

A Tale of Two Vulliamys

A Tavern Clock special by Martin Gatto.

Over the last three years, Martin Gatto has established a significant archive of over 300 tavern clocks and published the only book on this subject in 2010. This article features the most significant maker of this category of clock, both in numbers and stature, Justin Vulliamy, clockmaker to King George III. The author is quite happy to share detailed research material with genuinely interested researchers and collectors – mg@tavernicus.co.uk

The indirect title reference to London and Paris, courtesy of Charles Dickens, almost works as Justin Vulliamy had, in fact, been working in Paris before emigrating to England in the 1730s, although the extended Vulliamy family have their origins in early Swiss watchmaking. Full name, Francois Justin Vulliamy, b1712–d1797 established himself in London from the late 1730s, and married the daughter of Benjamin Gray in 1741. Early clocks were made in partnership with Gray between c1743–1765.

The elegant round dial, teardrop trunk tavern clocks seen in **Figures 1 & 2** are the most common form of tavern clock made by Justin Vulliamy. Predominantly made for private use in the estates of the wealthy, there are probably 15–20 surviving clocks in this format. Less well known is the fact that at least two shield dial tavern clocks were made under the Gray/Vulliamy partnership. One is



3. Shield dial by Benjamin Gray & Justin Vulliamy c1750–60.



1. Private Collection c1785.

shown on page 9 of the monograph by D G Vulliamy entitled 'The Vulliamy Clockmakers'.

Another, which I recently inspected, is shown below, **Figure 3**, although the reader will have to trust me, as the signature is not visible in this image. I do have very clear close-ups. Interestingly, 'LONDON' is placed on the bottom moulding of the shield which is rare. As with the example in the book, the base is missing, in this case as a result of a fallen weight.



3a. Movement.



2. Vulliamy 231 pre-restoration.

The movement is a classic A-plated, 4-wheel-train type with internal counterweighting of the minute hand, evident in **Figure 3a**. Most of the correct Vulliamy tavern clocks have this feature and the minute hand is not counterweighted. The weight on the back-plate in **Figure 3a** does not appear to be original. There are only two Vulliamy shield dials in my archive.

Later in the Vulliamy history, the round dial, teardrop trunk emerged. This series of clocks probably dates from the 1780s and are therefore signed by Justin Vulliamy alone, as the partnership with Gray ended by 1764.

However, there is one round dial teardrop signed by both Gray and Vulliamy, dated c1760, which was auctioned in 1988. The black japanned dial is small at 18in and overall the case is 48in, so it is smaller than the standard format round dial tavern clock which would have a dial of 24in, and overall height 60in. The minute hand is not counter-balanced consistent with the Gray/Vulliamy style.

Although the rest of this article will concentrate on the classic round dial teardrops, mention must be made of the white round dial, straight drop, trunk example in the Clockmakers' Company Museum in London. Signed by Justin Vulliamy, the number of the clock, 427, is placed uniquely in the signature space below the dial. The ears, normally found on standard round dials, are either lost or were never there. The



4a. Internal counter weight.

black japanned case, with a cushion base, has the gilded chinoiserie design of clocks made in the late 18th century and yet the number indicates that this clock dates to c1806. This date derives from the research undertaken by Roger Smith and published in *Antiquarian Horology* in 1991 and 1994. Hence, this somewhat ungainly example was made after the teardrop series.

So to the tale of the two Vulliamys. The teardrop style was made for about 10–15 years in a conforming series of around 20 clocks in the late 18th century. **Figure 1** is the restored example shown in my book, *The Tavern Clock*, on page 50 and is further described on page 189. Made for a



4b. Vulliamy 231 dismantled.

private Scottish estate in around 1785, the current owner – a descendant of the first owner – carried out the restoration, with his wife who is an artist. In daily use, it has all the features one expects of a correct Justin Vulliamy teardrop; internal counter-weighting, A-plated 4-wheel train movement, no counter-weight on the minute hand, correct size, etc. It is driven by a 12lb brass covered weight and the pendulum bob, weighing 6lb, is suspended on a flat iron rod with a slot for the crutch pin. In keeping with the later series, it is slightly larger than the above mentioned Gray/Vulliamy teardrop at c50 inches overall.

Figure 2 shows the numbered Vulliamy 231 in unrestored condition complete

with the later Victorian hands. A full plate image, courtesy of Bonhams, can be seen on page 79 of my book. The added and erroneous date of 1674 can also be seen just above the centre of the dial. The clock was in original condition, albeit distressed. However, the most important feature is that all the original gilding could be discerned, and the ground on the dial has well-defined crackle. The movement was in good condition, but dirty and needing a service. The crutch had to be repaired and the whole of the pendulum assembly, both rod and bob had to be re-created as did the weight.

Replacement hands in the correct style had to be made. John Reynolds, FBHI,



5a. Vulliamy 231 restored.



5b Vulliamy 231 interior.



5c Vulliamy 231 restored.



6a. Calico inside.

was entrusted with the work on the movement, and we had the template of the example in **Figure 1**, of which the owner kindly allowed me to take detailed comparative photographs. The period bob was sourced rather than re-made and it has the patina of age, whereas John made the weight and hands to the patterns from scratch.

The case was complete but many of the joints had sprung and need re-gluing. Using conservation fish glue from Conservation Resources, in Oxford, all the open joints were stabilised by me. I tend to do the casework and I use the fish glue as it is liquid at room temperature – it is commonly used at West Dean as an acceptable substitute to the glue-pot. As with all animal glues, heat can be used to provide reversibility. The most difficult aspect of this work was the thin pine strips which are glued/pinned to the frame of the bulge on each side of the trunk. The 2in strips are put in place horizontally and are strengthened inside the case by placing a piece of calico over the whole area of the bulge and dosed with glue. Some of the calico was missing, so new pieces were added and a new dosing of glue applied which makes the bulge section quite rigid.

The dial has a visible crack. I took the decision not to attempt closing the crack by clamping and gluing as this would have dislodged the periphery mouldings, and worse, the white ground would have flaked off in a disastrous way. So the crack survives. It has not been filled in as eventually the filler would become visible. The stabilised dial and trunk (with new turned oak pegs made to the pattern of the one survivor) were then handed over to the lacquer specialist. The dial was cleaned and touched-in, and the numerals were re-done in the correct style. The 1674 date was removed but leaving a shadow so that on close inspection it can be seen. The chinoiserie was also touched-in and a stabilising rubber of



6b. Image of the number 231.

shellac was then applied. **Figures 4, 5 & 6** show some of the results.

The two featured Vulliamys are fine examples of the series. Vulliamy 231 can be dated to c1791 using the above-mentioned research. The BHI library contains portions of the Vulliamy Archive with details of clocks numbered 296-489 and 746-1067. Regrettably, information on clock number 231 is not available.

In my book, I catalogue four Justin Vulliamy teardrops with black dials and nine white dials. I am not able to feature any other of these photographically due to intellectual property rights, but I have images of all those catalogued. It is impossible to draw conclusions based on photographs but it is clear that not all the clocks are entirely correct, although having said that, the doubtful ones are in the minority.

The signatures show noticeable variations in the calligraphy. This should surprise no-one as it is quite likely that a number of artists were used. Some would have been touched up or indeed over-painted and maybe one or two were simply added. Unravelling this is a matter of connoisseurship and detailed reference material – a subject in its own right!

Tavern clocks were made mostly in London and the south of England. Many were made by provincial makers with only one surviving known example. There is only a handful of makers with more than five known examples. In the first division of clockmakers, George Graham made one and Francis Perigal made at least seven. However, no maker comes close to Justin Vulliamy who made at least 16 tavern clocks; a wonderful legacy.

References and Acknowledgments

David G Vulliamy, *The Vulliamy Clockmakers*.

Roger Smith, *Antiquarian Horology*, Vol 19, No 6 1991 & Vol 21, No 5, 1994.

Peter Fane-Gladwin, with thanks, for access to the clock in **Figure 1**.

Mrs Linda Bursnell, with thanks, for access to the clock in **Figure 3**.



The website www.tavernicus.co.uk is a source of free information on the location of tavern clocks on public display, access to restorers, relevant book references, numerous photographs illustrating every type of tavern clock and importantly an archive of 300 specific clocks is listed by maker. The latter is a free research tool and the author hopes to upload another 100 clocks to this free archive by the end of the year.

Much fuller descriptions of these clocks are available in the book, including when and where the clocks were last seen or featured in advertisements. There is a Forum originally intended for horologists to post to but spammers in their hundreds caused this section to become the musings of the author; the most popular posting is the regular update of tavern clock auctions. The author, perhaps uniquely in the clock world, reserves his more controversial views on the economy and the antiques market in general for his blog which can be found at <http://tavernicus.blogspot.com>.

THE TAVERN CLOCK, published in 2010 is available from the horological booksellers, Jill Hadfield and Jeff Formby or directly from the author. RRP £50.

