

THOMAS FARDON

Unknown Quaker maker

by **Brian Loomes**, UK

Recently I was asked if I could find a buyer for an unidentified long pendulum clock on a modern wooden wall shelf. I no longer buy clocks myself for stock as my back will not cope with lifting them since an accident a few years back. But I do still buy and sell on a very modest commission basis, usually by putting the seller and buyer in touch with each other. I was intrigued to know what this clock was which I had yet to see, though it sounded like a longcase clock that had lost its case.

It belonged to a lady in her 90s, now in a retirement home, whose possessions were being sold up, the proceeds to go towards the fees. The background was that she had been given the clock over 30 years ago by a neighbour who was a clock enthusiast and told her it was quite a rare Quaker clock. It was signed but the family were uncertain of the name. I later found the clock is signed 'Thomas Fardon'.

When her son-in-law brought the clock round to show me I found it was a surprisingly small hooded clock that had lost its hood, which most have of the age this turned out to be. With a 6 1/2in dial it was really tiny, but just how small is appreciated better when

it is seen alongside a lantern clock of standard size (16in). What surprised me was that it really *is* a Quaker clock but by an unrecorded maker, so how did the previous owner know that? Or was he just guessing?

The plain style with blank corners without spandrels and the undecorated, almost bland centre is a characteristic of some Quaker clocks in some areas— they vary a lot regionally. But in the area where this clock originated, which I soon pinned

down to North Oxfordshire, this was *not* a typical local style. In this region most Quaker clockmakers liked what we today call a 'zig-zag' dial centre. This incorporates a dial centre pattern based of a number of circles with spaces between, each circle decorated with radiating lines of squiggles (zig-zags). The point is it avoids the bald look of a plain centre and this simple decoration could be done by anyone with an engraving tool and a guider stand, who needed no trained engraving skill. Do-it-yourself

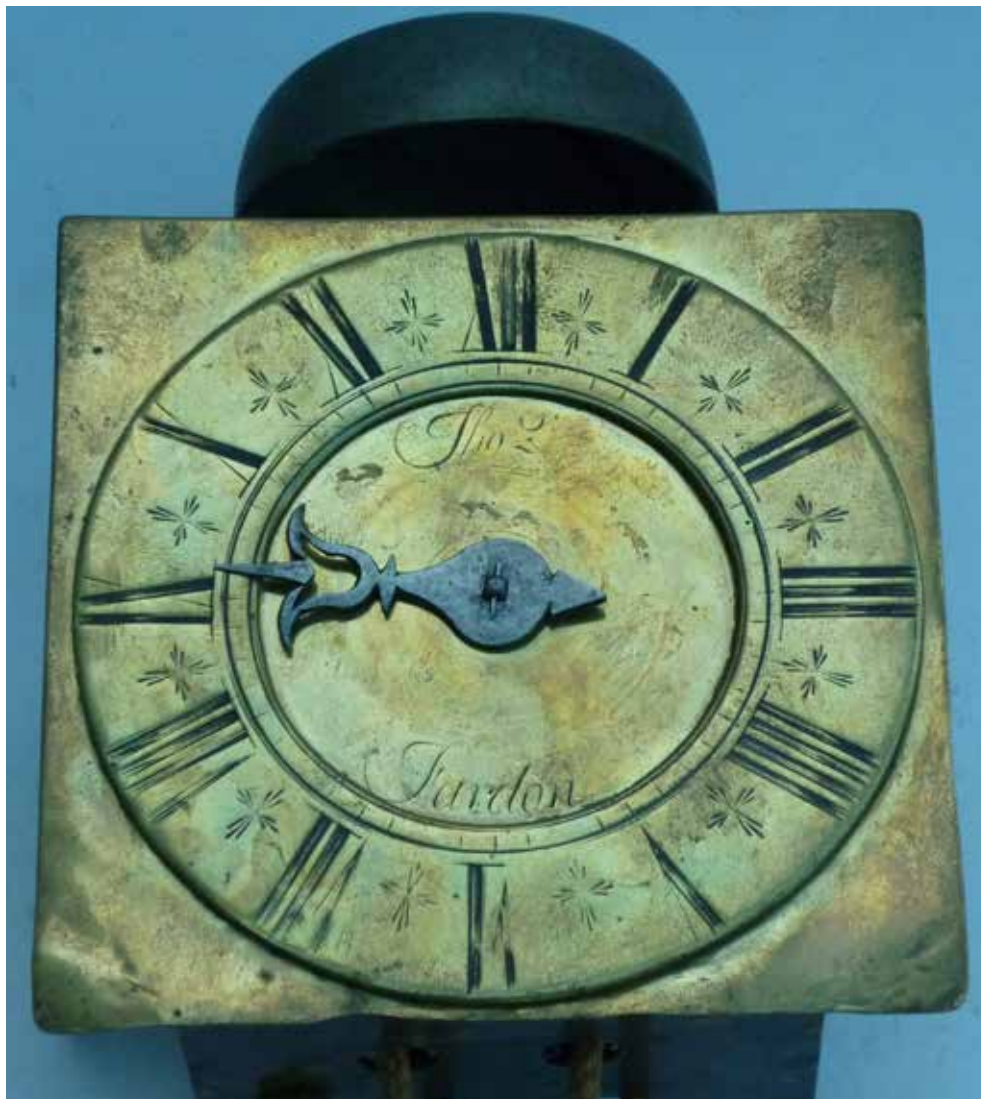


Figure 1. The dial is very simple as we expect from Quaker work, the ethic of which was function not decoration. The original single iron hand is based on a tulip, unlike any other Quaker clock hand yet recorded in this area.

practices appealed to many Quakers. Zig-zag dials probably began about 1720 but in this area the more general plain Quaker style of this clock may be one indication that it was made *before* zig-zags appeared. This clock dates



Figure 2. The tiny dial is unusually small at 61/2in square, which makes it too small to have been a longcase and determines it as a hooded clock. Its tiny size is more obvious when pictured alongside a standard-sized lantern clock at 16in.

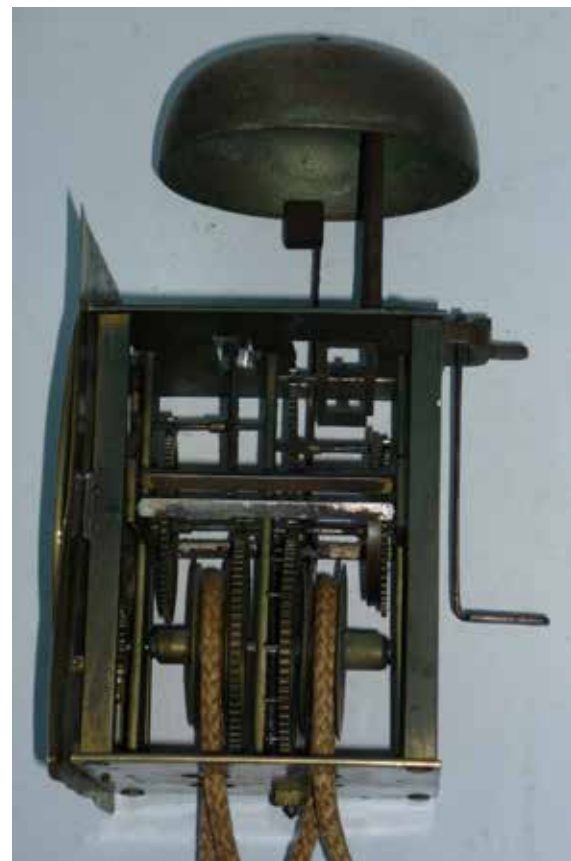


Figure 3. The posted movement is on the same principle as a lantern clock. The pillars are riveted in place, though better examples attach by nuts. Once known as 'bedpost' clocks, a misleading term no longer used.

from maybe 1690-1700. We can tell that this clock was made as a hooded clock because of its tiny size. A hooded clock was really a small longcase clock without its body, and longcase dials are very seldom less than 9in square.

Quakers liked the hooded version because it was cheaper by the saving of the body cost, which meant it could appeal to a wider clientele of less-than-wealthy country folk, who had lived their lives since the dawn of time without the need of a clock to measure it and who were unlikely to stretch their resources to the greater expense of buying a longcase. Sometimes Quakers made this kind of clock in the even cheaper form of what we now call a hook-and-spike clock, being exactly the same clock but with a hoop at the top to hang by and spikes or spurs at its base to hold it squarely against the wall.

If I was to guess what this clock cost when new, based on the small handful of original prices I have come across over

the years, I would guess in hook-and-spike form £2, in hooded form £2 5s 0d (£2.25p), and as a full longcase £2 10s 0d (£2.50p). In today's money £2 then could be about £300 now.

I was hooked into investigating this clock more closely. The Fardon name was familiar to me but only vaguely so as I had never handled a Fardon clock. A bit of research was called for, but before that the first place to look was obviously in Tim Marshall's excellent 2013 book *THE QUAKER CLOCKMAKERS OF NORTH OXFORDSHIRE*, which I had on my shelf—as, I am sure, will many of you reading this. That is where I expected to find whatever is known about this close-knit group of Quaker clockmakers, who were bound together through marriage and apprenticeship.

Tim raises a very interesting point in his book, one I have never come across before. He points out that Quakers did not recognise any sort of 'hierarchical pyramid' of status, but saw everyone as

equal, which of course is a well-known aspect of Quakerism. But he wonders if the now-well-known Quaker circles and zig-zag designs of their dial centres, which some Quakers used frequently and which were not used outside that group and their immediate associates ... whether they might represent the circular view they had of equal status. The same idea as we associate with King Arthur's round table, where nobody sat at the head.

Most early Quaker clockmakers in many regions preferred plainness in their dials, no fancy engraving, no spandrels, no decoration at all where they could get away with it—though they sometimes agreed to be persuaded otherwise by customer pressure. The gold lacquered tavern clock pictured here must surely be an example of customer insistence. Some Quaker clocks even bore no signature, for they believed a man should be forgotten on his death and even to leave his name behind on an



Figure 4. Left view of the posted movement. The ironwork is painted black, or 'japanned' to prevent rust. This was often done by restorers after servicing, but it is not known whether this was also sometimes done at the time of making.

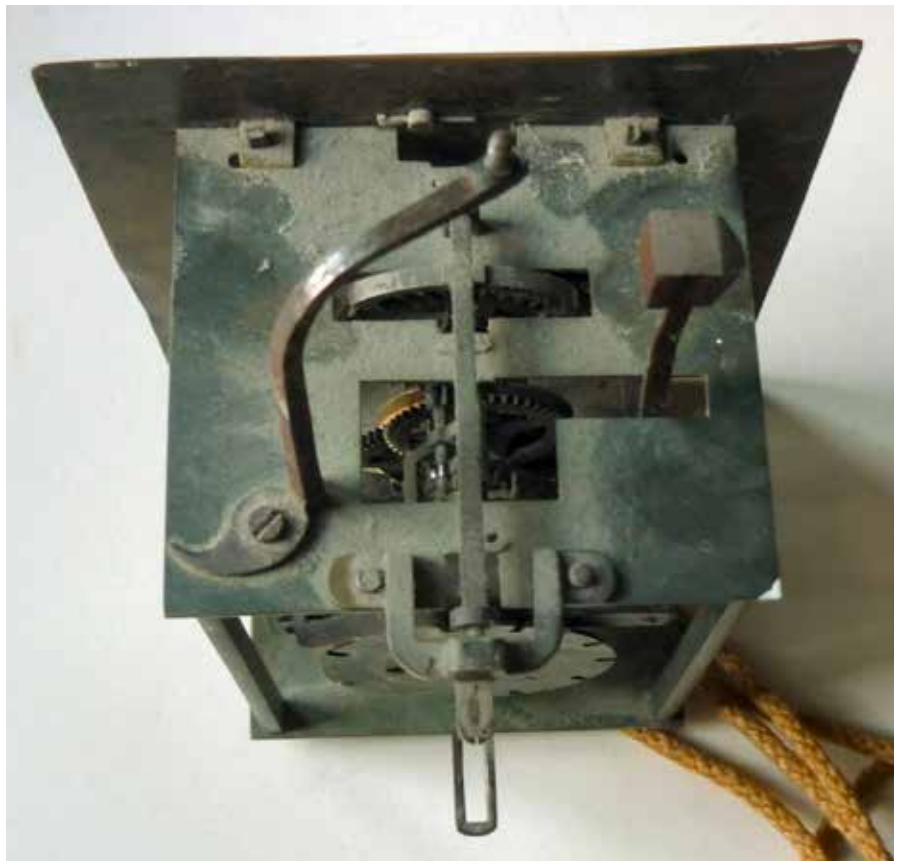


Figure 5. Top view showing that the plates, pillars and most fittings are iron. The typical anchor escapement and the tail of the bell-stand neatly shaped into a teardrop—beautiful smith work.

Many
Quakers saw
plainness as
conveniently
godly ...
twice blessed
by being
cheaper too.

object smacked to some of vanity. Some even refused to mark their tools, because after death some other person would use them as his own. For that reason some Quakers went so far as to leave no tombstone—very irritating for genealogical researchers. This could lead to the question of how we can recognise a clock as being by a Quaker if it is unsigned. We usually can, but that involves an explanation too lengthy to go into here. In the end many unsigned clocks are wrongly 'identified' as Quaker clocks by vendors and auctioneers in an attempt to give them status. Apples may be red but not all red things are apples. So many Quakers saw plainness as conveniently godly, and it just so happened that on clock dials plainness was twice blessed by being cheaper too, saving the extra cost of engraved work, spandrel castings, etc. Most Quakers were economic to the point where they might be accused of cutting a currant in

two. Plainness appealed greatly to the Quaker virtue of thrift, which ultimately meant low prices for the customer and so Quakers soon developed a reputation for good value for money and honest fair trading. The Fardons were an early family of Oxfordshire Quaker clockmakers. Tim does record a Thomas Fardon of Deddington but he was not born till 1757. From its style it was obvious this clock was made around 1700 give or take a touch, more than half a century before that Thomas was born. So the Fardon family were known as Quaker clockmakers, and maybe the previous owner was going on that. But the Thomas Fardon who made this clock was not the known Thomas, but a much earlier one previously unrecorded as a clockmaker. A bit of further research was called for and, of course, I had to get in touch with Tim Marshall, who was delighted to hear of a new Fardon clock, especially one as early as this. As it happens most

Quakers kept their records very carefully and safely. They had to in order to prove legitimacy as they could not turn to local parish registers for evidence of relationships, since they did not baptise their children. Once we can get access to them we often find that Quaker records are far more detailed and therefore more helpful genealogically than those of the parish church. Quakers were also more inclined to leave wills than most, for that same reason of defining relationships and inheritances in the face of a hostile legal system.

I found that this Thomas Fardon was born in 1656, son of John & Alice Fardon of North Newington, often shortened to North Newton. The family were all Quakers. We can assume he was working by 1677. He was married at Banbury in 1687 to Hannah Ball, daughter of butcher Nathaniel Ball. Hannah died in 1705 and he married for a second time in 1708 to Mary Fowler, who died in 1724. He died in 1731 and from his will, in which he styles himself a yeoman, we learn he left six children, four boys and two girls. The boys were Richard, Thomas, John and Jonathan. Daughter Elizabeth was married in 1713 to John Smith and daughter Hannah in 1720 to John Totty or Tutty or Tably. The trade or profession under which a man was recorded was then a very variable factor. Fardon's will tells us he was a yeoman, which is usually taken to mean someone who owned his own house and land rather than renting them—and we can see that is true in the case of Thomas Fardon senior. But it was very likely that a man, or one who wrote his name in a record, might opt to use that term he felt gave him most status or reflected highest worthiness. Perhaps this even applied amongst Quakers because he might need the weight of his 'rank' to give strength to his wishes in the hostile world that surrounded him. In rural areas at that time a man would necessarily have multiple skills, talents or trades, as no one skill would be sufficient to earn him a living.

I know a talented man in my own locality today, as I expect you all do in yours, who can turn his hand successfully

to such varied tasks as plumbing, building, decorating, general repairs, woodworking, tree felling, log cutting, cabinetmaking, French polishing, roofing and many others. But if he had to fill in a form stating his trade he would write 'joiner', because that was what he originally learned. At that period in rural Oxfordshire it is unlikely that anybody could make a full-time living making clocks. Most people had a bit of land on which to produce food but most at this time had to be a jack-of-all-trades.

I am reminded of a time when I was a professional genealogist and was listed by some illiterate *YELLOW PAGES* clerk under 'Physicians and Surgeons' in the misapprehension that I was a gynaecologist. It culminated in an irate phone call one night from a man furious that I refused to come out to attend his

Fardon's 1731 will is that he left 'the south end of ye great house at Deddington', currently occupied by apothecary John Appletree, to his son Thomas. The other half of the house, where he himself lived, was bequeathed to his son John. This John is the earliest in the Fardon family already recorded as a clockmaker at Deddington in Tim's book and it looks as if his time there may have begun in 1731, or perhaps earlier. But this newly-discovered clock by John's father puts the family's clockmaking skills back a further generation.

Thomas Fardon owned other properties too, including land called 'Dep Sladd' (Deep Slade?), which he left to son John, as well as another he left to Jonathan. So he was quite a prosperous man—you see where thrift gets you! He made mention of his



Figure 6. The maker had to re-position his dial attachment lugs, otherwise as first planned their riveted ends would have shown in the dial centre instead of being hidden behind the chapter ring, as now, evidence that the maker was inexperienced at this time.

sick wife! More pertinent perhaps is one example I recall where a clockmaker was recorded as 'gone to be a soldier', which could easily lead us to wonder why a soldier was making clocks.

I heard more recently of two others, members of the same family, who were clockmakers at one point but later reverted to the family trade as butchers and then one of them later still to an alehouse keeper. I assume that butcher meant meat cutter and was not merely a description of the way they repaired clocks. The point is we need to be careful how we interpret any description of a man's trade, which may be inconsistent and each not mutually exclusive.

An interesting feature of Thomas

daughters, Elizabeth Smith and Hannah Tably to each of whom he left two shillings and six pence (12.5p). This was not a cruel streak or a case of a 'cutting them off with a shilling' mentality. It was the custom, perhaps in this instance also an example of establishing relationships, by stating them, and he explains the tiny amounts by the phrase 'I having formerly made provision for them'.

I also found the will of his father, John Fardon of North Newington, written on 24th October 1677 and proved within a month. By then Thomas was 21 and no doubt prospering in his own right as he is not mentioned. I quote the will only for two interesting aspects. Firstly he gives

the family name as Fardon 'alias Vardon', which came as a surprise. Presumably it simply reflects the way different people tried to write down the name as pronounced in a local accent. Secondly he left his son, Richard, 'all my lands in Moorton Warrens in Warwickshire, which I hold by lease from Francis Lord Carrington'—a different county but only a few miles away. This may imply that the family lived previously in those parts. A bequest of £200 (that could equate to more than £30,000 in today's money) to his unmarried daughter, Elizabeth, who perhaps lived at home as housekeeper, indicates that he was a man of some substance. Presumably he too practised the Quaker principle of thrift, a virtue well known here in Yorkshire, or, as a friend of mine puts it: 'if you get hold of a pound, make it a prisoner'.

The clock itself is mostly made of iron, along the lines of a much simplified lantern clock but using as little brass as possible. That was the principle with many of the earliest country clocks, by Quakers and others of any religion. All had to keep the price of their clocks as low as possible if they were to have any hope of attracting buyers from families who had never previously bought such an unnecessary item as a clock.

Today we call these posted movements. In the past they were occasionally called 'bedpost' clocks, meaning that they had four posts like a four-poster bed. But this was sometimes misunderstood and I have even seen it pronounced in books that they were hung from a bedpost, which is absolute nonsense. So we no longer use that term.

There were two obvious reasons. Iron was much cheaper than brass, for many years costing about one (old) penny per pound weight against ten pence for brass. Secondly brass required casting by an expert (and you would not find those in rural villages), whereas iron could be forged by any capable smith, of which there was at least one in every village. So this clock, and others like it, had brass only in those places where it was essential—principally the dial and the wheels. Iron was the perfect medium for rural clocks, except for wheelwork—perhaps iron wheels would not take the wear. It was well known even then that the friction between like metals caused more wear than between different metals. Being of working age by 1677 would make Thomas Fardon not only the earliest Quaker clockmaker in the area, but probably the earliest of any faith. Non-Quaker John Nethercott of nearby Long Compton, previously regarded as



Figure 7. A lacquered tavern clock by John Fardon of Deddington, Thomas's grandson, is a most unexpectedly frivolous type for a sober-minded Quaker, though the quotes from the Bible are in character. Photograph courtesy of Hutchinson Scott Auctioneers.

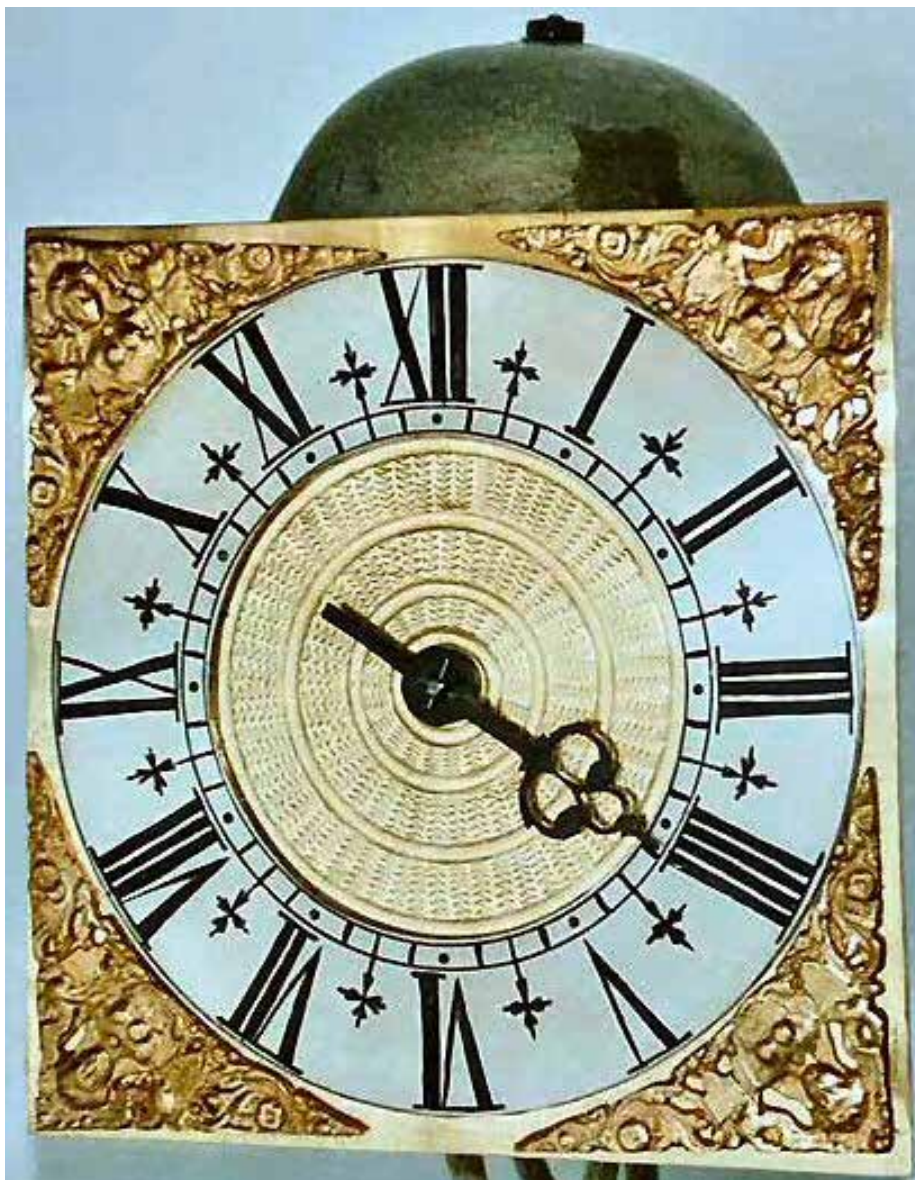


Figure 8. An unsigned longcase dial with typical zig-zag dial centre, clearly the work of a North Oxfordshire Quaker.

the first, was not working till 1686. Of the Gilkes family of Quaker clockmakers, who are especially well-known for their zig-zag clocks, the earliest known to have signed clocks was Thomas Gilkes, who was not even born till 1675. There are many unsigned clocks with zig-zag dials, but I doubt if any of those are as early as this one. I tried a little diversionary research into John Nethercott and the Gilkes family, but this proved massively time-consuming, so will have to wait for another day. This clock has two alterations, which

at first sight might seem disturbing. As collectors we should all be nervous about such things, until we can explain them to our satisfaction. In fact I usually enjoy the challenge of trying to explain alterations. Fortunately the reasons for them are usually fairly obvious, which is as well as I am no mechanic. I would even go so far as to say I enjoy them and I have occasionally bought superb clocks cheaply at auction because buyers were put off by alterations they did not understand. Everyone is terrified of buying 'marriages' or fakes.

Two empty screw-holes in the top plate indicate that the two dial connecting lugs have been moved closer in. The reason can easily be determined. In the original positions the riveted ends of the lugs would have shown on the clock dial front, whereas experience taught clockmakers to position these in such a way that they were hidden behind the chapter ring—as these are *now*. The maker himself moved these when he realised his mistake. This is not a slip you would make twice, and it indicates that he lacked experience, which tells us this was probably his first, or even only clock.

The second alteration is a lateral iron strap soldered across the movement front and clockmakers did not use solder. This is a modern addition, presumably done by the previous owner 40 or 50 years ago. Its purpose is to hold the hand firmly in position. The hand rests on the dial-hole it protrudes through. Wear can cause the hole to deepen and the hand to scratch the surface, especially so with a very thin dial, which Quakers were notorious for using on account of the cheaper cost. Normal practice is to re-line the hole, or 'bush' it, to lift the hand to ride at its intended height. The previous owner obviously didn't know that. This is a problem easily rectified by some future owner if he wished. Additions are often easily removed.

So the chance occurrence that directed this clock my way has brought to light what seems to be the earliest domestic horological item by any clockmaker in this region. It is amazing that such new finds are still out there waiting to be discovered and documented. But what also continues to astonish me is the slender thread such as this by which our knowledge increases. And the best part seems to me to be the fact that a total beginner has just as much chance of bumping into one as the greatest so-called experts.