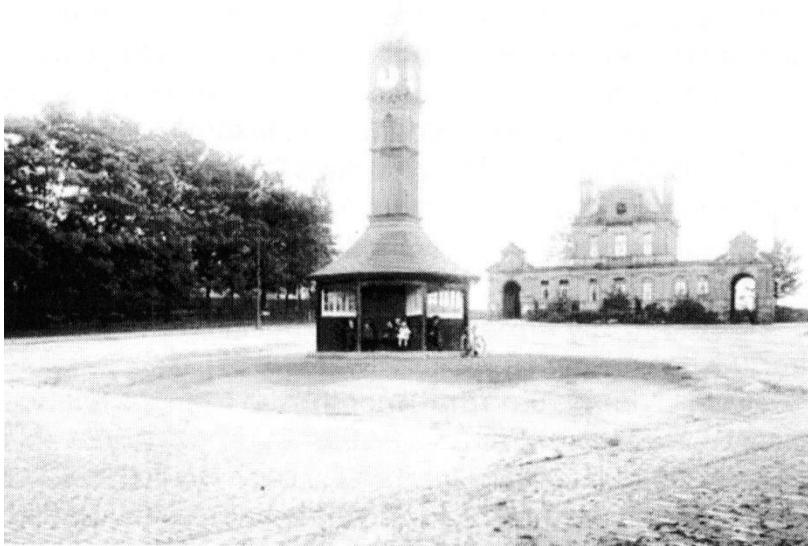


How Oakwood Got Its Clock

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Oakwood Clock in place at Oakwood 10 June 1914.

This photograph is from the Leodis Database. Copyright Leeds Library and Information Service. Roundhay Park Entrance Lodge in the background was built in 1872 and demolished in 1937.

Oakwood Clock's early years were spent in Kirkgate Market, where it was set going on 1st July 1904, the day of the market's official opening, by Alderman Knowles. It was a Potts clock and was situated centrally at the Vicar Lane end of the market. Needless to say, it was not then known as Oakwood Clock, but, if anything, as the Market Hall Clock, and its support was a stall, not a shelter, as in its later incarnation. And there it might have stayed, chiming away contentedly (yes, it did have an hourly chime in those days) throughout the twentieth century and beyond, but for the 'pace of change', which was perhaps the dominant feature of that century.

The changes which influenced the destiny of our chronometric hero occurred in 1912. They were twofold, and related to the Kirkgate Market and to Oakwood respectively. In the case of the market, it seems that the City Fathers of those days were not too great on forward planning. Although the market had only been open for close on eight years, it was decided that a third entrance was needed on Vicar Lane - a central entrance. This meant that the large Market Hall Clock was in the way, and the Markets Committee resolved, on 22nd July 1912, to offer it as a gift to the Parks Committee. Two days later the Parks Committee accepted the gift, and on 25th July 1912 they agreed to erect the clock at Oakwood.

It is easy to see why the clock was being given away, but the question arises: Why give it to Oakwood? The answer to this question brings us to the second of the changes referred to above. Readers of Oak Leaves Part 2 will probably be able to give the answer, 1912 being the year when Roundhay Rural District, which included Oakwood, became part of Leeds. Newspaper reports at that time indicate considerable discontent about this, and it is hard to resist the conclusion that the gift of the clock was a sweetener to one of the annexed areas, though this was not spelled out in so many words. Clocks as a leaving present are a time-honoured custom - a clock as a joining present is less common.

From July 1912 onwards there are two parallel themes to the story of how Oakwood got its clock. It is necessary, through Council committee reports and newspaper reports, to follow the bureaucratic and constructional progress, and it is also of interest to note public reactions, as apparently featured in readers' letters to the New Leeds News (later North Leeds News). I say "apparently" because this newspaper merely reports the themes of the letters rather than printing them out, which means that the readers' opinions are third-hand and, just possibly, could have been embroidered, or even supplied

by the newspaper itself. I hope not, and will tell the story as if they are genuine.

By September 1912 the Markets Committee were looking to replace our clock in the market, which suggests that it had already been removed and put into store. In the same month, readers of the New Leeds News are wondering if the clock will not look out of place at Oakwood, and whether a new shelter for tram passengers is really necessary? Even at this early stage, therefore, there is some disgruntlement about the clock, but we can only speculate about the reasons. Ratepayers angry at the cost? Aesthetic considerations? Or just a feeling that the new town dwellers are being manipulated and fobbed off?

Meanwhile, the bureaucrats did not exactly hurry. Not until late November did the Parks Committee authorise a sub-committee to deal with the erection of the shelter to form the base of the clock, while it was December 1912 before two members of that sub-committee were authorised to interview the Tramways and Electricity Committee with a view to them contributing towards the cost of erecting and lighting the clock and shelter. Tenders to carry out the work would only be obtained after agreement was reached with the Tramways and Electricity Committee. This would delay further progress until February 1913.

By January 1913, the delay led to more grumbling in the pages of the New Leeds News, partly from its readers, but also in the form of an article in the newspaper, which protests at this "handsome erection" being "allowed to remain much longer in the obscurity of some storehouse, somewhere or other". One reader asks if the new clock and shelter at Oakwood will not be a distinct improvement upon the "present unsightly structure?". This tells us that public opinion towards the clock was not wholly disgruntled, and that there was a tram shelter at Oakwood before that under the clock.

In the 7th February 1913 New Leeds News a reader, possibly from Moortown, asks if there is to be a shelter at Moortown as well, and "is one not as necessary as the other?". The tone suggests a disgruntled ratepayer who thinks neither is necessary.

Progress was, however, made during February 1913. The Sub-Tramways and Electricity (Traffic) Committee agreed to contribute £75 towards the erection cost and to light the clock and shelter and, consequently, tenders were to be obtained. Even so, it was not until 5th May 1913 that the tender of Messrs Thompson and Sons was accepted, the total cost of the building work being £229.

At last the work was started and made steady progress, progress noticed on 8th July 1913 by a reader of the North Leeds News, whose irate fulminations seem worth reporting in full. Calling himself 'a ratepayer' the author says "May I point out what seems to me to be a waste of time and labour which is going on at Oakwood where the erection of a clock with a number of etceteras is in progress? What advantage this structure will be goodness only knows, for if they want a clock up there, why not erect it on the Parks Department buildings? The truth of the matter seems to be that the Parks Committee want to get the clock off their hands. Hence, as the antiquarian timepiece has to be put up somewhere, Oakwood residents are to have a permanent eyesore inflicted on them."

Handsome erection or permanent eyesore? Well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder of course, but "antiquarian timepiece" seems a bit rich when referring to a nine-year old clock. 'Ratepayer' does seem to have a point in his suggestion that the park entrance building could have had a clock put on it. This was a pleasant enough building centrally situated on the Soldiers' Field side of the road between Princes Avenue and Park Avenue. It was demolished shortly before the Second World War.

Another reader asks, in the 11th July New Leeds News, if the first strong wind will blow the clock down at Oakwood? In the 18th July 1913 issue there is a reaction to these views. Readers ask Why there should be so much grumbling about the new clock at Oakwood? If it will not be of great public service there? The next week (25th July 1913) there is a humorous response, when readers ask Where is the market clock? If it is not "high time" this business was "wound up". If it has not "struck one" or "two" of the Roundhay residents that "time" has been lost, stolen or "run down". Whether the Clerk of the "Works" is a "striker" or the "hands" have "struck". Is there not "alarm" among the residents of Oakwood?

But even such sparkling wit could not hasten the process of construction, and the weeks continued to pass. In the 19th September 1913 New Leeds News readers ask, perhaps sarcastically, if special [tram]cars will be run for the opening of the new clock and shelter, which must therefore have seemed more imminent.

Well, Leeds City Council got there in the end, and the North Leeds News of 17th October 1913 announced that the work had been "completed at last, and Roundhay residents are agreeably surprised to find that, contrary to expectations, the structure is quite a pleasing and ornamental one... within a few days the public will have access to this new convenience. There will be no formal opening ceremony - the shelter will simply be thrown open to the public at the earliest possible moment".

The lack of an official opening is disappointing, particularly to the historian, and no doubt anticlimactic to readers of this article. But there it is. The clock is pictured in the Yorkshire Evening Post of 5th November 1913, captioned 'Roundhay's new ornament', then 'The clock and shelter, which is both ornamental and useful...'. The use of the present tense implies

that the public were admitted to the shelter between 17th October and 5th November 1913, and we must be satisfied with that.

Acknowledgement:

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Other sources:

**Leeds City Council. Proceedings of Committees
New Leeds News, later North Leeds News.
Yorkshire Evening Post**