

The Bells and Clocks of the Steeple

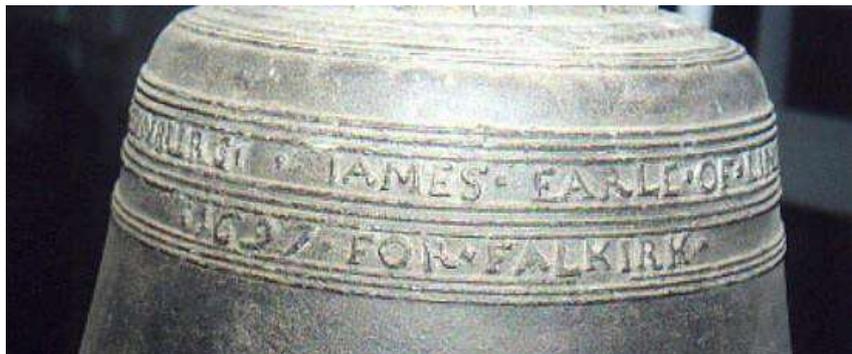
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[Introductory Film: Falkirk's Steeple Bell](#)

The exact location and appearance of Falkirk's first steeple is uncertain and there is no evidence to suggest that it contained a clock. There was however a weather vane and a bell and it would appear that neither was in a fit condition when the replacement steeple was under construction in 1697. A new bell was required and it came in the form of a gift to the town by James Livingston, 4th Earl of Callendar. The bell, which was cast in the famous

Edinburgh bell-foundry of John Meikle, was 26ins in diameter and had an unusual shape, being only 17ins high from the lip to the base of the canons. It is inscribed "JAMES EARLE OF LINLITHGOW AND CALLANDER JOHN MEIKLE FECIT EDINBURGH 1697 FOR FALKIRK"



Illus: The 1697 Steeple bell.

and served for exactly 200 years.

In 1814 when the present steeple was under construction the stentmasters decided that their grand new venture deserved a second bell to supplement the old favourite. In March 1814 the stentmasters determined

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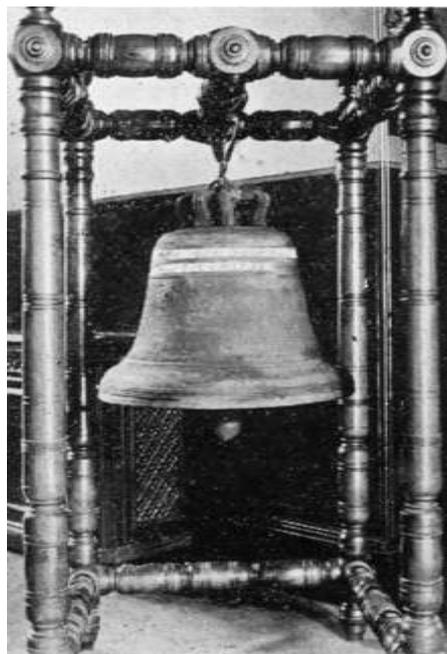
to raise the necessary money and John Russell, Falkirk's leading clockmaker, volunteered to take charge of the subscriptions. The town was offered 6d per pound for the old bell, but this, thankfully, was rejected. In August 1815 sufficient funds had been raised and Russell wrote to London to order a bell, not to exceed 15cwt, to be made. It was delivered by a Carron ship the following January and was hung by Michael Muir, wright, Falkirk. The bell cost £120, but with carriage, installation, and so on, the total was nearer £200. In addition to the maker's name, Thomas Mears, and the date 1815, the bell bears the motto "MAY FALKIRK FLOURISH". After a century's service, the new bell was repaired and turned in the 1920s by Thomas Blackadder and Sons of the Garrison Foundry, Falkirk (Love 1910, 114). It is the bell that today we hear ringing the hours today.

Illus: The 1815 bell with the inscription 'May Falkirk Flourish'.



Back in 1816 the new bell was soon at the centre of a dispute between the stentmasters and the Parish Church. The bell had to be rung manually and the customary times

of the day for this were 6am, 1pm, 8pm and 10pm. It had also always been rung on the Sabbath in concert with the bell of the parish church. After 1814 some of the dissenting congregations in the town requested that the town bell be rung for them too, their services occurring at different times to those of the



established church. Influential members of these congregations had subscribed to the Steeple and the new bell and not surprisingly the request was considered favourably. Dr Wilson, the minister of the old kirk was furious. Such a proceeding, he insisted, would be confusing and was against common usage and practice – and hence against the law. The stentmasters consulted the legal profession and were told that Wilson's argument was mere bluster. The bell could be, and was, rung when required. It was therefore agreed to ring the bell at a quarter before eleven and a quarter before two o'clock on Sundays, as well as at the times previous (Love 1910, 115). In connection with Royalty it was rung on birthdays, coronations and deaths.

Illus: The Steeple bell in the burgh buildings.

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The original 1697 bell remained in the Steeple until 1897 when it was reported to be cracked and the burgh councillors decided to replace it. It was removed and placed in a special wooden frame and displayed in the burgh buildings for a number of years. It is now in the Falkirk Museum collection.

The Council purchased a replacement bell which was installed in June of that year but the sound it produced brought an avalanche of objections from members of the public who claimed it was unworthy of an important town like Falkirk. The following letter to the Falkirk Herald was typical: *"On the Sabbath one felt quite pained to hear the cheap-jack tinkle of this latest addition chiming with the grand deep-toned, sonorous voice of the familiar 'Big Ben' of Falkirk."*

The writer concluded that until a new bell was in place *"keen regret must prevail that the 200 year old bell is to be succeeded by a mere toy bell"*. Fortunately help was on hand in the form of Captain Fenton-Livingstone of Westquarter. He offered to pay for a bell of better quality and by November of the year (1897) it was hoisted into place and rung for the first time by Mrs Fenton-Livingstone. The bell bears the inscription "Presented by L. Fenton-Livingstone to replace the bell gifted by his ancestor James, Earl of Linlithgow and Callendar, in the year 1697. John C Wilson and Co., Ltd., ironfounders, Glasgow." The 'cheap-jack' tinkler was gifted to the Falkirk Town Mission which was then being built just off the Cow Wynd. This required a belfry to be substituted for dome of the original design and the bell is still in place. This new small bell for the Steeple also remains in position in the bell chamber above the 1815 'Big Ben,' but has not been used for many decades.



Originally the bells were attached to wheels and rung by ropes pulled in a bell-ringing chamber below. In the case of the present Steeple this was the large room with the round-headed windows. After the opening of the new court house in Hope Street in 1868 the prison cells in the Steeple were no longer used as such and holes were made to allow the bell ropes to pass down to the lower floors. Sometime in the early 20th century the bells were fixed in position and the large bell rung by an electro-mechanical device linking the clock to a hammer.

Illus: The new 1897 small bell in position pictured in 2014.

The bells in the Steeple were also rung in celebration of the military victories that form the stepping stones of British history such as Trafalgar and Waterloo. In the Second World War the Steeple bell chiming midnight was once mistaken by the Home Guard as a signal that the area had been invaded by the German army. It was subsequently silenced and did not ring again until VE Day with one single exception and that was the Allied victory at El Alamein which was seen as a turning point in the fortunes of the nation.

We do not know when the first Steeple clock was installed but by 1722 there was one in place to which Mr Johnston of Kirkland testified in this description of

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the town: *"It has a very handsome Tolbooth with a beautiful steeple, where are a clock and large bell, this stands in the centre of the village. It has a well and pond near to the Tolbooth."* (MacFarlane, W 1906, Vol. 1.)

It seems likely that this clock was replaced because we have several prints showing the date 1776 placed in the spandrels. However it does not seem to have been a great success because the Council was regularly asked to find money to make various repairs. In 1785 the Herald reported that James Watterson, a painter from Paisley, was appointed to *"execute the painting, lettering, figuring, and gilding the two dials"* for which he was paid £16 10 shillings. At the same time clockmaker John Russell agreed to *"keep and wind the clock from Whitsunday 1785 to Whitsunday 1788 for a yearly sum of sixteen shillings and eightpence"*. The work of maintaining the clock was clearly problematic for Russell because we find him complaining that his salary is insufficient. In addition the Council had to replace elements of the clock to keep it functioning several times right up to 1803 when the building was demolished.



Illus: The 1815 bell and hammer pictured in 2014.

Since the clock had never kept good time there was no point in keeping it and it was sold as scrap for 11 shillings. Russell now offered to furnish a new clock at cost price as his contribution to the funding of the new steeple. The agreed specification was:

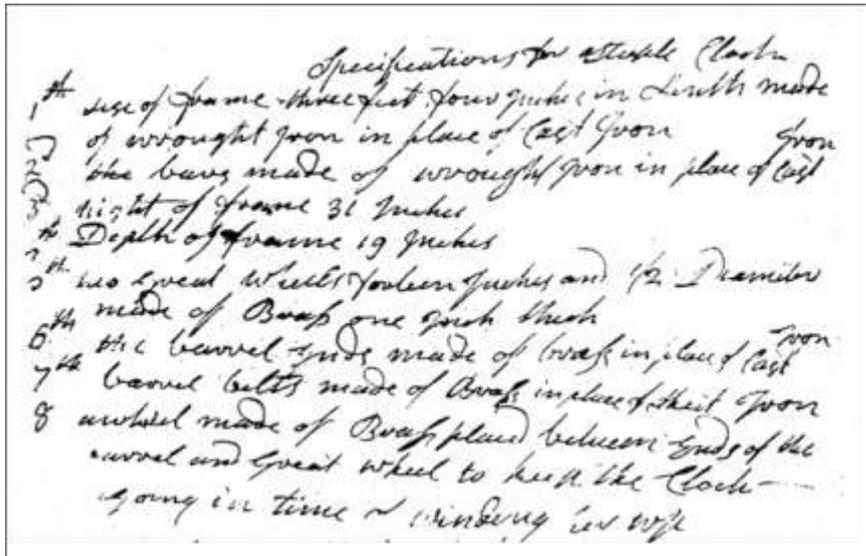
- 1st. Size of frame, three feet four inches in length, made of wrought-iron in place of cast-iron.*
- 2nd. The bars made of wrought-iron in place of cast-iron.*
- 3rd. Height of frame, 31 inches.*
- 4th. Depth of frame, 19 inches.*
- 5th. Two great wheels, fourteen inches and a half in diameter, made of brass, one inch thick.*
- 6th. The barrel ends made of brass, in place of cast-iron.*
- 7th. The barrel bolts made of brass, in place of steel-iron.*
- 8th. A wheel made of brass placed between ends of the barrel and great wheel, to keep the clock going in time of winding her up. A complete going clock with hands, paces, pendulum, a box to cover the work, and every other thing necessary to put up the same, and leave it in proper going order.*

In September 1814 his offer was accepted. He was to be paid £100 in five yearly instalments, without interest and the clock was to be installed by Whitsunday 1815 (Love 1910). This was duly done and the clock bears the following inscription: *"This clock was contracted for by the Stint-masters of*

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Falkirk, Thomas Johnston, Preses; Thomas Duncanson, Treasurer; John Russell, watchmaker for Scotland to His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent."

The brass setting dial further records that the clock was repaired in 1872, and August, 1887, by David Strang, watchmaker, Falkirk, who had regulated it from August, 1864. After the death of Russell in 1817, the clock was regulated and repaired by Robert Dalglish and the Dobbies, notable Falkirk clockmakers.



Illus: John Russell's specification for the new steeple clock dated 1814.



Illus: The Falkirk Steeple clock of 1815 on display in Edinburgh and, right, the setting dial with inscription.



Illus: Drawing of the High Street, c1830. Peter Keir, clockmaker, is standing in the doorway on the left looking up at the clock that he maintained.

The dials of the clock being of wood, it was impossible after dark to see the time, consequently a movement was began in 1846 to fit in a transparent one for the west to be lit by gas. The Stentmasters and Feuars voted £20 towards the project, and additional subscriptions amounting to almost £60 were raised through the exertions of Provost Robert Adam. The principal subscribers were:

Subscriber	£	S	D
Stintmasters of Falkirk	10	0	0
Feuars of Falkirk	10	0	0
Robert Adam, banker, Provost of Falkirk	5	0	0
John Wilson, Esq., South Bantaskine	5	0	0
John Wilson, Esq., Dundyvan	15	0	0
Michael Benny, Esq., of Custonhall	3	3	0
Alexander Nimmo, tanner	2	2	0
James Aitken, brewer	1	0	0
Henderson & Smith, writers		15	6
William Simpson, late of the Falkirk Bank	1	0	0
William Dobbie, watchmaker and bailie		10	6
William Ritchie, stoneware merchant		10	6
Robert Young, draper and councillor		10	6
Thomas Miller, grocer		10	6
George Murdoch, druggist		10	6
John Patrick, grocer		10	6
James Neilson, auctioneer		10	6
Henry W. Cochran, ironmonger		10	6
Peter Muirhead, cloth merchant and councillor		10	6

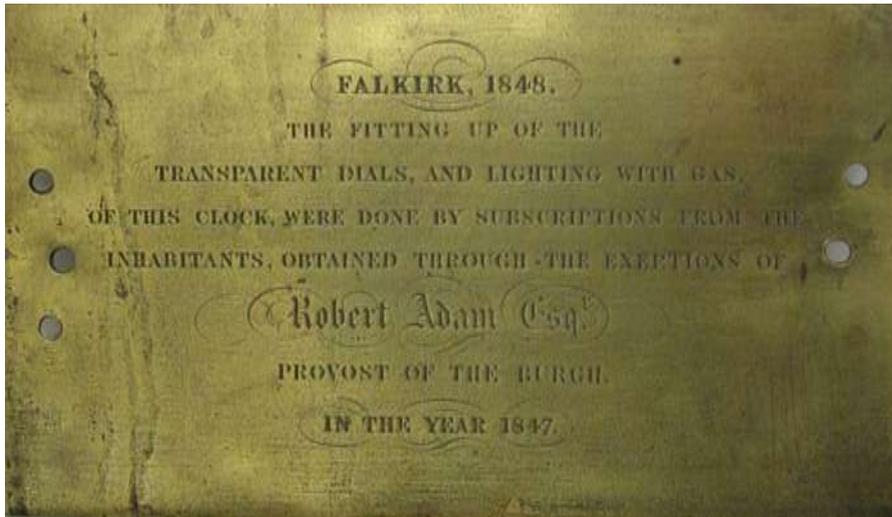
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Subscriber	£	S	D
Joseph Gartshore, grain dealer		10	6
Thomas Stark, draper		10	6
William Ure, grocer and councillor		10	6
Charles Jeffrey, bookseller		10	6
John Gair, procurator-fiscal		10	6
Patrick Murdoch, sheriff-clerk		10	6
William Roy, cloth merchant		10	6
Graham Hardie, manager of Falkirk Iron Works		10	6
M. Middlehurst, cabinetmaker and councillor		10	6
Alexander Macfarlane, agent Bank of Scotland		10	0
J. Hosie, grocer and bailie		10	6
Crosthwaite, Miller & Co., Camelon Iron Works		10	6
James Bryce of Kilns	1	0	0
J. W. Dickson, Esq., sheriff-substitute	1	0	0
W. Booth, nurseryman		10	6
Adam Smith, writer		10	6
James M'Laren, wright, Grangemouth		10	6
Mrs Bell, Belmont	1	0	0
A. Callendar, late of the Falkirk Bank	1	0	0
Rev. William Begg, minister of Falkirk		7	6
Archibald Johnston, stationer		10	6
D Buchanan, painter		14	0
Oliver Brothers, seedsmen		10	6
George Lightbody, hat manufacturer		5	0
William Smith, railway		15	6
James Espie, surgeon		10	6
Reid & Gillespie, drapers		10	6
Alexander Learmonth,. flesher		10	6
William Grosart, flesher		5	0
P. & J. Gentleman, drapers		7	6
James Duncan, printer and bookseller		7	6
William Thorburn, builder		10	6
James Rennie, Grahamston		10	6
William Forbes, Esq. M.P.	10	0	0
John Thomson, Carronflats		10	6
Thomas Hagart, Esq., Bantaskin	1	0	0
Dr Reid, Prospecthill		10	6
J. Sutherland, boot and shoe maker		5	0
Stewart M'Watters, painter		10	6
Allan Bell, Abbotshaugh		10	6
James Dawson, Carron	2	2	0
James Girdwood, surgeon		10	6
Alexander Black, land surveyor		10	6
David Arnot, ironmonger		6	0
Dr Lorn, Dunbar	1	0	0
Sir Michael Bruce, Bart.	1	0	0
James Russel, Esq.. Bonnyfield	1	0	0

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The lighting of the western dials of the clock was dubbed “a great improvement.” and additional sums were solicited for renewing and lighting the east dials, which was completed at a cost of £20, the money being immediately raised by public subscription. Yet another brass plate was set in place:

“FALKIRK 1848./ THE FITTING UP OF THE TRANSPARENT DIALS AND LIGHTING WITH GAS,/ OF THIS CLOCK WERE DONE BY SUBSCRIPTIONS FROM THE/ INHABITANTS OBTAINED THROUGH THE EXERTIONS OF/ Robert Adam. Esqr./ PROVOST OF THE BURGH/ IN THE YEAR 1847.”



Illus: Brass plaque commemorating the lighting of the clock in 1846.

In 1896 another Falkirk watchmaker, WC Muir, overhauled the clock at a cost of £45 10s. Opal dials were placed in the west and east fronts. In 1904 electric

lighting was introduced (Love 1928, 18-21).

The Russell clock survived until the lightning strike of June 1927 when there appeared to have been an accompanying explosion within the clock chamber which seriously damaged the mechanism. As part of the restoration an electric clock was installed and after some years in storage the old clock was repaired and put on display in the Museum of Scotland in Chambers Street, Edinburgh, where it remains today.

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