

*Lyme Regis Museum
Lyme's History in Objects
9. c.1760 - Great Storm Clock
Accession Number LRM 1985/240*

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Revised April 2016



The Great Storm Clock, a rather handsome Longcase or Grandfather one, is to be found on the first floor of the Museum, between the Literary Gallery and the passage connecting it to the Landslip Gallery. It was made about 1760 and was given by the Friends of the Museum. It still keeps good time, with a quiet tick, providing it is wound every seven days. The pretty chimes strike again, after David Newton of the Honiton Clock Clinic kindly untangled the striking mechanism in 2016, entirely free of charge.

There have been many disasters in Lyme. Most of them of the natural kind, and to give you a clue, they usually start with the word 'Great.' So we have the 'Great Fire', the 'Great Flood', the 'Great Landslip', and several 'Great Storms' - always bigger and better in Lyme, or should we say bigger and worse? The Clock is a survivor from the Great Storm of 1824. How 'great' was that storm? Actually, it was extremely great!

The Great Storm of 1824

It happened on the night of 23rd November, a Hurricane Force wind (force 12, above 75 mph) came roaring out of the South West, pushing the sea before it, resulting in what is known as a 'rogue tide'. A rogue tide is one which doesn't stop rising when it is meant to. So when it came to the "proper" High Water Mark it just kept on rising for another five hours. It might have been caused by a tsunami of sorts; one was recorded in the Bristol Channel in 1607. The wall of water created was so high that it topped the High Wall of the Cobb. (There are a couple of eyewitness sketches in the Museum which show clearly the actual height of the sea). The destruction that this caused was immense.

During the storm 90 yards (or roughly 90 metres) of the Cobb wall were completely destroyed or 'washed down', flattened, and the utter devastation came with terrible consequences, but also with a few little miracles on land and sea. Sometime after Christmas the tide returned to normal.

When the Cobb Wall went down, the shipyard was destroyed, and also Coade's Wall protecting the houses of the Cobb Hamlet. The houses and buildings behind were mostly reduced to rubble. This wall also protected England's Hotel, which, after the storm, was quickly removed next door into relatively undamaged houses. Here it still stands, now as the Royal Standard Inn. The clock was in one of those house, washed out, found in the Cobb and restored, as the plate on it records. What a miraculous survival!



At the height of the storm. The clock came from Mr Peter Walker's house, already fallen in this drawing. It was where the steep waves reach the shore in the foreground. Could any clock survive that? A ship is suffering: maybe the *Unity*.

Wreck of the *Unity*

Four ships were moored in the Harbour, and they either sank or were destroyed by being battered on the rocks, but amazingly two ships survived. One of these, the *Unity* was very interesting. She had been built in Bussels Boatyard down at the Cobb, the very one destroyed in the storm. During the storm she was dragged off her mooring and swept out to sea, with her Lyme crew on board.

Imagine that scene. Relatives of the crew on the cliffs above (now Langmoor Gardens) shouting, their voices lost to the wind, running along the cliffs in despair. But that crew survived, saved by a retired sea captain who lived in Lyme. His name was Captain Benett. He organised the rescue and this is how he did it.

Unity, captained by Robert Pearce, was swept across the bay towards Charmouth, and stuck on the rocks under the cliffs. A local man, a harbour pilot, was lowered over the cliffs on a rope which had been secured to a tree and managed to rescue Pearce by breeches buoy.

Meanwhile, one of the sailors fell into the water from the rigging and Captain Benett himself was lowered into the boiling sea and saved the man. (There is an eyewitness black and white picture in the Museum). Two other crew members, having been cut from the rigging, were pulled to safety. For their help in the rescue, several people were given purses of money, and Captain Benett was awarded a medal from the ‘Society of Preservation of Life from Shipwreck’, a forerunner of the RNLI.

Amazingly the *Unity* didn’t break up. Like the clock, she was repaired. She resumed her trading runs to London, even occasionally transporting some of Mary Anning’s fossils to customers there.

The Storm destroyed the houses on the Cobb as well...

Whilst all this was going on at sea, besides Mr Walker’s house going down, there was a drama happening in the house at the end of the Cobb. In that house lived an elderly couple, William Kerridge, the Cobb pilot, and his wife. When the storm struck, they were asleep in bed and were unable to get back to the land, because at that time you could only cross the beach from the Cobb to Cobb Hamlet at low tide. So there they were, stuck with boulders smashing onto the roof of their house and the sea breaking their windows with no hope of rescue. So what did they do?

Luckily, we have an eyewitness, a schoolmaster and local historian called George Roberts. In his book, *The History of Lyme Regis and Charmouth*, published in 1834, he explains what happened next. He says that the terrified couple managed to get out of their dwelling and into the Watch (or Customs House) next door (now the Aquarium). They got in through a broken window and he says they ‘scuttled¹ the floor’ of the building, one more substantial than their own, and there they lay for two days and nights, listening to

¹ It is assumed that this means to make a hole in the floor to allow water to run away, rather than the usual meaning of sinking a boat by making a hole in it or opening the sea cocks.

the storm raging around them, and to the destruction of their own house. Miraculously, after those two days, they were rescued and taken across to Cobb Hamlet, homeless but alive.



Peace restored after the storm – Mr Walker's house lay in the foreground, now just beach and gaunt wooden piles. The breach in the Cobb is clear see.

For more information on the sea walls and the storm, see http://www.lymeregismuseum.co.uk/images/stories/research/sea_defences_part_ii_walls_jetties_etc.pdf

The Clock, the tale of an Amazing Survivor of the Storm

Looking at the clock face, you can see this inscription:



A MEMORIAL
*of the Dreadful Storm, which on
the Morning of 23rd of Nov.
1824 laid waste the Western Coast.
A house situated at Lyme Cobb
occupied by Mr. Peter Walker was en-
tirely destroyed by the Violence of the
Waves. This Clock was recovered
from the ruins which were thrown
upon the Shore and has been
put in a state of complete re-
pair by John Hallett.
Watch Maker of
LYME REGIS. DORSET.*

By the side of the clock the museum label quotes George Roberts' eyewitness account of the Great Storm.

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