

# KEEPING TRACK OF TIME

King Street Clock Repair

BY NANCY MCCALLUM



**W**HEN MIKE BROWN retired from his career in human resources in 2019, he decided to start a new - and unusual - career. “I decided that repairing antique clocks would be a very rewarding way to spend my time,” he says. So Brown, who had been tinkering with clocks for a few years, started King Street Clock Repair, Inc., in the Oxford home he shares with his wife, Tina.





"Antique clocks have been in my life since my early childhood," Brown says. During the summer, his family and many cousins would spend weeks at his grandparents' coastal homes in Massachusetts. His maternal and paternal grandparents lived across the street from each other.

"The gathering of 12 cousins all within 10 years of age, the old-fashioned lifestyle of days on the beach, walks to the ice cream parlor, and bike rides around town are among my happiest childhood memories," Brown says. Those memories include the Sunday morning ritual of winding the 1810 family heirloom banjo clock at his paternal grandparents. Across the street, his other grandparents owned several antique clocks, including "...a huge grandfather clock in the front hall, and grandmother clock (grandmother clocks are 2/3 size

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Brown is now one of only about a dozen people in Maine who repair antique clocks professionally. These clocks do not rely on electrical or battery power - they must be wound by hand. People had attempted to track time for centuries - think of ancient sundials - but it wasn't until 1656 that Dutch inventor Christiaan Huygens designed a pendulum clock that reliably measured time.

The oldest clock Brown has worked on to date was made in 1760.

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What drew Brown, 61, to this unique business? First, there was the sentimental aspect.





of grandfather clocks) with a rocking whaling ship over the dial, and a cuckoo clock,” he says. “There were many scrambles to catch the cuckoo bird popping out at the top of the hour, and at the end of the day the sound of the grandfather clock ticking as we all fell asleep is one of my fondest memories. The allure and nostalgia of old clocks has been with me ever since.”

A second reason he was drawn to this craft is because he enjoys what he calls “mechanical challenges.” “I’ve lived in old houses my entire adult life and developing repair skills is almost essential in that environment,” he says.

What makes mechanical clocks tick is pure physics. The shorthand explanation is to think of a clock as a machine that controls the release of energy over time. The tick/tock you hear happens when the energy is being released. The inner workings include springs, gears, pinions, pendulums, and other parts that must all interlock and work precisely in order to measure time accurately.

Antique clocks vary in unusual ways. Clocks that will be used on non-level surfaces (such as a boat) are governed by a balance wheel versus a pendulum. The mechanical set-ups differ from clock to clock. Some need to be wound every day; others, once a week; some just once a year. Some have second hands, some have chiming features, and some feature cuckoos or other birds, or other whimsical features such as spinning dancers. “The casework is just as complicated as the mechanical portion of a clock,” Brown says. “Cases can be made of cast brass, stone, wood, glass, and anything else you

can think of. Tall clocks are often a treasured family heirloom, with elaborate and beautiful carvings, inlays, turnings, etc. I do basic repairs on cases, but don’t have the experience to produce the quality results that these pieces of art deserve.”

Brown learned about repairs by buying inexpensive clocks and disassembling them. “The first few gave their lives for my education, but with practice I could soon overhaul a simple movement,” he says. (The term “movement” refers to the mechanical components of the clock.) “I recall waking up in the morning wondering if a movement had run through the night, and the wonderful feeling of accomplishment when I saw that that pendulum was still swinging.”

He then bought the tools and clock inventory of a retired clocksmith from Laconia, New Hampshire and a small lathe/milling machine set-up from a clocksmith in Scarborough. He built a solid, level workbench (essential in this field) and installed brilliant lighting. “My wife still refers to the shop as the ‘operating room,’” he says.

Brown also connected with several experienced clocksmiths who mentored him. (He notes that the number of clocksmiths continues to decline, as most practitioners are seniors.) As a member of the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, he also has access to online resources, and he’s connected to other clocksmiths online.

Brown also received some local assistance. “One of the first things I did after incorporating in 2019 was join the





Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce,” he says. “They set me up with business coaching through SCORE and helped design a marketing plan. Many local businesses have been supportive of the new business. Route 26 Antiques offers a wonderful opportunity to retail the clocks that I purchase and overhaul. I also have clocks on display at the Paris Public Library, Creaser’s Jewelers, and McLaughlin Gardens. All of these people have been great business partners and are happy to talk with their customers about the services I offer. Grassroots Graphics has been a wonderful local asset. Karin has helped me recreate graphics for dials, which often have lettering styles that are hand-painted and can be over 200 years old.”

Brown mostly works in the shop, with occasional house calls every month to retrieve the inner parts from large clocks or to work on tall clocks on-site. His focus is mostly on pendulum clocks, which have a weight swinging on the end of a rod. The rods range from a couple of inches to three feet long. “The longer the pendulum rod, the slower the clock beats,” he says. “A classic grandfather clock has a pendulum that is 39.1 inches long, and beats once per second, or 3,600 beats per hour. It is interesting that this is also the beat rate of an average healthy human heart. I’ve often wondered if the soothing feeling of a ticking tall clock reminds us of our mother’s heartbeat, maybe from before birth? I’d like to think so.”

A lot of Brown’s work is about maintenance - which he recommends at every five years to 10 years, depending upon the clock and its environment. He advises people not to attempt it themselves, especially with common lubricants such as WD-40 or 3-in-1 oil, as they will gum up the works. Special clock cleaning solvents are required. Maintenance also involves polishing, refurbishing, and repairing worn parts, as well as making adjustments.

When Brown needs parts, he looks in his own inventory, can sometimes purchase them, or otherwise, he can make them. When an unfamiliar clock comes in, he often buys

a similar clock from the Internet in order to practice on it first. “I am acutely aware that my customers are entrusting me with a treasured possession, and I treat each one as if it were my own,” he says.

Before returning clocks to customers, Brown keeps them for a bit, to make sure they are working properly.

Brown has a favorite memory of a clock he repaired. “One of my favorite clock stories involves a woman named Sue who asked me to work on a massive Gustav Becker tall clock,” he says. “Her dad purchased the clock in Germany at the end of World War II for three oranges and two candy bars. He had it shipped home, and he wound it every Sunday for the rest of his life. After he died, the clock hadn’t run for almost 30 years. I overhauled the movement and got it running again. The first time it struck after the overhaul, Sue had tears in her eyes, as it brought back such powerful memories of her dad. Giving someone that kind of joy is immensely gratifying and is the reason that I will continue to repair old clocks for many years to come.”

Brown also sells clocks and has inventory on his website, [kingstreetclocks.com](http://kingstreetclocks.com), as well as a booth at Route 26 Antiques in Oxford. OHM

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I offer maintenance service, mechanical repairs, and casework repairs on all types of pendulum clocks, from the 1700’s through modern clocks.

I am eager to help you preserve or resurrect your family heirloom clock, or help you find the clock of your dreams.