

Stopped clocks are a symptom of Britain's decaying public spaces



If our local authorities cannot even keep the time, what hope is there for other services?

Few syllables can have changed their meaning more drastically in the past decade than tick-tock (or TikTok): the former a staple of traditional English nursery rhymes; the latter a universe bounded in a social media nutshell, in which is to be found a selection of trippily animated modern nursery rhymes about old-fashioned, tick-tocking clocks.

Such artefacts might seem all but redundant. Our digital devices insistently remind us that it is later than we think. Mechanical clocks are increasingly the preserve of mildly obsessed eccentrics (among whom I count myself – I write this amid the ticking of an assortment of clocks, all prone to lagging behind or racing ahead of the pips).

If privately-owned clocks were once the glory of the domestic mantelpiece (the Wallace Collection's small but exquisite exhibition of Boulle timepieces is a timely reminder of just how glorious those ticking trinkets could be), municipal clocks were once the glories of our towns and cities. More than mere timepieces, they were landmarks and meeting places, scenes of partings and reunions; witnesses to countless human dramas.

The great boom in these mechanical monuments of civic pride came in the mid-19th century, with the rise of the railways and the standardisation of local time to London or "railway" time. Every station, town hall and public building announced the time to passers-by (including the Telegraph's former Fleet Street offices, where a splendid clock loomed high over the street, with letters spelling out 'The Telegraph' in place of the numerals).

An army of clockwinders once serviced the nation's public clocks. Over time their numbers dwindled as mechanisms were electrified, and last week saw the retirement of another member of that select band: After 32 years of winding the town hall clock at the Yorkshire town of Yarm, Graham Tebbs retired at the age of 76. The mechanism of the Yarm clock has been electrified and no doubt it will keep excellent time – though it won't adjust the clock to run half a minute fast as Graham sometimes did, so that people didn't miss their bus.

It is not just the clock winders, but the public clocks themselves that have fallen victim to the times. Whatever the reason – budget cuts, a lack of skilled people to maintain them, or just municipal indifference – a passer-by is more likely than not to find the hands of public clocks permanently stopped.

For clock lovers, there are few sights more melancholy than a handsome building whose clock isn't working. A stopped clock on a Victorian town hall or clocktower might seem a minor matter amid the decline of more pressing services. But this small act of neglect speaks eloquently of a lack of attention that resonates more than local authorities might imagine.

The unease when the "bongs" of Big Ben fell silent during the restoration of the Great Clock in the Elizabeth Tower was felt across the nation and sparked a lively debate as to what should replace them. At some subliminal level, a stopped clock above a busy street signals to passers-by that the time is out of joint. The debate about how to revitalise our high streets is intractably complex, but along with adequate parking, tidy streets and clean public loos, a functioning public clock signifies that someone, somewhere, is paying attention.

Our phones can tell us that we are late for a meeting; but street clocks make us look up for a moment at the world around us.

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