

“John Harrison” Clock Lost and Found

by Bob Frishman (MA)

“I have a John Harrison Clock,” said the woman who had just attended my presentation on antique clocks at a local historical society.

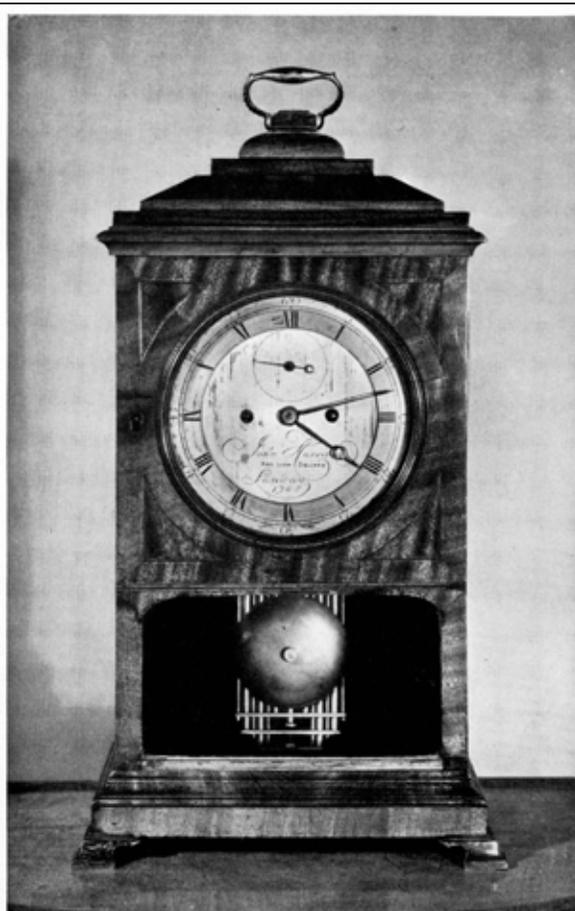
I often hear similar statements about ownership of an important clock, and I expressed polite but brief interest. A few months later, however, she brought her “Harrison” clock to my shop for repair; this time she told me, “It’s in the book.”

The “book” is William J. Andrewes’ *The Quest for Longitude* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1996). Page 220 includes a grainy black-and-white photograph of a bracket clock signed on its dial “John Harrison, Red Lion Square, London, 1766”, and a few sentences noting that the clock, unlike anything else known to have been made by Harrison, disappeared in 1940 after its sale in New York City by retiring antique dealer Arthur S. Vernay (Figure 1).

Sure enough, the clock in my shop was the clock in the photograph! On April 1, 2011, I called Will Andrewes who lives in a nearby Massachusetts town. Assuring him that this was not an April Fool’s prank, I told him that I was looking at the missing clock at that very moment. Soon afterward, he was at my shop, camera and white gloves at the ready.

In an article Will and I coauthored for the December 2011 issue of *Antiquarian Horology*, Will revealed details of the long search for this clock. He began his study of Harrison in 1969 while a horologist in England, and it continued throughout his work at the Old Royal Observatory and National Maritime Museum, and then in this country at the Time Museum and Harvard University. Just before his first visit here in the 1970s, he was tasked by Colonel Humphrey Quill (1897-1987) to look for the clock.

Despite inquiries including a 1979 visit to Christian Jussel, whose family had taken over Vernay’s business, there were no leads, and the address he had of the one-time buyer led only to the site of a demolished office building. Jussel did more searching but could only state that the clock was bought sometime between



AN 18th CENTURY MAHOGANY MANTEL CLOCK

A beautiful and stately example in handsomely figured mahogany case with eight-day striking movement by John Harrison who achieved renown through his invention of the pendulum known as the gridiron form of compensation. Born in 1693, he died in Red Lion Square and was buried in Hempstead Churchyard in 1776. The dial is of engraved steel inscribed with the maker’s name, address and date 1765. Height, 21½ in.; width, 11 in.; depth, 8 in.

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Figure 1. Page 28 of the October 1938 Vernay catalog.

1923 and 1935 when Vernay then brought it to New York from London. Nor did any new information arise after a 1988 letter to *Antiquarian Horology* by Andrew King, who provided the Vernay catalog photograph and text.



Figure 2. “John Harrison” bracket clock with its silvered engraved dial and visible compensating pendulum. Height is 21.5”.

Finally, after 71 years, the clock was available for examination (Figure 2). Its owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, is a descendant of the man who bought the clock from Vernay. She now knows, as had been suspected all along, that the clock was not made by John Harrison. Rather, it probably was cobbled together early in the twentieth century after Rupert T. Gould revived the reputation of the eighteenth-century winner of the Longitude Prize. The story was popularized by Dava Sobel’s book, *Longitude* (New York: Walker & Co., 1995) inspired by the Longitude Symposium at Harvard in April 1993.

Most likely, we never will know who assembled the clock. A letter from P. D. Green, in the March 2012 *Antiquarian Horology*, offers a sketch of its unique pendulum from a circa 1932 scrapbook of his grandfather F.

H. Green (1872-1936), a London dealer who added a note “sold to Mr. Vernay.” We can guess that the clock first appeared sometime before that when affluent collectors began seeking rare Harrison examples.

Despite the dial signature and an attempt to fabricate an appropriate gridiron pendulum, nothing else about the clock indicates that the maker of H1 had any connection to it. The eight-day brass movement is from a typical eighteenth-century double-fusee bracket clock, but with an upgraded time train featuring maintaining power and deadbeat escapement, and indications of a removed earlier verge escapement (Figure 3). The silvered dial is a marriage of various parts, and the steel hands appear to be nineteenth century. The Victorian-era mahogany and oak case was lengthened to accommodate the longer pendulum and front window. The pendulum itself is far heavier than one Harrison would have constructed, its jeweled knife-edge suspension is an unlikely Harrison feature, its rating nut is misplaced, and its “tin whistle” adjuster simulates the look, but not function, of one by



Figure 3. Rear view showing the engraved backplate and pendulum.

Harrison in the collection of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers (Figure 4). We should expect, too, that Harrison would have engraved his name on the ornate backplate.

Arthur Vernay offered the clock in his 1938 catalog, and again as No. 392 in his final 1940 sale book where its price was reduced from \$825 to \$565. It was described as “by John Harrison,” a claim Mr. Vernay may have believed. With the decades of John Harrison research and attention following its sale, it is relatively easy now to know that this clock is a tribute to, rather than a product of, the great man. That 1940 buyer must have been extremely proud to own it. Even today, no longer a puzzle, the clock is a part of John Harrison’s enduring story.



Figure 4. Gridiron pendulum with “tin whistle” adjuster.

About the Author

Bob Frishman has collected, restored, sold, and studied antique clocks since 1980. He lectures regularly on various aspects of horology, and he is a frequent contributor of articles and features to *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. He thanks Will Andrewes, Jonathan Betts, and Andrew King for invaluable information, Dr. Peter De Clercq (editor, *Antiquarian Horology*) for permission to retell the story in this publication, and the current owner of the clock for permission to reveal its existence. Bob Frishman’s website is www.bell-time.com.