





Hickory dickory dock



The soporific tick-tock of seconds passing, the hypnotic swing of the pendulum, the commanding chiming of the hour: every house deserves a longcase clock, concludes Matthew Dennison

IN 'every room the encouragement given by his Majesty to ingenious constructors of time-pieces is apparent,' wrote an anonymous visitor to Buckingham House in 1802. Among the timepieces on display in George III's house at the turn of the 19th century that caught the eye of our unnamed commentator was an exceptional burr-walnut veneered and gilt-brass mounted longcase clock by leading English clockmaker Thomas Tompion. It had been made a century earlier for Queen Anne's husband, Prince George of Denmark, and stood first in the State Bedchamber at Kensington Palace.

Technically ingenious—in addition to the time, it showed days of the month, signs of the zodiac and the position of the Sun, and ran for 390 days on a single winding—Tompion's clock is also an extraordinarily handsome object, one of only about 650 clocks made during the 40-year lifespan of the workshop opened by the Bedfordshire blacksmith's son near Fleet Street, in 1671. It reminds us, as dealer in antique clocks Tobias Birch explains, that the finest examples of the art represent 'a collaboration between clockmakers, cabinetmakers and engravers to produce articles of mechanical excellence and great beauty'.

This collaboration reached its apogee in longcase clocks such as that made by Tompion for Prince George. Widely known as grandfather clocks, after Henry Clay Work published the popular song *Grandfather's Clock* in 1876, such clocks (albeit less rarefied) were once a staple of British interiors: tall and freestanding, the case housing a swinging pendulum movement and hanging weights that each fulfil distinct functions, for example, the clock's chime or hour strike.

These are the clocks that previously stood sentinel in halls and studies across the country, their distinctive sounds as much a part of a house's life as birdsong beyond the windows and mice behind the wainscot, like the clock on the half landing in front of which Beatrix Potter painted an anxious

Tabitha Twitchit in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* or the clock that, on its 13th strike, lures Tom into a magical enclave in Philippa Pearce's classic children's novel, *Tom's Midnight Garden*.

For leading dealer Howard Walwyn, the disappearance of the longcase clock from so many British homes is cause for regret: 'These clocks are a wonderful living presence in a house, their gentle tick in a room soothing and utterly charming.' Mr Walwyn points to the diversity of longcase clocks manufactured in Britain between the last quarter of the 17th century and the middle of the 19th century, 'the fantastic variety in size, proportion, materials used, the architectural perfection or otherwise of the case'.

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He describes the longcase clock as 'the classic English clock' and his stock frequently includes exceptional examples by 'Golden Age' London makers Joseph Knibb and Edward East, clockmaker to Charles I, or Daniel Quare, Tompion's rival—who also made barometers after obtaining a patent for a portable weather glass in 1695. Then, there's the family of Dutch origin who introduced to England the use of the pendulum for clockwork, the Fromanteels (John Evelyn noted 'a clock by our famous Fromanteel' in Charles II's 'cabinet of rarities' shortly after the Restoration in 1660).

It is little wonder that early clocks by leading makers became such glamorous *tours de force*. The pendulum movement enclosed within cases made of figured and burr walnut, lacquer and *faux-tortoiseshell*, oak and even pine achieved an accuracy in timekeeping unimaginable to previous

horologists. The patenting of the first pendulum clock, by Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens on June 16, 1657, revolutionised time-keeping: it used the technology of a falling weight and a swinging pendulum accurately to measure and mark the passing of seconds, based on the observation that a pendulum of a certain length always takes the same amount of time to swing back and forth.

Pendulum clocks use a falling weight to move the second hand and power the clock; the weight's fall is regulated by a pendulum. As it swings, the pendulum rocks a lever called an escapement; the escapement in turn unlocks the part of the clock's mechanism driven by the falling weight, allowing it to move once per second. This locking and unlocking is what makes clocks' distinctive tick-tock sound. In order to protect this mechanism of weight and pendulum, it is encased, the length of the workings requiring a case of some height and most longcase clocks are some 6½ft tall (shorter versions are sometimes called grandmother clocks).

Case design and manufacture became a key aspect of the overall process and, over time, reflected changes in the decorative arts, as well as the ambitions of the clockmaker or requirements of a patron. The ➤

Facing page: What enchanted world might the chime reveal? An 1880s grandfather clock. Right: The 1693 clock Tompion made for Mary II sold for almost £2 million in 2019





bird-and-flower marquetry typical of many early longcase clocks reflects the Dutch influence on English furniture following the accession of William and Mary.

Less florid is a longcase clock by Anthony Hebert, from the second decade of the 18th century, in the collection of the British Museum: its walnut case is simply decorated with a mirror-glass door panel. By contrast, the oak case of a clock made 30 years later by Isaac Nickals, currently with Mr Walwyn, is sumptuously decorated with green, red and gold chinoiserie lacquerwork on an unusual cream background.

‘Their tick-tock is a mirror’s reflection of our own heartbeat’

The clock made by leading French horologist Ferdinand Berthoud, which George III purchased in about 1765, is almost completely eclipsed by its dazzling case of inlaid purplewood and mahogany marquetry and sumptuous gilt-bronze mounts, the work of distinguished cabinetmaker and sculptor Charles Cressent. The King was only 27 at the time of purchase.

His own interest lay chiefly in scientific instruments and he may have bought the clock on the strength of its appearance as a present for his wife, Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, given her taste for Continental furniture. Certainly, Charlotte later moved the clock to the Queen’s Sitting Room at Kew Palace. Like so much Rococo design, the Cressent/Berthoud clock appears strikingly French to British eyes: homegrown longcase clocks

The advent of the first pendulum clock in 1657 helped to revolutionise timekeeping



Top of the clocks: Thomas Tompion

Often described as the father of British clockmaking, Thomas Tompion enjoyed the patronage of three successive British monarchs: Charles II, William III and Queen Anne. In London workshops, appropriately at the sign of The Dial and Three Crowns in Water Lane, he made clocks and watches of exceptional quality, benefiting from his close association with scientist Robert Hooke, inventor of the spiral balance spring for watches. From 1680, Tompion’s clocks were numbered (his last was No 542). His working life was less varied than that of fellow clockmaker

James Pike, who, a century later, also ran the post office in Eltham, as well as serving as a constable, but his distinction was unrivalled. At Charles II’s request, Tompion created clocks for the Octagon Room at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich. He is commemorated through inclusion, alongside Caxton, Chippendale and Wedgwood, in the 10 sculptures of designer-makers and artist-craftsmen that decorate the Exhibition Road façade of the V&A Museum.



have a less sinuous, more architectural profile, with minimal changes in outline during the 200 years of their manufacture.

Typically, longcase clocks were made with one of two movements: an eight-day movement that required weekly winding or a less expensive, 30-hour movement, which used a single weight and needed daily winding. Thirty-hour movement clocks were invariably less costly in every aspect of their treatment, including the design of the case and the materials used.

These are the clocks made across the country by provincial makers, in some instances, as Mr Walwyn indicates, icons of vernacular or folk art, their age-patinated oak cases as richly coloured as molten caramel, dials signed in flowing engraved script. Readers of Mary Norton’s ‘Borrowers’ novels will remember that the borrowers’ status derived from where they lived in the house. The stories’ heroes, Pod, Homily and Arrietty, of humble status, lived behind the clock, which gave them their surname, a far less prestigious location than the drawing-room overmantel. As works of art, clocks’ status



The heroes of *The Borrowers* lived behind the clock, which gave them their surname

is wide-ranging: an 18th-century longcase clock by a provincial maker (a timepiece of equivalent status to Pod, Homily and Arrietty) can be acquired from a reputable dealer for a few thousand pounds.

A longcase clock by Tompion, however, is a serious and costly investment. One of his miniature table clocks, made for Mary II, was sold by Bonhams last year for £1,935,062 including premium; Mr Walwyn indicates a conservative starting price of about £250,000 for a Tompion longcase clock. Happily, under current rules, as ‘wasting asset’ chattels, clocks—together with boats, watches, yachts and motor vehicles—are exempt from Capital Gains Tax.

For a generation increasingly accustomed to the impersonal (and silent) omniscience of the smartphone, a grandfather clock—or its smaller grandmother counterpart—would be a noticeable addition to a household, with its ticking, hourly striking and the need for regular winding. Despite their small footprint, such clocks, Mr Birch says, add a great deal in terms of character, with no two identical in sound quality. They remind us that time can have a concrete quality, can be both a feature of and a partner in our lives, their tick-tock a mirror’s reflection of our own heartbeat. 🐭

Time’s a wastin’: where to buy longcase clocks

Tobias Birch (01242 242178; www.tobiasbirch.com)

Specialises in English clocks from the 17th to 19th centuries

W. F. Bruce (01273 473123; www.wfbruce.co.uk)

Stock includes longcase

clocks from East and West Sussex

Carter Marsh & Co (01962 844443; www.cartermarsh.com)

Long-established Winchester dealership

Raffety (020-7937 2220; www.raffetyclocks.com)
Supplied antique

timepieces to the Dumphries House Trust

Howard Walwyn (020-7938 1100; www.walwynantiqueclocks.com)

Award-winning dealer specialising in London clockmakers, from the 17th to 19th centuries