

# Tavern Clocks

Martin Gatto takes a retrospective look at the 1947 *Country Life* View of Tavern Clocks.

## COACHING INN CLOCKS

By R. W. SYMONDS

of Commons, June 30, 1797.

Mr. Pitt. There was an object of taxation which had entirely been proposed which was in a great degree a certain and regular collection, but that he supposed might be done in nearly the same manner as the Poor Law Duty. It was certainly a Tax which did not fall upon the poorer order of people and the amount was so low that no one could be supposed to find difficulty or have any aversion to its payment. What proposed was a duty of 2/6 annually on all persons using silver or metal watches; and 10/ per annum on as were gold ones. The proportion would be found singly moderate considering the disparity between circumstances of those who wore gold watches and who wore watches of another kind. . . . Added to this, he would propose a duty of 5/ per annum on clock except such as are used in cottages, etc. . . .

Mr. Sheridan. . . . proceeded to express his disapprobation of the tax on Watches and Clocks. . . . it a sufficient hardship upon fathers of families to be obliged to answer for the number of his servants who had powder, but much more difficult would it be to answer for the number of his family servants; all that had watches as they did not wear them in a conspicuous or ostentatious manner, or indeed in any case that was with any regularity open to inspection, posed this tax because of the difficulty of collecting the uncertainty of its amount, and the encouragement it would give to contemptible sets of spies and informers.—*Inside Public Advertiser, July 1, 1797.*

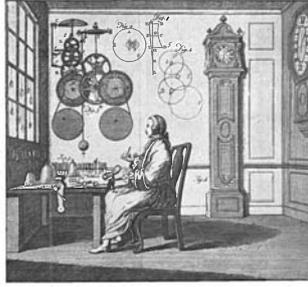
THE tax on watches and clocks was said to have created considerable distress to the watch- and clock-makers, both in London and in the provinces. The London Clock-makers' Company, supported by petitions from the manufacturing centres of the watch and clock trade—Coventry, Bristol, Leicester, Prescot, Castle-on-Tyne, Liverpool, Derby, Edinburgh—made a strong protest to Parliament, which resulted in a Committee being appointed to investigate and report on the effects of the taxation on the watch- and clock-makers' trade. Evidence was produced by the Company which showed that during the first six months of the passing of the Act, the number of gold ch-cases hallmarked was 1,550, whereas in previous six months it had been 3,301. Also or cases showed during the same periods a considerable drop in production—74,319 after tax, against 93,476 before. The findings of the Committee resulted in the Act being repealed in March of the following year. A belief has grown up that the tax on ches and clocks caused many people to put

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public places—inns, coffee- and eating-houses and places of entertainment. No contemporary evidence, however, can be found in support of this theory. Moreover, the Act was in force for too short a period for a large production of clocks to get under way; and there must have already been a considerable number of mural clocks in public places long before the Act came in.

The pre-Act public clock was of a particular type. It was weight-driven, regulated by a long seconds pendulum and it had a short trunk with a door fitted below the dial. It was a timepiece, for it had no striking train and it usually went for a period of not less than eight days, and sometimes for a fortnight; for the duration of gong was controlled by the length of drop of the weight. In order to obtain an eight-day clock with a short drop, an intermediate wheel and pinion between the barrel and centre pinion was added (Fig. 7). Such a train, with the drop of a grandfather clock, would go for a month, but in a mural clock, with a much shorter drop, it meant a duration usually of eight days. It should be realised that in this type of mural clock the drop of the weight took place behind the dial as well as in the trunk.

These mural weight-driven clocks have survived in considerable numbers, and the earliest examples do not appear to be earlier than 1740. They were fitted in black japanned cases with gold decorations, usually in the Chinese taste. The dials were black with gold hour numerals and gold hands. The japanning was also executed in dark green or blue, but the black ground was the most usual. Judging by the design of extant mural japanned clocks, they must have been popular up to the end of the 18th century, when examples with mahogany-



1.—A CLOCK-MAKER AT HIS BENCH. From a print of *Universal Magazine* dated 1748. The mural clock with octagonal dial shows the popular type at this period



In August 1947, *Country Life* published an article by R W Symonds (1889-1958) entitled 'Coaching Inn Clocks'. Limited space here precludes reprinting it, but any reader wishing to read the full article can do so by using the web link in the references. Symonds was one of the pre-eminent experts on English furniture and also wrote extensively on horology. His archive is in the Winterthur Library in the USA.

The Symonds article is one of the best I have read summarising the history of timepieces that we know today as Tavern Clocks. One of the images in that article was of a shield dial by Thomas Hemmings [sic] of Piccadilly, ca1765, see **Figure 1**. By way of contrast, another shield dial by Thomas Hemmings [sic] has recently been restored by Tavernicus. That restoration is featured below.

The most common and enduring myth about Tavern Clocks is that they were made as a result of the tax on clocks levied by William Pitt in 1797 by an Act of Parliament. The earliest known large format wall clock fitting into this general design of dial clock dates to c1715. The clock was made by George Graham and is numbered 575; it has an octagonal dial over a large drop-trunk and is still in daily use in a church in East Anglia. Whilst the earliest dials were either octagonal or a shield with break





*upon the father of families to be obliged to answer for the number of his servants who wore hair powder, but much more difficult would it be for him to be answerable for such family servants at least that had watches as they did not wear them in a very conspicuous or ostentatious manner or indeed in a quarter that was with any regularity open to inspection. He opposed this tax because of the difficulty of collecting it, the uncertainty of its amount and the encouragement it offered to contemplate sets of spies and informers.'*

Mr Sheridan did not prevail. Pitt had to finance the war with France and money was so tight and the economy in recession that desperate measures were taken in a year when even the Bank of England ran out of money.

*'The Clockmakers Company, supported by petitions from the regions made a strong protest to Parliament which resulted in a Committee being appointed to investigate and report on the effects of the new taxation on the watch and clockmaker's trades. Evidence was produced by the Company which showed that during the first six months after passing the Act the number of gold watch cases hallmarked was 1560, whereas in the previous six months it had been 3301. Also silver cases showed during the same periods a considerable drop in production — 74319 after the tax, against 93476 before. The findings of the Committee resulted in the Act being repealed in March 1798.'*

Symonds goes on to describe the pre-Act public clock (or mural clock) which he maintained survived in considerable numbers. This was wide of the mark as the number extant today is very small compared with almost any category of clock. No more than c20-25 clocks appear at auction or in dealer stocks in any one year. Of course it may have been different in 1947 but I doubt it. Symonds used the term mural clock freely and describing their usage in inns, coffee and eating houses and places of entertainment, he maintained that in his opinion they were designed primarily for coaching inns where it was essential to know the time for the coming and going of the stage coaches. This opinion is just that. He also recognised the difficulties of knowing the time and the differences between London and Bristol time, differences that were not fully reconciled until the development of railways. The rest of the article included descriptions of a banjo shaped clock by Charles Cabrier, c1780 and a mahogany veneered teardrop by Jonathan Nevill, late 18th century. Neither of these has been recorded since. There was also a description of a 'Coaching Watch', 2.75 inches in diameter which belonged to the Exeter Subscription Coach run by Edward Sherman & Co. The watch would have been accurately set in London and then carried on the coach.

Readers are urged to seek out the original Symonds article for its own sake, but it sparked a comparison between two shield dials by the same maker, Thomas Hemmins, as another has come to light and is featured below. The two clocks have almost identical hands but are otherwise non-identical twins. The clock in **Figure 1** appears totally repainted. The floral decoration on

arch top/rectangular lower moulding up to about 1740, thereafter the middle period shield dial became more common as seen above. By the final quarter of the 18th century, the predominant dial was the simpler round format. These large format wall clocks were found in churches, coffee houses, taverns, coaching inns, country house kitchens, significant private houses, hospitals and other public buildings.

Known as Act of Parliament clocks for most of the 20th century, there is no fully accurate definition. 'Public wall clock' would be more accurate but misses the romance of the historic associations. Tavern Clock is my preferred nomenclature and Symonds was close with Coaching Inn Clock – you decide!

The Symonds article contained some material that I have not seen elsewhere and it is re-printed or paraphrased here in italics.

*THE ORACLE PUBLIC ADVERTISER, JULY 1 1797 : 'House of Commons June 30 1797. Mr Pitt. ...There was an object of taxation which had frequently been proposed which was in a great degree an article of ornament and luxury and it was probable the House anticipated him. He meant watches and clocks. The great difficulty in this was to devise a mode for its certain and regular collection, but that he supposed might be done in nearly the same manner as the Hair Powder Duty. It was certainly a Tax which did not bear upon the poorer order of people and the amount would be so low that no-one could be supposed to find any difficulty or have any aversion to its payment. What he proposed was a duty of 2/6 annually on all persons wearing silver or metal watches; and 10/- per annum on such as wore gold ones. The proportion would be found exceedingly moderate considering the disparity between the circumstances of those who wore gold watches and those of another kind... Added to this, he would propose a duty of 5/- per annum on every clock except such as are used in cottages etc... Mr Sheridan...proceeded to express his disapprobation of the tax on Watches and Clocks... It was sufficient hardship*



the dial periphery mouldings and on the trunk is not commonly found on clocks of this era. The different spellings of the name are of no particular concern as this was not unusual given that different artists may have been used and literacy was variable. Thomas Hemmins worked in London in Air Street in 1744 and then in Piccadilly in 1749, until his death in 1777.

Restoration of these clocks is fraught with pitfalls. How far to go: restore, conserve, replace or repair? There is no one answer nor indeed a correct one. Museums, dealers, restorers and collectors will have varying perspectives. Also, the norms of today may have been quite at odds with those of 1947.

Remember polished and lacquered plates? I work on a rule-set that the end product of a restoration depends on the starting point. If the clock is near original (rarely so) then the restoration takes one path, whereas if the clock has been seriously altered or badly restored in the past then the path will generally be different. The Hemmins in **Figure 2** had had some incidental 'modernisations', a replacement base operating as a door, replacement side inspection doors, a push catch for the door, (the lock having been lost), stabilisation of the dial boards with thin metal plates screwed to the boards, alteration to the seatboard cheeks requiring minor ovaling of the winding and motion work holes. The movement, now restored by John Reynolds FBHI, required one replacement pivot, one facing of the pallets and the umbrella shaped escape wheel was corrected. The beautiful yellow brass is featured in **Figure 3**.

The hands, which are identical on both of the Hemmins clocks, are original; a new collet holds them in place. The original



pendulum and weight are long gone. A contemporary pendulum bob is now in use and a new weight has been cast from a pattern which I fashioned from a piece of scrap timber, see **Figure 4**.

The 'modernisations' of the case were un-restored to include a replacement base with the correct moulding, a replacement lock and key. Conservation fish glue was used for repairs as this is liquid at room temperature and is reversible. The breakarch moulding at the top of the dial was the most difficult aspect of the case restoration as at some point in its life some quite extensive damage had occurred. Subsequently, previous artful bodgers had filled and glued the broken pieces of moulding but skill was sadly lacking. After painstaking dismantling of the broken sections, a major re-gluing operation ensued, see the image of the numerous clamps required to put everything back together, **Figure 5a & b**.

The critical part of the work was the lacquer restoration. As already stated, the end result depends on the starting point. In this case, it was very fortunate that the lacquer and chinoiserie had never been wrecked by a well meaning amateur. In fact, this aspect of the clock was largely in original condition, making this clock rare indeed. Inspection with a UV lamp revealed nothing untoward on the front of the clock and the sides had original chrysanthemum gilding which had become all but invisible in natural light. Hopefully, the before and after images tell all, **Figure 6 & 7**.

### References

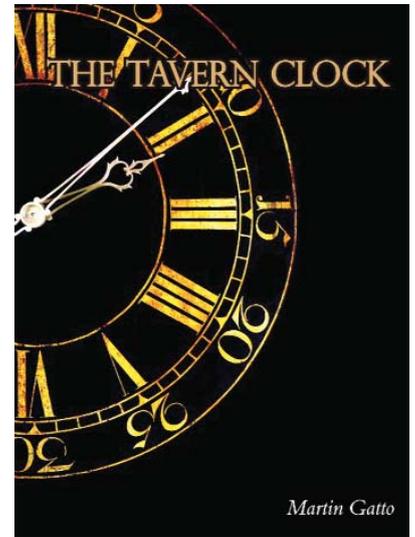
Country Life, 8th August 1947, pages 276-7  
 Link to view above [www.tavernicus.co.uk/cl](http://www.tavernicus.co.uk/cl)  
 Brian Loomes: *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World - Complete 21st Century Edition*  
 (ISBN 10: 0719803306 / ISBN 13: 9780719803307)

## The Tavern Clock – research continues

'The Tavern Clock' by Martin Gatto was published in 2011 and is the only specialist book on this subject. The author has continued his research following the publication and now has reference material on a further 100 tavern clocks over and above the 300 referred to in the book.

He hopes to publish an Addendum to the Archive section of the book in 2013 and is currently investigating the possibility of publishing the Addendum in electronic form.

The book may be purchased for £50 plus P&P directly from the author via the website <http://www.tavernicus.co.uk/> or from G K Hadfield or Jeff Formby Books



Martin Gatto

# CLOCKS

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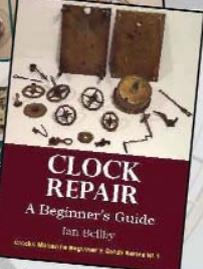
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