

Welcome

Did you know...?

Some of the most important buildings in Leeds have a Potts clock.

The story of Potts of Leeds covers five generations of clock making.

Over 1,600 public clocks made by the company have found their way around Great Britain and across the world.



Potts clocks have been linked to the story of the city from Victorian times and are still part of the landscape. This city centre heritage trail will help you spot some of the finest examples, some of which are still in good working order.

On this side of the leaflet you will discover the history of this remarkable firm and the skilled craftsmanship which made it famous.

Alongside the map on the other side you will find that each clock has its own unique story.

To walk around all the clocks on the trail would take about one and a half to two hours. To help you find your way, Walk It signs are placed at various locations around the city centre.

Early days

The story begins with Robert Potts, who was born in Northumberland in 1776. He was one of nine children and the family lived on a farm near Stockton-on-Tees. At sixteen Robert was apprenticed to James Thompson of Darlington for six years at a cost of £20 to 'learn the art of watch and clock making'.

Following the death of his wife in 1814 Robert went to work for William Smith and Sons of Keighley, who manufactured spindles, flyers and guide wires for the early spinning machines. William Smith made and repaired clocks in the evening, and for a time Robert used a corner of William's shop to make his own clocks.

William's story begins

William, Robert's third son, followed in his father's footsteps as a clockmaker. At the age of twelve he left grammar school and went to work with his father in Keighley where gradually his own interest in clocks developed. In 1830, William went as an apprentice to Darlington, working for Samuel Thompson, son of James who had trained Robert.



William Potts in about 1870

At the end of his apprenticeship in 1833, William moved from Darlington to Pudsey only a few miles from Leeds, at first making small 'house clocks' supplying local shops. Robert helped him in the business until his death in 1839.



In 1838, William married Elizabeth Banks from Pudsey. Elizabeth had inherited a good head for business from her father and a strong determination from her mother. She is known to have supported William, who said he often consulted his wife.



Inside the Corn Exchange

Glory years

By 1847 the family was living in a three storey property in Chapeltown, Pudsey and in that year William received his first major commission - a new clock for Ilkley Parish Church. He won the order after close questioning by the amateur horologist Edmund Beckett Denison (later Lord Grimthorpe), who had been brought in to advise by the Rev John Snowdon. This clock survives almost in its original form, even though the dial fell from the tower in 1947. It now has a copper dial, still with the hands fitted by William Potts.



William started to gain a wide reputation for his high quality workmanship and reliability and the demand for the impressive turret clocks was increasing. In 1862 he moved the business from Pudsey to Leeds - already a rapidly expanding industrial town. The new premises were at 13 Guildford Street on what is now the Headrow, between Butts Court and Green Dragon Yard and not far from the Town Hall. By 1872 they had expanded further into 21 Guildford Street. As demand increased further and the workforce grew to twenty-one men and four boys, the company expanded into nearby Basinghall Street off Butts Court.

William and Elizabeth had three daughters and four sons, three of whom, Thomas (known as Robert), James and Joseph joined the business around their twenty-first birthdays, creating the partnership - William Potts and Sons.

The new century

The last three decades of the nineteenth century were prosperous, with new commissions linked to the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria. In 1887 William Potts died and the company moved turret clock manufacture into grander premises at 19 Cookridge Street.

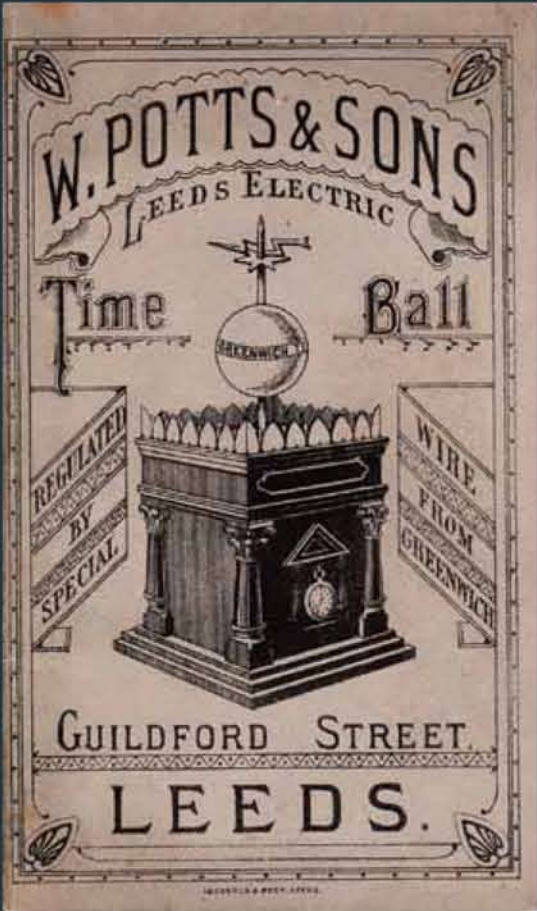
Unfortunately by 1905 demand for turret clocks was declining and in 1906 the partnership became a limited company, with James and Robert as principal shareholders while Joseph left to start his own firm with his son Cecil - Joseph Potts and Son. But shares were dropping in value and profits decreasing. Thomas Edmund Potts, William's grandson, was dismissed from the company in 1924 for mismanagement, and his son Robert, the fifth generation, was also asked to leave. In 1927 retail premises opened at 7 Commercial Street and in 1928 a new factory was acquired in Burley for the mass production of small clocks. Still sales were disappointing.



In 1930, frustrated by not being able to take charge of the firm, Robert Potts' son Charles began trading in his own name. When in 1934 the business was sold to John Smith & Sons Ltd of Derby, Charles continued with his business, installing clocks worldwide and modernising many of the earlier clocks. After he died in 1957, the business was sold to The Synchronome Co. and managed by his son Tony. The last clock made by the company was installed in 1962.

The Leeds time ball

In 1875 a curiosity appeared in the shop window of the Guildford Street premises - a time ball. At 1pm each day a telegraphic message was received from Greenwich and the ball dropped down the shaft - giving people in Leeds the chance to check their pocket watches against Greenwich Meantime. It was the first time ball in Leeds, and although there are no records, it is thought likely that Potts manufactured it. A similar one was later installed on the front of what was then Dyson's Jewellers on Lower Briggate. Although it no longer operates, the Dyson's time ball can still be seen today.



Dials and hands

The hands of the clock on Leeds Civic Hall in Millennium Square illustrate that this is not a Potts clock. Installed in 1933 by The Synchronome Co of London it is designed in late 17th century style and located in elaborate gold brackets.



In Victorian times, when the maker wasn't allowed to put his name on the clock, the shape of the hands, particularly the hour hand, was his signature. The dials and hands were referred to by pattern numbers. The hands of the Old Post Office clock, below, are 'Potts standard' - Pattern No 1 - with a classic 'skeleton' dial referred to as Pattern 6. The panels are opal glass.



Inside Leeds Central Library



The Potts wall clock in the Local and Family History department which once hung in the York Road Library reading room.

Did You Know?
There are many Potts clocks around Yorkshire. Look out for St Mary's Church in Whitby, Scarborough Station, Sheffield Town Hall, Saltaire Congregational Church, and the Wool Exchange in Bradford.

Credits:
Leeds City Council gratefully acknowledges Michael Potts for allowing us to use his book 'Potts of Leeds - Five Generations of Clock Makers' (Mayfield Books 2006) as the main source material for this trail including archive images and photographs.

Images of Leeds Parish Church and the Corn Exchange (7 and 8) and Kirkgate Market Hall - Leeds Library and Information Service. To learn more about old Leeds and its places and spaces visit www.leodis.net

Photograph of Oakwood Clock courtesy of Iain Macniven; Morley Town Hall - Rachael Kennedy.

Clocks outside the city centre

One of the most well-known Potts clocks in Leeds was commissioned in 1904 as a clock tower to be positioned inside the new market hall in Kirkgate Market. It is an impressively detailed hour striking clock with four dials. When the entrance to the market was changed in 1912, the clock tower was removed and erected in the open air at Oakwood, four miles from the centre of Leeds, where it has remained ever since, a familiar local landmark.



The clock of Morley Town Hall was installed by Potts in 1895, the same year as the one on the Post Office in central Leeds. It is a large Cambridge quarter chiming clock with four illuminated dials. In 1961 the clock was destroyed in a fire but the dials were repaired and a new auto winding clock installed.

In Sheepscar just north of the city centre you will see Northwood House, formerly a branch of the London and Midland Bank, dating back to 1836. Here the clock has three faces and is placed within an unusual turret.

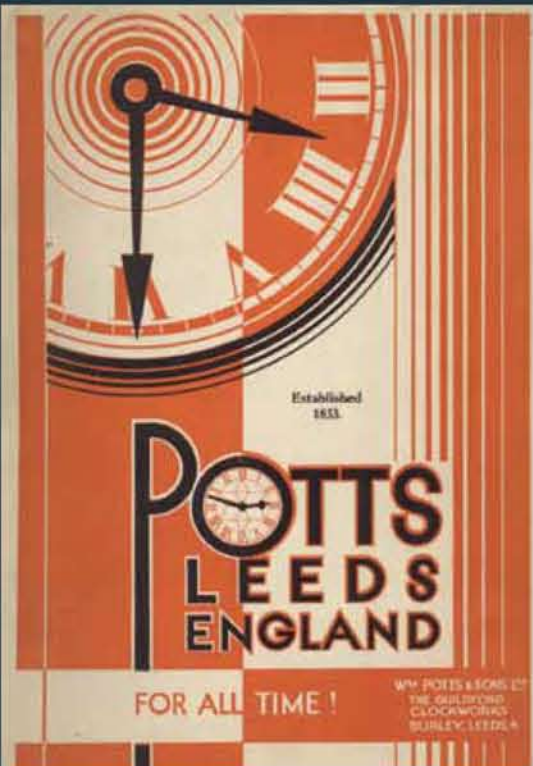
In the city centre is Prospect House on Sovereign Street whose clock was installed by Charles H Potts and Co Ltd in 1935 for Charles Walker and Co. Other familiar Potts landmarks around the area are Armley Library, St James's Hospital, the Library pub on Woodhouse Moor, and in Otley, the Jubilee clock tower erected in 1887 and still standing proudly in the market place. In Roundhay Park, at the Lakeside Café overlooking the historic Waterloo Lake, the Potts clock dates from 1904.

Company advertising

Potts and Sons produced many catalogues, advertisements and exhibition brochures to promote the company and they also exploited letters of recommendation, especially those of Lord Grimthorpe, who had been responsible for giving William his first major commission for Ilkley Parish Church. They used elaborately headed invoices and receipts displaying their Royal Warrant.

In 1897 they made much of Queen Victoria's visit to Holy Trinity Church in Windsor when 'Her Majesty honoured this Memorial Clock with a visit of inspection and of gracious approval ...'

This advertisement in Robinson's Leeds Directory of 1898 shows the range of clocks Potts were producing at this time and illustrates their pride in the clocks they made for Lincoln and Newcastle Cathedrals.



Pictured here is the colour cover of a forty- two page catalogue illustrating the domestic clocks made at the Burley factory between 1928 and 1934. These clocks included mantel, wall and longcase clocks - grandfather (7ft 6in), grandmother (5ft 9in) and granddaughter clocks (4ft 6in).

Did You Know?
In 1930 Leyland Motors Ltd came up with a new advertising idea and designed a number of clocks with the words 'Leyland Motors For All Time' around the dial. One of the most famous was on the summit of Shap over the high fells between Kendal and Penrith. The prototype clock unfortunately had a tendency to stop in snow or high winds so Potts were brought in to devise a mechanism that would withstand the weather. There were eight clocks round the country and they became well known landmarks.

Potts clocks from the 1920s...



What would the staff and management of William Potts and Sons Ltd, photographed inside Butts Court in about 1923 think of...

... to the 21st century

Momentous - a spectacular light projection on Leeds Civic Hall in October 2013, over four days including Light Night. Created by artists Illuminos in celebration of Potts clocks.



Walk it

Leeds Potts Clocks Heritage Trail



Leeds is very compact and walkable, easily accessible by bus, train or car. Leeds Bradford International Airport is just half an hour from the city centre by bus. There are numerous car parks and ample blue badge car parking spaces in the city centre.

Leeds Visitor Centre

Friendly visitor information and ticket office conveniently located at Leeds station, open 7 days a week.

0113 242 5242
www.visitleeds.co.uk

Leeds Travel Information

With up-to-the-minute information about car parking spaces, public transport and walking routes, travelling into and around Leeds has never been easier.

0113 242 5242
www.leedstravel.info

Leeds City Bus

The Leeds city bus provides fully accessible travel between key locations around the city centre.

Metroline 0113 245 7676
www.wymetro.com/

Walkit.com

The urban walking map and route planner helps you get around Leeds on foot. Get a walking route map between any two points, including your journey time, calorie burn, step count and carbon saving. Its quick, free, healthy and green.
www.walkit.com/leeds





1 Carriageworks

The Carriageworks Theatre and Electric Press date from 1848 and were formerly the West Riding Carriage Works and cabinet manufacturers Roodhouse and Sons. The building became Chorley and Pickersgill's printing works in 1866. This clock, situated within the roofed courtyard area now surrounded by bars and restaurants, is original, and was restored when the Carriageworks Theatre was created in 2005. Its workings can be seen on the landing between the ground floor Box Office and the first floor of the Theatre. Although it has the Potts maker's plate, none of the parts can be identified as the standard parts usually used by Potts, so the name of the original maker remains a mystery.

For opening times of the Carriageworks Theatre see www.carriageworkstheatre.org.uk



3 Old Post Office

The Old Post Office facing the City Station across City Square is still one of the most impressive structures in Leeds. Designed by architect Sir Henry Tanner, it was originally Leeds's largest post office and the city's telephone exchange. Creating a clock for such an important municipal building would have been a significant order for William Potts, who received the commission in 1895. No longer a post office, it is Grade II listed and still displays its remarkable exterior features. The intricate detail of the clock tower encloses four illuminated dials 6ft 6in in diameter, and reflects the grandeur of the city's Victorian architecture.



5 Holy Trinity Church

In 1902, many clocks were installed across the country to commemorate the coronation of King Edward VII. Potts received commissions for seventeen church clocks in this year, one of which was for Holy Trinity Church on Boar Lane.

When the church was built in 1727, its clock was made by Morgan Lowry of Leeds, one of the most famous makers of the time. Potts replaced it with a new hour-striking clock now housed in a three stage tower, which replaced the original tower and timber spire that blew down in 1839. The tower has two bells, one of which is the oldest in the city, dating from 1728.



2 Leeds Town Hall

Edmund Beckett Denison was an expert in clocks – an horologist. As advisor on the choice of clock maker for the Town Hall, he recommended Dent of London. But in 1859, one year after the Town Hall was opened by Queen Victoria, the clock still hadn't been delivered. It was eventually installed in early 1860 but failed to operate reliably, so William Potts was appointed to take charge and get it running. Given the company's extensive repair and alteration work, Leeds has always thought of the magnificent Town Hall clock with four faces, as a Potts.

Town Hall tours including the clock tower take place on the last Monday of the month at 11:30am and 2:30pm and the last Saturday of the month at 10:30am. Tickets £4. Please call 0113 2243801 to book.



4 Griffin Hotel

In 1868 the major redevelopment and widening of Boar Lane took place and a shopping street with fashionable and exclusive shops was created. This presented an opportunity for Potts to create two new clocks. The first of these was in the stunning Royal Exchange building situated on the corner of City Square and Boar Lane but was demolished in 1966.

Still existing today is the clock installed in 1877 for what was then the Griffin Hotel. Unlike Potts' usual design which uses Roman numerals, the numbers here are represented by letters spelling 'Griffin Hotel'.



6 Leeds Bridge

There may have been a crossing point over the River Aire here in Roman times. The present Leeds Bridge was built of cast iron in 1873 replacing the medieval stone bridge, site of the Leeds Cloth Market. The new construction was better able to cope with the increased trade and traffic of the growing industrial town. It was from the second storey of a building here in 1888 that Louis Le Prince used his single lens camera to make his famous moving film of horse drawn traffic passing over the Bridge. The clock installed by William Potts and Sons in 1868 can be seen on the south side of the river on what was formerly the property of belting manufacturers G. Angus and Co.



7 Leeds Minster

In 1898 a large quarter-chiming clock was commissioned for the Parish Church, which had been rebuilt by architect Robert Chantrell on the site of the medieval structure. He had been told by the new Vicar of Leeds Dr Hook, that he wanted a 'grand' church for everyone in the town. This mighty building with 1600 seats was consecrated on 2nd September 1841 with Florence Nightingale in the congregation. Still famous for its Victorian stained glass and mosaics, the Church became Leeds Minster in 2012.

The clock displays four illuminated dials 8ft 6in in diameter on the 139ft tower. It is thought Potts may also have supplied the carillon machine, a musical instrument housed in the bell tower and used to alert people to the time.



9 Queen's Arcade

Named in honour of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887, Queen's Arcade was designed by Edward Clark and built on the site of the Rose and Crown Yard. In 1890, the clock was installed on a bracket on the Briggate entrance as a signpost for the Arcade. Originally a drum clock 5ft in diameter, it was reduced in size in 1957 and later fitted with an electric motor so that it ran off the mains – this is known as a synchronous movement. In 1901 William Potts and Sons received the last Royal Warrant awarded to a clock maker in the reign of Queen Victoria.



11 Grand Arcade

Currently not in working order, this dramatic example of a large quarter chiming clock was installed in 1898 in the new Grand Arcade, which was built by William Lupton and Co, local woollen merchants. It was probably inspired by the automaton clocks Arthur Greenhow Lupton saw on a visit to Germany. William Potts and Sons were delighted with this unusual timepiece, calling it the 'greatest horological accomplishment of the century'. Two copper bronze knights in armour struck the quarter hours with their battle-axes and as the clock struck the hour, five figures emerged on a turntable, including a guardsman who saluted and a Scotsman in highland dress who bowed. As the figures passed back into the clock, a cockerel crowed and flapped its wings.



8 Corn Exchange

In 1862, William Potts was commissioned to make two clocks for the new Corn Exchange, considered by many to be the greatest work of architect Cuthbert Brodrick, best known for his design of the magnificent Leeds Town Hall. The clock on the exterior of the building is set in the parapet above the main entrance just below the building's unique oval dome, and is surrounded by elaborate scrolls. Inside there are now shops and a restaurant where once corn farmers and corn factors traded.

The Potts clock, high up in the roof, is framed by stone sheaves of corn. Both clocks are in good working order with the original dials still remaining, though the movements have been replaced with synchronous movements.



10 Thornton's Arcade

This famous clock, designed by Leeds sculptor John Wormald Appleyard, was installed in 1877. Its life-size wooden automaton figures, Richard Coeur-de-Lion, Friar Tuck, Robin Hood and Gurth the Swineherd, represent characters from Walter Scott's novel 'Ivanhoe'. While the figures appear to be striking the bells, the working hammers are actually out of sight behind the clock. Celebrated for its large Cambridge quarter chiming mechanism with the latest gravity escapement, it was converted to automatic winding in 1955 by Charles Potts and further restored in 1997. It continues to fascinate shoppers in this beautiful Victorian Arcade.



12 Thomas Green & Sons

After modest beginnings as a wireworker, Thomas Green made his first lawnmower in 1855. Over the life of Thomas Green and Sons, over a million machines were manufactured for the home market and overseas. As the business expanded into the Smithfield Ironworks on North Street, they built road rollers and over 200 steam tram and steam railway locomotives, playing a vital part in the industrial history of Leeds. This clock dates from 1923 and is an example of the 'turret clock' for which William Potts and Sons were particularly well known. Like the Griffin Hotel, the clock has letters in place of numerals.

An early Thomas Green lawnmower and a hand roller can be seen in Abbey House Museum in Leeds.