” a significant section of the audience who were perhaps becoming restless and he was told that he must not occupy the time of the meeting any longer and the Chairman hoped, “...that Mr Johnson, having spoken for about an hour – **(Mr Johnston; “Three quarters only”)** – should be content to sit down, and hear Mr Bennett in reply”.

“**Mr Bennett then came forward, and was received with cheers and hisses**”, and Farmer could not help adding that his address, “occupied an hour and a quarter in the delivery”, although this is misleading owing to the continual interruptions to which he was subjected. He raised a laugh immediately by saying that he had needed a drink before facing this audience as he was naturally a very nervous man but, more seriously, he stated at the outset that he “...considered himself responsible for what he regarded as the necessary reform of the English pocket watch. ... He would go on until he made that system, which he believed to be not only essential to the progress, but to the very salvation of the trade, fully understood”. On the question of how qualified he was to make pronouncements on the watch trade, Bennett was at pains to point out that he had conducted a watch business for twenty five years as well as also supervising the manufacture of watches for many years while, between them, his grandfather, father and himself had been in trade for nearly a century.

Turning to his introduction to Swiss watches, Bennett related that he “... went one day to the Royal Observatory to clean a regulator, and was shown a Geneva watch by Dr. Pond. He was struck by its shape and scientific character”. He tried to have a similar watch made in England and only succeeded after much difficulty and although it performed well, the cost was so high that it was uneconomic to begin production. At first, Bennett refused to buy Swiss watches, “... but people nevertheless bought them of others, and after a time he studied the dictates of common sense, kept such watches as his customers would buy, and adopted the plan which Sir Robert Peel declared was the principle of common sense, of buying in the best and cheapest market. From that time his trade increased”.

Then came the Great Exhibition where, “The magnificent display of Swiss watches upon that occasion he would not say certainly was unsurpassed; but they were not like the toys made in previous years. ... Mr Vulliamy said that the Swiss watches were only toys; but when they came into contact with the English in the market, they were nevertheless taken in preference to the English”. Bennett took the earliest opportunity of raising the Swiss threat before the Society of Arts who took the matter very seriously unlike the English trade; “The Englishman, of course, would, as they were always in the habit of doing, stand up for their rights, without comparing the merits of the Swiss and English works”. However, the facts spoke for

themselves. “In 1853 the duty paid upon the watches (from Switzerland) that were regarded as toys, unworthy of consideration, was 42,000 and odd. In 1854 they had nearly doubled. In 1855 they went up to 90,000 and odd. Such was the number that paid duty; he could not guess how many respectable smugglers there were who did not think proper to render an account to the Government. The more respectable, the more they smuggled. **(Cries of “Shame”, and great interruption.)**” Bennett then moved on to the French Exhibition of 1855 where, “...only eight exhibitors showed anything of English manufacture; but let them go into the Swiss department, and look at the commercial character of the articles and their numbers – hundreds and thousands. Mr Johnston, like all good workmen, saved up his money and went to Paris and improved his stock of knowledge by examining the collection of watches at the exhibition, and he is a witness to the quality that was there exhibited. It was the duty of everyone in their respective vocations to examine how far foreigners were, in some cases, not up to themselves, in others equal to them or treading upon their heels, and in others going before them”.

Now coming to the question of the difference in price between English and Swiss watches, Bennett turned the pugilistic side of his nature onto the English watchmakers. A wealthy man, he said, “...could not do better than to go into a respectable London house if he wanted a good timekeeper. He would get it rather bulky, perhaps – **(cries of “No, no,” hisses and groans)** – let them hear the sentence out before they hissed – as compared with those of Swiss manufacture.” However, if not so wealthy, a man would buy what he could afford which is what the Swiss supplied. “He found, upon reference to his book, that the number of Swiss watches sold, as compared to the English, was four to one. He could not help himself; he protested against the necessity, and after hard days’ work, for three or four nights in the week he endeavoured to inculcate the danger of persevering in the present course, and its repugnance, not only to common sense, but right and truth also. ... He did not do as some people did ... declare the facts to be untrue.” Bennett went on to say that beautiful and stylish Swiss watches could be purchased for up to 50% less than English ones so that for English watchmakers “...it would not do to shut their eyes, and howl and say, ‘We do not care for the foreign toys.’ The public were buying them in increasing thousands”. He urged the English trade to “...adopt the same course, and leave the public the same liberty with regard to watches, and make them as they did in Switzerland”.

An interruption now occurred as one member of the audience tried to prevent Bennett from speaking further but he would have none of it. “If the gentleman who cried “Time” was dissatisfied, he might leave the room; if his wife desired him to be home by a certain hour, he had better go”. **(Laughter, cheers, and hisses)** This small witticism allowed Bennett the opportunity to raise the contentious issue of women being employed in the trade and, “...he wished that the same system here should produce the same abundant prosperity



A Bennett silver-cased watch from the BHI collection

as was enjoyed by the watchmakers of Switzerland. The system had been successful in a social as well as a commercial point of view. Why should not the men of Clerkenwell train up their daughters and wives to the business?" (**Tremendous hisses and groans**) Now Bennett moved on to another reason for Swiss success and urged the trade to follow suit. "There was no reason why the decimal mode and uniform standard of measurement should not be adopted. He would mention an instance of the advantages of the uniform standard. A watch was made and engraved ready to go home, to be given that day as a birthday present. The man broke the cylinder, and the master was dismayed at the disappointment which would be occasioned to his customer. The man replied that there were plenty of sixteen-line watches; and he took a pendulum spring, dropped it into it, screwed it down, and sent it home." (**"Oh, oh," and laughter**) "Precision was the first thing – to know what to do. Then who was to do it? Why, the whole population, the women among the rest."

Pandemonium now broke out in the Hall. **"Great interruption was here offered to the speaker. The Chairman interfered to procure him a fair hearing. Mr Clifton and others contended that there was a breach of engagement as to time on Mr Bennett's part. A scene of the greatest confusion lasted for a considerable time."**

Bennett was eventually allowed to proceed and he tried to persuade the audience on the benefits of adopting the system of subdivision of labour as practised by the Swiss. However, he could not resist adding a warning that the city of Geneva had lost much of its watch trade to Neufchatel because of the former refusing to admit women which resulted again in **"...a most excited scene of interruption and confusion.."**

In a final attempt to lead the English trade to understand why the Swiss were so successful, he said, "Their principle was, that an ignorant man never could be a good workman. They made every school a school of design for the education of designers and draughtsmen. ... A man told him, that the aristocracy scarcely bought an English watch, not merely because the price of the Swiss was lower, but its design was more elegant". Then, almost as a conjurer drawing a surprise rabbit from his coat tails, "There was a class of sellers who put their name upon watches which were partly made in Switzerland and partly in England, and passed them off as English; a specimen of which is upon the person of the Chairman." Now, against a background of mounting uproar, Bennett concluded by moving a resolution; "That seeing the great and increasing importation into Great Britain of Swiss watches for home consumption, it is desirable to consider how far the adoption of the Swiss system will enable the English to meet the case by making a good timekeeper for less money".

Almost immediately a Mr Walters leapt to his feet and moved an amendment; "That this meeting having heard the statement of the speakers at the beginning of the meeting, to which Mr Bennett has made no reply – (**"Oh, oh," "No, no," and great confusion**) – and believing that Mr Bennett's views are neither philanthropic nor reforming in the natural meaning of those words, but proceed from motives of self-interest, Hereby declares its conviction that Mr Bennett no longer deserves the attention or sympathies of the public."

Walters reiterated many of the criticisms that the Clerkenwell men had against Bennett, accusing him of "an array of falsehood, mockery, and perversion in that lecture..." and ended by appealing to the audience "...not to condemn the industrious men of England, and brand them as impostors, but to treat them as honest men. Would they decide with the money-ocracy or with the partisans of labour?" (**The remainder of Mr Walter's observations were drowned out in the confusion that prevailed**).

The resolution and the amendment were finally put to the meeting and, despite the presence of many of Bennetts' supporters, the amendment was carried by an overwhelming majority, **"...amidst loud cheering"**. Clerkenwell had won the day and the meeting **"...which for excitement has rarely been paralleled"**, ended late in the evening.

Conclusion

The watchmakers of Clerkenwell were no doubt in euphoric mood as they wended their way wearily back to their homes but some were doubtless also in a reflective frame of mind. It may have seemed that they had won the battle with Bennett but he had made some telling points and had some powerful supporters and, perhaps, some were also aware that the tide of public opinion may not be so supportive of English workmen if something foreign was readily available at a cheaper price.

Perhaps the most reflective of the Clerkenwell men that night was the man who had had to face him first in the ring, Edward Johnson. Bennett's remarks about the superior education of the Swiss worker no doubt brought back to Johnson memories of his own apprenticeship and the lack of any formal training program or the availability of a horological library or museum that would have been of so much assistance to him in his early career. Then there was the uniform standard which had been so scorned by the English watchmakers that evening. Perhaps such ideas should not be dismissed so casually. Johnson was conscious that despite their apparent victory that night, the Bennetts of this world were winning the battle in the minds of the public. The Clerkenwell committee had been formed to counteract the influence of Bennett and his friends in the retail business but it could be seen that its aims were too negative. As Secretary of this committee, Johnson now determined to turn its work in a more positive direction and chief among his thoughts was the formation of an institute dedicated to a new (and, dare it be said, Swiss) way of training apprentices and the promotion of British horology. Johnson's idea of a British Horological Institute probably took shape that night.

As for John Bennett, he continued to expound his views freely and was thus never trusted or forgiven by the men of Clerkenwell, although to be fair to him, he never stopped selling English watches alongside Swiss ones. It was because of him that the British Horological Institute came into being and he took a keen interest in the progress of the Institute and even served on its council at a later date. What is remarkable is to realise how well Bennett would have fitted into the commercial and social world today. He was dedicated to his customers over his suppliers, believed in consumer choice and value for money, supported the emancipation of women and enjoyed the celebrity status he so cultivated. However, the distrust of the trade extended beyond the grave and his obituary in the *Horological Journal* in August, 1897, contains the following; "Of a peculiar personality, he may be said to have been deficient in veneration and dignity, but with abounding assurance and self-esteem. Though a large customer of the Clerkenwell manufacturers, he was not much liked by them. His public criticism of their mode of manufacture, together with his posing as the saviour of the English trade, led to his being challenged on more than one occasion to support his assertions; but he always cleverly evaded the issue, and indeed no one behind the scenes ever took Bennett seriously. The accident of holding the office of Sheriff when the Prince of Wales visited the City in 1872, led to him receiving the honour of knighthood." These rather waspish sentences were probably written by BHI Secretary, Frederick James Britten, and, if so, are as unkind to Bennett. Perhaps Britten should have considered that without Bennetts actions leading to the founding of the Institute, he would not have been in a position to write these words.

Notes:

1. For information on Ingold and his London factory, see "Pierre Fredric Ingold and the British Watch and Clockmaking Company", RF and RW Carrington, *Antiquarian Horology*, Vol 6, pp 698-714 and Vol 10, pp 44-46. Also "PF Ingold - His Impact on Watchmaking both in Europe and America", David Penney FBHI, Proceedings of the 23rd Annual NACWCC Seminar, Boston: Cradle of Industrial Watchmaking.
2. For background information concerning Bennett and his family, see website <http://www.freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~gloverhoward/bennett1.htm>
3. Many editions of the Clerkenwell News and Daily Intelligencer can be found at The British Library, Newspapers, Colindale Avenue, London NW9 5HE.