

Memory Lane

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The Birks Building

The original building at 1 James St. S was designed by architect Richard A. Waite, who also designed the Ontario Legislature building in Toronto, and built in 1883 for Canada Life Assurance as their head office until 1900 when it relocated to Toronto. The five-storey Gothic building, built with Connecticut brown stone, was made famous by the Birks company and the building made Hamilton famous. The building was sold to jeweler Henry Birks and Sons in 1929 after being severely damaged by fire. Henry Birks and Sons restored the space adding copper roof and the famous Birks Clock. The clock tower, added in 1929, was a highlight of the core. Oscar Wilde called it the most beautiful building he'd seen in the country.



The building pictured in the 1890s before the fire. Features included an electric fire alarm in each room and a hydraulic elevator. The upper storeys of the building were severely damaged by fire in 1929, but new owners, the Ryrie-Birks Co. Ltd., announced the building would be reconstructed almost exactly as it had been. From that point on, it would be known as the Birks Building.



A view of the ground level of the Birks building, 1960.

The founder of the Birks organization in Canada was born in Montreal in 1840. He opened the first shop to carry his name in that city in 1879. By 1893 four sons had joined the enterprise and the name Henry Birks & Sons was adopted.

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The Birks Building ...continued

The 18-foot tall, one-ton bronze clock was designed after “The Clock of the Charging Horsemen”, a famous 14th century timepiece still in existence at Wells Cathedral in Somerset, England. The lower part of the clock represents a medieval castle, with four armoured knights jousting on horseback. The knights circle the castle and tilt every quarter hour. The upper part of the clock houses the clock faces on four sides and represents the tower of a cathedral. The clock was designed by English heraldic artist Kruger Gray and installed in 1930.



This aerial view of Gore Park from James St. to Hughson St. shows how grand and expansive the Birks building was on the corner of King St. and James St.



The Birks clock in 1961.

Just before the Birks Building was demolished in 1972 to make way for a new modern building called 1 James South, the clock was removed. Once the new building was complete, the timepiece was re-attached to the building in its original position on the corner of the building in 1975. The Birks company, opened up their new store in Jackson Square and the clock was removed and sent to a warehouse in Toronto. Finally, the clock was placed outside the main entrance to Jackson Square in 1986.

The clock stopped working and was eventually given to the City of Hamilton to look after. It was warehoused by Public Works until 2006, then moved to safe storage at the Hamilton Museum of Steam and Technology in the east end. In 2008, it was suggested that the soon-to-be renovated Hamilton Farmers Market would be a great new home for the clock. It now has a prominent location right in the centre of the two-storey court in the heart of the market.



The clock being reinstalled in 1975.

The Birks Building ...continued

In 2006, its care and maintenance was transferred from the Public Works Department to the Community Services Department. After years of neglect and well-intentioned but ill-advised repairs, the clock had deteriorated considerably; it was not keeping time, the charging horsemen mechanism had seized and the original brilliant colour scheme was gone. It became the subject of many complaints from the public and subject to many Spectator articles. As the result of public pressure, it was dismantled in the fall of 2007 and put into safe indoor storage until funds were allocated for its restoration and a new indoor location identified.

The current building at 1 James Street South was designed by architect Stanley Roscoe and was constructed by Yale Properties in 1974 for the Fidelity Mortgage and Savings Corporation.



These two buildings, the Toronto-Dominion Bank and Imperial Bank of Canada, pictured in 1959, were located directly beside the Birks building on James St. Both were torn down in 1961 for construction of the new Imperial Bank of Canada building. It later became known as the Canada Permanent Building. That building was torn down in 1999.