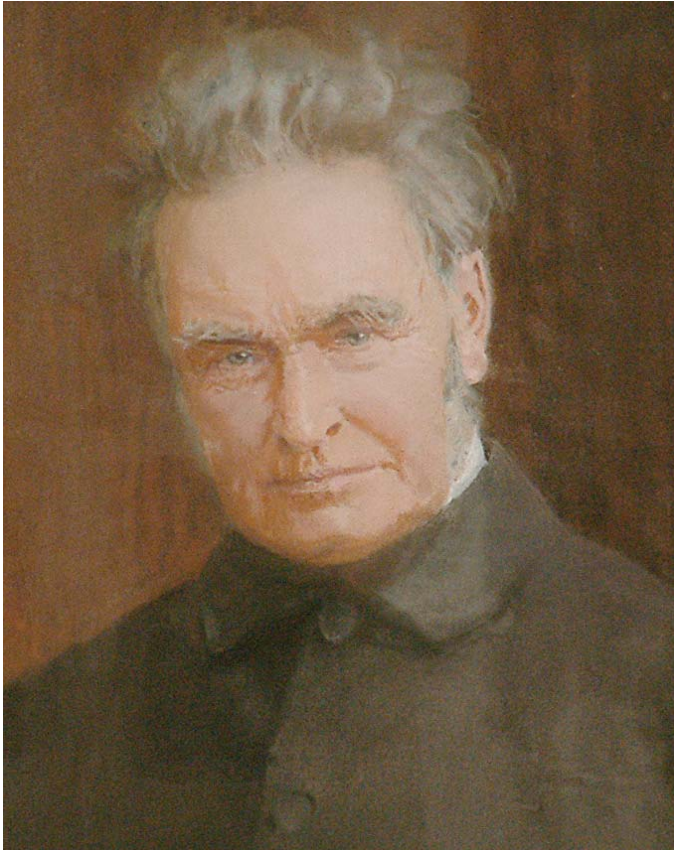


The History of the BHI (Part 10)

Edmund, First Baron Grimthorpe

Chris McKay looks at the infamous Lord Grimthorpe, BHI President from 1868-1905.



On the 5th December 1864, the BHI met at The Society of Arts to hear a successful 48-year old lawyer, Edmund Beckett Denison, present a lecture on 'Large Clocks'; the Lord Mayor of London was in the chair. The Great Clock at the Palace of Westminster had been running for just over four years and Edmund, its champion and designer, stood before the assembled company. Both the lecturer and the lectured must have realised the situation was potentially tense. Jibes at the BHI inaugural meeting were directed at Edmund as being an amateur, the use of cast iron in the Great Clock had been ridiculed and the trade still resented the outsider. But Edmund was a giant of a character and he seemed to like nothing better than a good scrap be it in a House of Commons Committee Room discussing a bill, or facing BHI members a lecture hall.

Starting confidently Edmund said that he had nothing new to talk about, what he was going to say was all covered in his book '*Rudimentary Treatise*'. This was first published in 1850 and by 1860 had reached its 4th edition. He covered the basis of turret clock work and discussed gravity escapements using a model of his double three legged. The model could also be altered to show how the single three legged escapement worked and was left on loan for BHI members to inspect at their leisure. He lost little time in tilting at Vulliamy, Airy and turret clockmakers as well as the City of London over the poor management of their public clocks including those in the Royal Exchange and St Paul's Cathedral. At the end he remarked that it was nice to have such an agreeable meeting with London clockmakers compared with his past experiences over the Great Clock. In praising Edmund for such an informative talk The Lord Mayor promised to look at the City clocks but hoped none of them

would take five hours to wind; an undisguised taunt about the excessive time needed to wind the Great Clock.

With the passing of Valentine Knight in 1867, the British Horological Institute was in need of a new President. The February *Horological Journal* of 1868 recorded that Charles Frodsham was approached to be President but no reply was received since he was seriously ill. Lord Caithness, the inventor of a compass, was also considered for the post along with the Earl of Orkney who was an amateur watchmaker. Mr E D Johnston said that Mr Edmund Beckett Denison would be the making of the Institute; he was highly educated, devoted to horology and though he had ruffled the feathers of the trade some years since, he had settled down since that time and was a very different man and was trusted by the trade. Mr Glasgow supported the proposal saying that Mr Denison's knowledge of watchmaking and his high position would give dignity to the Institute.

Edmund must have seemed an ideal candidate for President. He had written an authoritative book on clocks and watches, he had published papers on escapement errors and remontoires. Before he came to be involved with the Great Clock, he helped install a turret clock in Helions Bumstead in 1838 and had designed the clock for Ilkley church that was made by William Potts of Pudsey in 1848. Edmund had worked with E J Dent to produce a turret clock for Meanwood Church in Leeds in 1850, and an exhibition clock for the Great Exhibition in 1851. Above all, it must have been Edmund's involvement in designing the Great Clock at Westminster along with the bells and the double three-legged gravity escapement that really was his chief call to fame.

Finally, Edmund had lectured to the BHI, was well-off and was not directly involved in the trade. Edmund accepted the invitation with the proviso that he would not be expected to attend dinners. Edmund was duly elected and re-elected every year until his death. Despite his dislike of dinners, he was a faithful President and always attended meetings when invited and if he was available. Although not aristocratic, the Beckett family blood was definitely good and it is useful to know a little of the President's family history and something of his other interests.

The father Edmund Beckett senior, married Maria Beverley, a great grand niece of a famous judge by the name of Denison. As part of the marriage settlement, Edmund Snr took the name Denison thus becoming Edmund Beckett Denison. Edmund's grandfather received a Baronetcy in 1813 for his work in subduing Luddite riots in Leeds. The title eventually passed to Edmund senior when he dropped the Denison name taking the title Sir Edmund Beckett.

The first son and BHI President to be, Edmund Beckett Denison was born on the 16th May 1816 at Carlton Hall, Carlton on Trent, near Newark. The family soon moved to Doncaster where Edmund was educated at Doncaster Grammar School, then at Eaton College, and finally at Trinity College, Cambridge, arriving there on the same day that the houses of Parliament burnt down. In 1838 Edmund graduated in the mathematical tripos becoming 30th wrangler. He had hoped to be placed 15th to 20th, but he wrote that he was: "*Not good at book-work type exams and since he and his father had agreed that he should follow law, he had not done as much work as he otherwise may have done*".

Edmund moved to London, graduated in law in and was called to the Bar in November of 1842. He writes that he was forced to seek other work and was recommended to try Parliamentary Committee work which he did around 1843. His father was elected Member of Parliament for West Riding, Edmund senior was then invited to be Deputy Chairman of the Great Northern Railway which was founded in 1844. The great railway boom was under way and since Edmund the lawyer was there at the beginning preparing private Parliamentary bills, he rapidly grew in fame and wealth.

In 1845 Edmund married Fanny Catherine Lonsdale, the daughter of John Lonsdale the Bishop of Lichfield. They moved to 42 Queen Anne Street, a number that has now vanished, and then around 1860 moved across the Street to number 33.

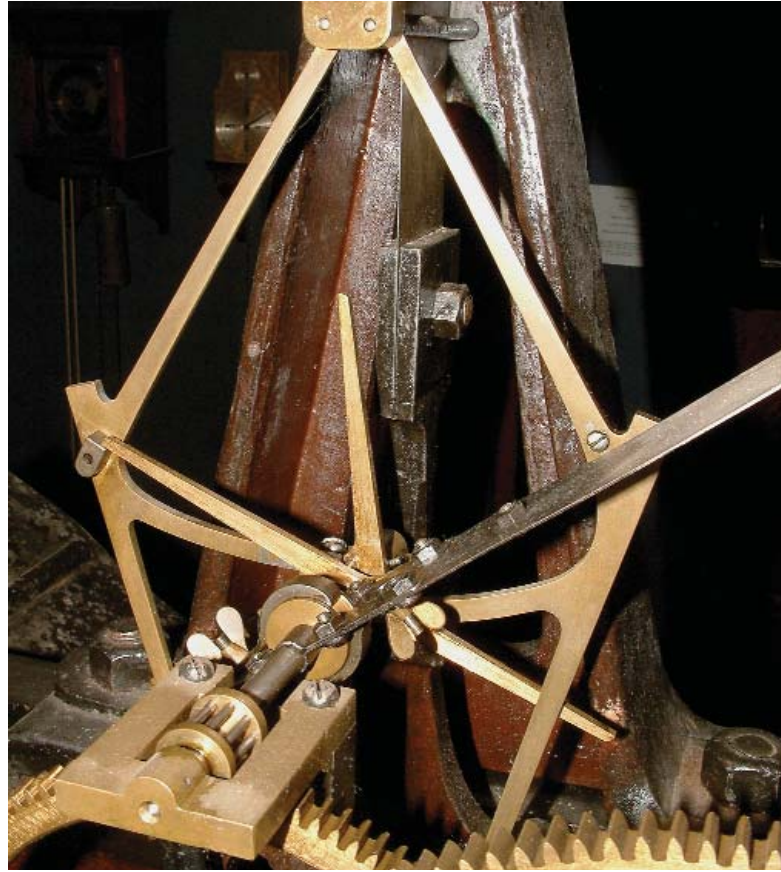
Batchwood Hall estate was acquired by Edmund in 1874. There he built his house, complete with clock tower, with wonderful views of St. Alban's Abbey. One of his many talents was architecture, but he was always scathing about architects saying of himself: "I'm the only architect with whom I have not argued". The rebuilding project at St Albans' Abbey was directed by Edmund and undertaken at his own cost. Though saving the Abbey from collapse, he made many enemies over the work he did. Indeed he gave a verb to the English language... 'to Grimthorpe', meaning to lavishly over restore without regard to taste.

In 1874 Edmund succeeded his father in the baronetcy following his father's example and dropped the surname Denison becoming Sir Edmund Beckett. Edmund was raised to the Peerage in 1886 for services to the Church, (in which he was much involved in the legal side) becoming the first Baron Grimthorpe. Grimthorpe is a small hamlet a few miles to the north of Pocklington in the East Riding of Yorkshire. In 1297 there is a record that Ralph Fitz-William, Lord of Grimthorpe, accompanied King Edward 1 in his war to France. The Grimthorpe title must have seemed to Edmund to be ideal; Grimthorpe Manor was owned by the Beckett family and was also in his beloved Yorkshire.

Returning now to Edmund's horological interests, it was in January 1873 some 60 BHI members visited the Great Clock at Westminster. Their host was the clock's designer and President of the Institute, Edmund Beckett Denison. It was then 21 years since the 29th January 1852 when the clock was 'born'. Climbing up to one side of the clock he gave a history of the clock and, of course, a great deal of technical information. Once the party headed by John Jones got to the belfry they gave Edmund three cheers as an expression of thanks. In reply Edmund hoped that they would not be in trouble with the Chief Commissioner for the noise they had made! A second opportunity for those who missed the visit was given in October that year, it was taken up by so a large number of members that it was impossible to see the clock with everyone in the clock room.

In the same year, the *Horological Journal* carried a serialised article by the President on barometric compensation of clocks. This was a mathematical analysis along with the practical application to domestic and turret clock pendulums.

1874 was indeed a year for Institute members to remember their President; not for his lecture or articles but for his comments at the exhibition of work. The 1873 April HJ announced that prizes would be awarded for the best specimens of work in chronometers, watches and clocks and to the best inventor of a tool to facilitate production. On November 10th, the exhibition opened and was judged by Prof. Wheatstone, Victor Kulberg and J McLellan with prizes being awarded in the various categories. It was stated that often it was difficult to judge a winner due to the high standards, but that the show of tools was very meagre. Some four pages were dedicated in the Journal to describing the various entries.



The double three-legged gravity escapement as designed by Edmund Beckett Denison. This became the standard for all good turret clocks after 1859.



A cartoon of Lord Grimthorpe entitled 'Bells' as drawn by 'Spy' in Vanity Fair. The accompanying text was pure acid: regarding architecture it said: 'He is so high an authority on church architecture that he is credibly reported to know the difference between a gargoye and a flying butress.'



Top: Batchwood House from the south. Designed by Edmund in the style of Queen Anne. The house stands on a hill with an impressive view of St Albans. You can see the clock tower in the right of the picture. It has two dials both with concave centres and batons only. Edmund argued that the concave dial eliminated the parallax problem, and since everyone knew where the chapters were, putting them on was not necessary.

Above: Joyce made the Batchwood clock to Edmund's specification. The flatbed was let into the walls and there was an additional internal dial for the servants.

In January of 1875 the day of the prizegiving arrived and in the Mansion House the chandeliers glittered and the gilding of the cornices and columns reflected the evening candles that illuminated the proceedings. Around 1,000 had gathered; BHI members, people of the trade and the like who came to see the fully-robed Lord Mayor perform the presentation. But the President was invited to speak at no notice to give a history of the exhibition, symptoms of dissent pervaded the assembly. Starting with the Prize Essay, Edmund dismissed this as "more to do with fine writing than containing anything of value". He pulled no punches; "But what are we really going to give these prizes for? Why, for polishing screw heads, and the flat sides of wheels and things like that. Some of you might remember my laughing at a meeting of the Institute at the importance attached to 'facing pinions', and I asked, and I ask again, how many people in England have the most remote idea whether the pinions of their watches are faced or not, or even what it means; and what is more important, will any man in this room venture to say that a watch will go the smallest degree better or worse whether its pinions are faced or not, or whether the wheel faces are polished or the screw heads left in the grey?" Edmund also praised the American system of watch manufacture.

The atmosphere must have been electric with the very men who laboured so hard to win prizes, and the organisers really unable to believe their ears as their President dealt methodical death blows to their aspirations.

Once Edmund was seated the Lord Mayor then started to present the prizes, but Mr Jones rose to ask the Lord Mayor to allow Mr Glasgow to respond to the President's address starting a wordy explanation of what finishing meant. The Lord Mayor was having nothing of that, stopped him dead and continued presenting the prizes. Afterwards Mr Glasgow gave a defence

of the exhibition, its aims and the prize giving.

In conclusion Mr Jones proposed a vote of thanks to the Lord Mayor and commented with vitriol on the perceived enemy of the English watch trade, Sir John Bennett, saying: "Some of our predecessors had found rest in Westminster Abbey; it would possibly agree with Sir John Bennett's desires to wish him an early admission within those venerable walls." Sir John Bennett, not an Institute member, had come to the meeting and appropriated a top chair. Ever the opportunist, Sir John rose and with a mischievous panache seconded Mr Jones' motion adding a cruel counter blow by saying: "Only one of a thousand clocks sold in England was English, the watch industry ought to copy the Swiss in employing women and that technical education should be diffused more widely than it is now".

During the following months the Journal carried letters of protest against the President, but it all faded away and Edmund gave no comment and remained President.

The following years were somewhat quiet with Edmund presiding over another visit to the Great Clock. Apart from advising on numerous church clocks, Edmund was also an authority on bells and astronomy. He designed the clock for St Paul's cathedral in 1892.

In 1902, Edmund took up his pen and wrote what he thought would be his last letter to the *HJ* that was published in the November issue. He reminisced about the clocks with which he had been involved and gives Fredericton (Canada) or Leeds as the first clock with the double three legged escapement. Both of these clocks are by Dent, Fredericton is 1853 and Leeds 1859. Since the double-three legged was installed in the Great Clock in 1859, it looks like Fredericton may have been modified. The tower was gutted by a blaze in the early 20th century but the clock survived despite molten bell metal dripping onto it. He speaks fondly about writing the letter in front of his regulator with the four legged escapement that was constructed in 1852 from his drawings by James Brock. The whole letter has the tenor of a man who with his full intellect is slowly approaching the end of his days and is reflecting on his successes in life. Oddly enough the Great Clock gets only the briefest of a passing comment. Not to go quietly he was again writing to the *HJ* in 1903 on the subject of illuminated dials.

As old age crept on Edmund suffered a stroke a few years before he died. He said at one stage: "I have no friends and all my enemies are dead". On Saturday 29th April 1905, and with his sister Mrs. Paget at his bedside, he died from heart failure.

Edmund specified in his will... "And I desire that no flowers or other decorations be used at my funeral or on my grave and no glazed hearse or lead or other strong coffin or brick grave be used and that the grave be not deeper than four feet."

On the 3rd May, Edmund's remains were interred alongside those of his wife in St Alban's Abbey graveyard. Edmund got some of his requests; the hearse was a plain black one, there were no flowers, but he would have probably approved of the moss-lined grave. However, the coffin was polished oak with a large gold cross on the lid and later a plain red granite slab was raised to mark his resting place; the inscription records him as the restorer of the Abbey.

An obituary appeared in the *HJ* written by F J Britten. It spanned nine pages and was full on interesting anecdotes. One recalls that Edmund had attended a BHI lecture and his hat that had been stuffed under his seat, was missing when he came to leave. The next day a very shabby old cap was found and indeed it was his. He wanted no special attention at meetings. When the headquarters at Northampton Square was proposed Edmund gave £50 towards the building, John Jones gave £100, so Edmund promptly topped up his contribution to match. He gave guidance to the Institute on employing an architect for the building, a profession for which he had no respect.

His dress was always the same and in style dated from the early Victorian period. His coat and vest were rather of a clerical cut, his collar buttoned, not in the front, but about one inch to the left side, there being a prolongation of the usual tab that allowed this to be done, and, of course, relieved the Adam's apple from the pressure that occasionally visits the collar wearing man for his sins. Utilitarian he was to excessive degree. To those who had business with him he was, when not at Westminster, usually to be seen at his town house, No 33, Queen Anne Street. There he would be found generally at a desk of such a height he could either sit or stand at it. This was a large, handsome room at the back part of the ground floor, well lit by windows facing south; comfortable enough but, but furnished so sparsely as to be noticeable to everyone. There stood his regulator fitted with a four-legged gravity escapement the performance of which he was especially proud. It is not enough to say he had no taste for pictures; he did not like them. A few unpretentiously-framed photographic portraits constituted the most attractive of the mural decoration.

As a chairman of the Institute he had no superior; he was severe and formal, his majestic air showed plainly enough that he regarded the business seriously and would allow no interference with his prerogative. As a speaker he was logical and concise and as a rule merciless to anyone who had the temerity to draw the sword against him.

Britten ended his obituary thus: *'Despite his manner he was, apart from public utterances, really a kind and considerate man. Throughout the 33 years I was officially connected with him our intercourse was of the pleasantest character. He was always just, always said what he meant. Happy ever would be the secretary who had to satisfy such a chief. While I live I shall revere his memory.'*

Edmund's will was complex, in his latter years he regularly added codicils. On his death the will eventually had to be contested in Court to procure a grant of probate. In 1907, £2,111,775 was distributed, a large sum today, but a massive fortune for one hundred years ago.

Beneficiaries were family and friends and many bodies for which purpose a charity fund was set up to administer the bequests. Strangely enough, the British Horological Institute received nothing from their President of 37 years standing. Perhaps Edmund remembered the bitter resentment when he pronounced on the "Finger work" done for the 1874 exhibition.

One notable horological gift was a turret clock to Trinity College Cambridge. It was stipulated that the dial should only have batons, not Roman numerals. The clock should be of the pattern that he approved, have his double three-legged escapement and be made by Smith of Derby, Potts of Leeds or Joyce of Whitchurch. Conveniently, the costs of the clock and bells were such that a new dial was not provided; much to the relief of the Fellows of Trinity.

Grimthorpe's clock at Trinity is unusual, it is a flat bed and has four trains, the fourth being an additional striking train that sounds the hour on a higher bell shortly after the hour was first struck on the lowest bell. Myth says the clocks strikes the hour once for Trinity and once for St John's the neighbouring college that does not have a clock of its own.

If Lord Grimthorpe were still President today, I wonder just what he would think of the BHI and of what he would approve and disapprove.

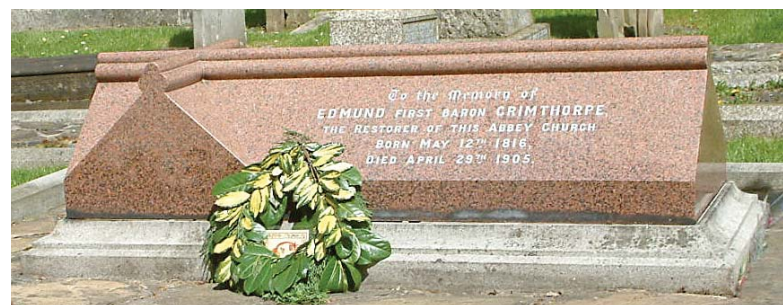
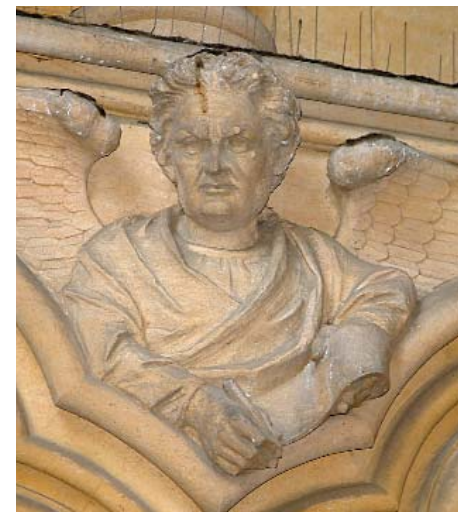
He would probably welcome the diversity of membership since he was an 'amateur' at a time when such people were so few in the BHI. On the education side the running of courses and seminars would be much approved provided that the course had a proper reason. Polishing and bluing would be approved if applied to say polishing pivots and bluing springs, but certainly not if applied for decorative reasons like to screw heads. The Chief Examiner's report on the 2006 Final Grade

would be pilloried for stating *"Abrasive, filing and turning marks often remained, particularly on the inner surface of the upright part of the cock and under the top".* *"Does a fine finish on the underside of a cock make a clock or watch go any better?"* we might hear him ask. At least the web site no longer has an option for upgrading to FBHI by making a clock with 'a very fine finish' but with no comment as to its operation or performance! Branch activities with events and lectures would no doubt be encouraged, Edmund always respected people who got on and did things. The *HJ* too would be greeted as a great success.

There can be little doubt that The Swiss watch industry's protectionist policy on the supply of watch parts would be scathingly attacked, Edmund never did like anyone of non-British extraction. His comments would probably be tempered by words to the effect that if people were buying showy watches as status jewellery, then they jolly well deserved to be charged extortionate prices by the maker for their repair.

In his will Edmund directed: *"That no stone monument be put up for me as my buildings are enough"*. In reality it is the booming of the great bell Big Ben set off by his Great Clock of Westminster that remains Edmund's great and lasting hourly monument.

Chris McKay



Far top Edmund is captured in marble in St Alban's Abbey Church. The bust was once in the night club that now runs Batchwood House.

Top: It is reputed that a stonemason used Lord Grimthorpe as a model for an angel in the west porch of St Albans Abbey; when his Lordship saw himself complete with wings he laughed and approved of the joke.

Above: In the north east corner of the Abbey grounds lies Grimthorpe's grave. The wreath was laid by AHS Turret Clock Group in 2005 celebrating the centenary of his death.