The clock tower in Berne

THE CLOCK TOWER IN BERNE

The Clock Tower or " Zytglogge " as it has been called ever since the earliest times, was in every respect the authoritative building of Berne. Its clock showed the official time after which all the other clocks were set, long before railway or radio existed as a means of checking the time; the distances of the roads were measured from the Clock Tower, and it is to it that the milestones on the cantonal highways refer. In its entrance archway, the linear measures, formerly *Elle* or *Klafter,* now metre or double metre, are put up as standard measures for purposes of official control and as models. To the wall of its archway all official announcements and laws were and still are affixed so that everyone may study them. The tower used to form the boundary of that ancient Berne, founded by Duke Berchtold von Zähringen in the year 1191. Then the town stretched from a lower gate and moat at the end of the Gerechtigkeitsgasse to the deep city-moat, which formed the boundary towards the west, on Kornhausplatz. The nucleus of this tower is without doubt the oldest construction in the city, its inner walls dating back to the twelfth century. Like most ancient towers it was open towards the city, and its interior and the side facing the town were built of wood. The foundation walls, more than nine feet in width, diminish slightly in thickness towards the top.

In the year 1405, the tower was gutted and after this fire the fourth side, which faces the city, was rebuilt in stone. The tower bell, which was cast in 1405, originally had to be struck by hand to announce the hours. It was in 1530 that the artistic astronomical or calendar clock, showing the position of the sun, moon, stars and planets as well as the month and day of the week was constructed; and at the time the delightful mechanical figure-play was made, which is still today a much admired showpiece of the town.

This "puppet-show" works as follows: two minutes before the hour strikes, a jester sitting in a niche wiggles his body to and fro to ring two bells suspended above his head. This is followed by a procession of armed bears in the lower part of the niche, which march out and disappear again inside. Two erect, marching bears, wearing the black and red colours of the city and acting as drummer and piper, lead the parade, then comes the captain, an armoured horseman with a sword in his hand, followed by a majestically-strutting bear with a crown on its head, prabably representing the sovereign power of Berne. After them three more bears appear as the guard or military power, the first clad in armour with sword and spear, the second shouldering a gun and the third carrying a sword. After this procession a cock crows, opens its beak and flaps its wings. Only now does the larger-than-life figure of a knight in golden armour at the verp top of the tower strike the great bell with a hammer, announcing the hour. Below, bearded Father Time counts the strokes by opening and closing his mouth at each peal. In his left hand he carries a scepter which he moves at every stroke and in his right an hour-glass which he inverts.

This amusing show has been the joy of children for more than four centuries, and is, as ever, much admired by all visitors to Berne.
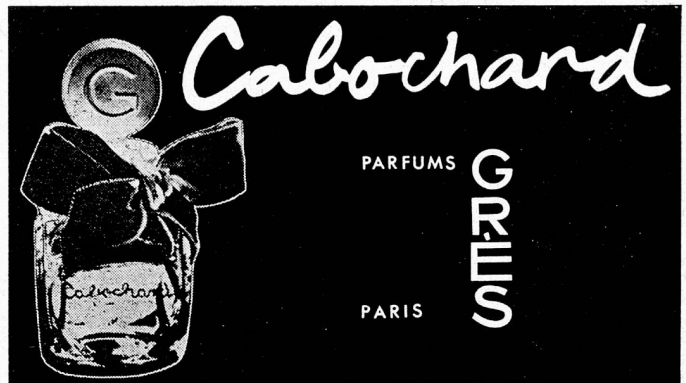
The outside of the tower underwent many a change with the passing of time. The west side is today decorated by a monumental allegoric picture painted by Victor Surbek representing the scythe-bearer Chronos, as a symbol of the swift flight of time, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Underneath is a simple black marble tablet with a Latin inscription dedicated to the founder of the city:

BERCHTOLDVS V. DVX ZAERING.
RECT. BVRGVND VRBIS CONDITOR
TVRRIM ET PORTAM FECIT
A. CHR. MCXCI
EA RENOVATA MDCCLXX

Translated it means:

" Berchtold V., Duke of Zähringen, Governor of Lesser Burgundy, founder of the city, built this tower and gate in the year 1191. It was restored in 1770." Of the many old towers and numerous gates of Berne only three are left, the Prison Tower, the Dutch Tower and this Clock Tower. They recall a medieval town full of beauty and charm.

(Berne Tourist Office.)