

Clock is a timely reminder of royal tribute and family feud

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POTTS clocks usually inhabit tall church towers or grand municipal buildings. But in Aldbrough St John there is one that graces a more humble private house.

How it came to be there is a happy story of a royal commemoration laced with the intriguing undercurrent of a long-simmering feud between the women at the end of two historic family lines.

It was the Percys versus the Spenceleys.

The Percys' connection with the area started in about 1638, when Sir Hugh Smithson made a large enough fortune as a London haberdasher to buy an estate in Stanwick. About 1668, he built the Old Hall opposite the church in Stanwick, which was the family seat for generations.

Those generations acquired more land locally, including the village of Aldbrough, and in 1750 one of them married the heiress to the Percy fortune. He changed his name by deed poll from Smithson to Percy, moved into Alnwick Castle and was soon proclaimed the first Duke of Northumberland.

The generations came and went until, in 1842, Lady Eleanor Grosvenor, daughter of the Duke of Westminster, married the Duke of Northumberland. She was 22; he was 55.

He died in 1865 and, because they had no children, a cousin became the duke and Lady Eleanor moved out of the castle and into the Old Hall at Stanwick.

There she lived for 45 years, fiercely aristocratic but genuinely kind to her villagers. She did many good works and replaced many farmworkers' cottages with decent stone buildings.

In 1879, she built the post and telegraph office in Aldbrough so that it looked like an estate cottage. Now the village was truly in touch with the outside

world - a postcard with a d stamp could be posted in London's Piccadilly Circus at 10pm and reach Aldbrough at 8am.

It is on the old post office, which Lady Eleanor had built, that the Potts clock hangs, but she did not put it there.

That honour belongs to Miss Mary Jane Spenceley (1857 to 1911). Her family had owned property in Aldbrough since 1210, gradually increasing their stock until the 19th Century, when her father owned more than 20 houses.

But her father, George Raper Spenceley (1805 to 1878), was a colourful cove. He was 53 when he married her 23-year-old mother, and he lived in the Old Hall, on Aldbrough green, while building the New Hall beside it. Somewhere along the line he also spent time in a debtors' prison in York.

Miss Spenceley also spent time out of the village. She became a nurse in Newcastle and was engaged to a prominent surgeon - a Dr Heath. But he died tragically young before they could marry, leaving her pregnant with a son whom she called Heathcote.

So it was as an unmarried mother, probably with a broken heart, that Miss Spenceley moved back to Aldbrough.

Like Lady Eleanor, she was a model of generosity, paying every year for the "tired mothers" of Aldbrough to visit the seaside at Saltburn or Redcar.

But, for Dickensian reasons we can only guess at, Miss Spenceley and Lady Eleanor did not see eye to eye.

"Miss Spenceley was never accepted by the Duchess Eleanor," says RJ Gill in his 1987 *Story of Our Village*.

So what must Lady Eleanor's reaction have been when she heard that Miss Spenceley had generously offered to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 by paying the famous Potts company, of Leeds, to put a large clock on her post office?

We shall never know. Ten years later, Lady Eleanor, the dowager duchess, died. She was the last of the long line to live locally because the Northumberlands sold off the Stanwick estate.

The fabulous hall was demolished, its fountain going to Cockerton Green, one of its ornamental arches to a house in Cleveland Avenue, and its wooden panelling being reassembled in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, US (the institute was founded by the illegitimate son of one of the first Smithsons of Stanwick, which sounds like a story for another day).

Fourteen years later, Miss Spenceley died and she, too, became the last of her long line to live locally. It is understood that Heathcote became a doctor in Darlington, where he had a family. But he died young and the family moved away, so severing connections that had out-lived 35 monarchs and the two Cromwells in the course of more than 700 years.

The Potts clock, though, has kept ticking. For 103 years its mechanism was housed inside a plain pine case (4ft by 15in by 9in deep) in the upstairs bedroom. The occupants were responsible for seeing that it was wound and accurate, and the parish council paid for its upkeep.

In 2000, the clock was converted to electricity. Now the parish council has to find four or five pence each week for the power bill, but no one has to be reminded about the weekly wind.

As regular readers will know, William Potts (1809 to 1887) was born in Salt Yard, off Bondgate, in Darlington, and served his clockmaking apprenticeship with an horologist in High Row. He founded a company in Leeds that bears his name to this day.

Many public clocks in this area are Potts clocks: Darlington town clock; St Cuthbert's, Darlington; South Park, Darlington; St Mary's, Gainford; St Mary's, Staindrop; St Thomas', Stanhope; St Edwin's, High Coniscliffe; Our Lady Immaculate and St Cuthbert, Crook; Etherley Church and Sadberge Church.

We would be delighted to learn of any others.

Aldbrough St John has probably the best village website of any in the district at www.aldbrough-st-john.co.uk/index.htm. It is packed with historical information, including that the correct pronunciation of the village is "Old-brough" which should rhyme with "rough".

And that is all you call the village. The post office might have added the St John bit in the 1930s to distinguish it from all the other Aldbroughs in Yorkshire, but no true Albruan would use it.

I With thanks to Ian Wardle of the village for his help

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