Early days

The story begins with Robert Potts, who was born in Northumberland in 1776. He was one of nine children and the family lived on a farm near Stockton-on-Tees. At sixteen Robert was apprenticed to James Thompson of Darlington for six years at a cost of £20 to ‘learn the art of watch and clock making’.

Following the death of his wife in 1814, Robert went to work for William Smith and Sons of Keighley, who manufactured spindles, flyers and guide wires for the early spinning machines. Robert Smith made and repaired clocks in the evenings and for a time he rented a corner of William’s shop to make his own clocks.

William’s story begins

William Potts trained with his father and followed in his footsteps as a clockmaker. At the age of twelve he left school and went to work with his father in Keighley where gradually his own interest in clocks developed. In 1833, William went as an apprentice to Darlington to work for Samuel Thompson, son of James who had trained Robert.

In 1838, William married Elizabeth Banks from Pudsey. Elizabeth had inherited a good head for business from her father and a strong determination from her mother. She is known to have supported William, who said he often consulted his wife.

Clocks outside the city centre

One of the most well known Potts clocks in Leeds is in the Chapel Market, in the middle of the city. It is a large, very impressive clock, housed in the old market hall in King Edward Street. It is a beautiful example of a clock from the 1840s, with a large face and a striking mechanism.

The clock was installed in 1846, 20 years after the death of Robert Potts. It has a large, ornate face with a clock tower, and is located in the centre of the city.

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William and Elizabeth had three daughters and four sons, three of whom, Thomas (known as Robert), James and Joseph joined the business around their twenty-first birthdays, creating the partnership - William Potts and Sons.

The Leeds time ball

In 1857, a 200-year-old time ball was installed on the roof of the Old Vicarage in Leeds. The ball was lowered at 6pm each evening to tell people the time. It was later replaced by an electronic clock.

William Potts in about 1870

In 1870, William married Elizabeth Banks from Pudsey. Elizabeth had inherited a good head for business from her father and a strong determination from her mother. She is known to have supported William, who said he often consulted his wife.

Inside the Corn Exchange

William started to gain a wide reputation for his high quality workmanship and reliability and the demand for the impressive turret clocks was increasing. In 1853, he moved to a larger premises in Pudsey where he manufactured small ‘house clocks’ supplying local shops. Robert helped him in the business until his death in 1839.

The new century

The Leeds story ends

In 1898, Yorkshire United Football Club was formed in Leeds and became a major part of the city’s culture. The team has a long history, with many successful seasons, and has been the home of many famous players.

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Walk it

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Potts Clocks Heritage Trail

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