

The curious tale of a well-travelled Wigan long-case clock

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Recently, I obtained a copy of the fifth, 'much enlarged' edition of Britten's authoritative 'Old Clocks and Watches & Their Makers'. Its subtitle, 'being an historical and descriptive account of the different styles of clocks and watches of the past, in England and abroad, to which is added a list of nearly twelve thousand makers,' invited further exploration. One entry in this hefty volume from 1922 caught my attention:

'Burges. Henry, long-case clock, about 1690; Mr. W. J. Clayton, South Australia'.

Since this was the only timepiece in Britten's compilation that had made it all the way to the Antipodes, my curiosity was piqued.

Henry Burges, the clock's designer, was a trailblazer in a long tradition of Wigan clockmakers. In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, northwest England was home to numerous master clockmakers, including many famous Wiganites like John Alkner, William Barker, Thomas Bridge, Archibald Coats and Peter Fearnley. Parish records of Wigan's Church of All Saints suggest that Henry Burges was also a Wiganite; he married Mary Roberts in 1665.

Horology - clock making - was a relatively new addition to the region's industrial manufacturing base at the time Burges made this 'long-case' or 'grandfather' clock. The industry's birth coincided with the large-scale expansion of Lancashire's textile manufacturing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution had given rise to a new generation of entrepreneurs who established engineering factories, ironworks, mines and textile mills. They spent their 'new money' on long-case clocks, eager to impress their guests with their newfound wealth and emulate the rural aristocracy with its 'old money'.

Wigan became known as the region's horological centre. As such, the area attracted many skilled craftsmen and watchmakers. But new arrivals could not simply set up shop and offer their services. Only clockmakers who had been made 'freemen' could do so; 'foreigners' - out-of-towners - were not allowed to trade unsupervised. Becoming a freeman was an onerous process, and success was by no means guaranteed. This is probably why Burges sometimes concealed his signature. Moreover, he frequently did not indicate the geographical origin of his clocks on their beautifully illustrated dial plates either.

However, persistence and ingenuity often paid off. For instance, in 1711, Henry's son John applied for Wigan freeman status, keen to join the local clockmakers' guild. At first, his application was rejected. The resident horologists opposed his candidature for Wigan's freedom for fear of increased competition. Nevertheless, the following year John applied again, this time requesting a license to trade as a gunsmith. And so, by 1713, he was eventually listed as a Wigan clockmaker after all.

Henry Burges represented an early generation of Wigan clockmakers, more commonly known as 'clocksmiths'. Their pioneering trade set the scene for the later prominence of Lancashire as northwest England's horological centre. However, market conditions were challenging. In the final decades of the seventeenth century, before the onset of the Industrial Revolution, clock ownership was almost unheard of outside of wealthy London circles. And so provincial clockmakers were struggling to sell even their cheapest and simplest timepieces.

Before the invention of the pendulum clock and the innovative 'endless chain' by the Dutch scientist-scholar Christiaan Huygens in 1658, clocks were kept running by regularly pulling up a weight suspended from a chain or rope. The cheapest clocks were weight-driven 'lantern clocks' and 'thirty-hour' long-case clocks; these required rewinding roughly every 30 hours. Second-generation long-case clocks employed a more complex gear train and became known as 'eight-day clocks'. Henry Burges' Australian clock was likely such an eight-day timepiece.

Given the challenging provincial market conditions in the late seventeenth century, Burges must have tried to make a living by selling the cheapest clocks he could possibly produce. To supplement his income, he was probably forced to seek additional metallurgy contracts or other repair work. Indeed, Brian Loomes, the British horologist, antique clock dealer and authority on Henry Burges, has eloquently pointed out,

'It is difficult to imagine a more sales-resistant group of people to try to sell a clock to than tight-fisted seventeenth-century Wiganites, who didn't need to know what time it was anyway.'

This brings me back to the 'Australian' Burges long-case clock and its unlikely voyage from northwest England. The

timepiece was owned by William Joseph Clayton from Mount Gambier, South Australia. Clayton appears to have been a foreman in George Lewis' local furniture factory. As we will see shortly, his fledgling career in the furniture business may have played an important role in the eventual fate of the Burges long-case clock.

In support of the Commonwealth's war effort, Clayton set sail for England on 22 May 1917. For the remainder of the Great War, he initially worked as an aircraft engineer at A. V. Roe & Company (now absorbed by BAE Systems) and at the Crossley Motor Aircraft Works in Manchester. An assignment at the National Aircraft Factory in Aintree, Liverpool, closed out his contractual obligations by January 1919.

Clayton returned to the Adelaide quarantine station at Torrens Island, South Australia, on the transport S.S. City of Cairo. He was discharged from active service on 28 March 1919. Although nothing is known about the provenance of his long-case clock, I suspect that he most likely only transported the clock's movement (its gear train, escapement mechanism, pendulum and weights), hands and face (the dial plate showing the time) on the long voyage home.

Clayton's eulogy implies that he was a professional cabinet maker, and so he may have constructed the clock's wooden case at a later date. Walnut and marquetry (inlaid-wood) cases were most popular. Upon his return from England, Clayton was first employed in the furniture and furnishings business of Alex McCallum. McCallum had taken over Lewis' furniture factory, where Clayton had started his career. In his later years, Clayton established himself as an independent entrepreneur.

Meanwhile, a century has passed since the publication of Britten's fifth edition. Sadly, the current whereabouts of Henry Burges' Australian long-case clock have become shrouded in the mists of time.

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Long case clock, 1710. This is an early example by renowned Wigan clockmaker John Burges. It features a signed dial with date aperture, cherub and leaf spandrels and a 30 hour movement.