

Aylward & Risbridger

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John Aylward was probably born in the 1630s and worked as a clockmaker at New Brentford in Middlesex from the 1660s. He also worked later from Guildford in Surrey, though probably did not live there, and had the same association with Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire, where he made the church clock in 1691 and agreed to maintain it for 31 years in return for the lease on two cottages there.

He is known through only a handful of domestic clocks and through one or two watches. We know very little about his life, and even that has come to light very recently. He was probably the John Ayleward of New Brentford, 'gentleman', who is recorded there in 1679.

His marriage to a wife named Mary

Figure 1. Lantern clock by John Aylward of Brentford dating from the 1670s, converted later to a double fusee spring movement and two hands.

has not been located, unless it was that which took place on 6th October 1660 at St Peter's in Marlborough in Wiltshire, when a John Aylward was married to Mary Reeves, though this seems rather a long way from his known territory. He and his wife, Mary, had two children, both daughters, though the baptism of neither has been traced. Alice was born about 1660 and was married some time before 1682 to Nathaniel Lake of Exeter, an upholsterer, by whom she had four children. John Aylward's other daughter, Elizabeth, also born about 1660, was married on 12th January 1679/80 at Teddington to clockmaker William Risbridger of Dorking, who was to become Aylward's successor in business and himself the founder of a three-generation family of clockmakers.

John Aylward's few recorded domestic clocks are of fine quality, mostly lantern clocks with the odd longcase. However he is known to have made and/or





Figure 2. Detail of the superb engraving of the lantern clock by John Aylward. Magnificent original hour hand, later minute hand. Such an early example is worlds apart in quality and charm from later ones.

Figure 3. Lantern clock by John Aylward of Guildford (signed Guldeforde) dating from the 1690s having its original verge pendulum. Photograph courtesy of Dennis Radage.



worked on a number of turret clocks. It is clear that he found Brentford too limiting for his talents and in an attempt to spread his empire further afield he sought to trade in the town of Guildford, though we do not know whether he intended to move to live there. However the Guildford council would have none of it, regarding him as a 'foreigner', meaning a non-resident and refused him permission to trade there. One or two connections with distant places (Salisbury and Exeter) may imply that he travelled considerable distances with his work.

But in 1683 John Aylward made a splendid public clock with two dials and presented it to the town of Guildford. It is there to this day, suspended on a huge bracket high up on the wall of what was then the new Guildhall. As a result of this the council yielded and made him a freeman, which gave him the right to trade in the town, even if he did not live there. Being a freeman of a town often brought more benefits than simply the right to trade there. These varied

town by town but might include such things as exemption from road tolls throughout England, the right to graze livestock on town fields, and even the right to vote.

John Aylward's son-in-law to be, William Risbridger, was born in 1654, would have been apprenticed from about 1668 till about 1675, and quite possibly was trained by John Aylward. Records rarely exist of provincial apprenticeships from that distant period. It would not have been the first time an apprentice married his master's daughter, as many examples of this are known in the history of clockmaking.



Figure 4. Lantern clock by William Risbridger (I) of Dorking, an early example dating from about 1670-80. This quality of engraved work and design was never achieved in later examples.



Figure 5. Lantern clock by William Risbridger (I) of Dorking dating from 1690-1700. This example was converted later to two hands and was fitted with a later spring-drive movement.

I am inclined to think that this was how William Risbridger came to know Elizabeth Aylward.

John Aylward signed his will on 10th January 1706/07 (1707 as we would now say). It was proved on 10th March following. He was obviously a prosperous man and owned property at Kingston-on-Thames in Surrey and Basingstoke in Hampshire as well as in New Brentford, where he lived. He left much to his widow, Mary, who lived on for a further ten years, dying in 1716. Then almost everything went to his two daughters, Elizabeth Risbridger and Alice Lake, with the proviso that the two husbands

‘shall have no power to intermeddle therewith or with any part thereof’. After their deaths he left the house he then lived in at Brentford to his grandson, John Risbridger, already of age and a clockmaker probably working at that time under his father, William Risbridger, who worked at Dorking. His older grandson, William Risbridger, also a clockmaker, presumably succeeded his father at Dorking, which is where we know he worked.

Oddly enough we know John Aylward’s daughter, Elizabeth Risbridger and her husband, William Risbridger, the clockmaker, also had a daughter, just the one, named Mary, born 1681, who later was married (in 1709) to Edward Fuller. It looks as if John

Aylward intended to leave bequests to her, Mary his granddaughter, as his will mentions both her (still single in 1707) and her brothers, but he or the clerk mistakenly called her Elizabeth (which was the name of his daughter not his granddaughter). We can only assume that the executors well knew who was intended.

William Risbridger, the first clockmaker of that name, was born in 1654, the son of John Risbridger of Shere near Dorking (by his wife, Mary Walford), who was the second son of another John Risbridger (William’s grandfather) who was Lord of the Manor of Shere. After learning his trade, probably under John Aylward, he set up business in Dorking, where he



Figure 6. Lantern clock of about 1710-1720 by John Risbridger of Brentford, with original anchor escapement.



Figure 7. Movement of the lantern clock by John Risbridger. By now the movements were plainer with less decorative filework.

worked till his death, which is believed to have been in 1718. William had two sons, John and William, both of whom followed the father's trade.

After John Aylward's death in 1707 it seems the Brentford business was continued by his grandson, John Risbridger, who was 25 years old at the time. John carried on the clock business at Brentford till 1735, when he died leaving a widow and two daughters.

This elder son, John, was born in 1682 and at the age of 26 inherited from his grandfather, John Aylward, the property at Brentford, his grandfather's old home, where he worked at the clock trade till his death in 1735. He was married in 1715 to Katherine Burnett, who was probably from London. John Risbridger made his will on 27th December 1734, the day after Boxing Day, which implies he was in a dire state of health to get a lawyer out of bed so soon after the Christmas celebrations and probably still carrying a hangover.

All the same his will was not proved till March, which suggests he clung

to life for some months after. He left no son to succeed him, just two 'well-beloved' daughters, Elizabeth and Mary, both under age at the time of his death and his 'dearly-beloved and affectionate' wife, Katherine. As well as his Brentford property he also left property at Kingston-on-Thames, which was probably inherited from his grandfather, John Aylward.

He also left a bequest of one guinea each to buy a mourning ring to his nephew and niece, William and Elizabeth Risbridger, children his of brother, William of Dorking, and the same to his wife's brother, Thomas Burnett and his wife, Elizabeth. The token gift of a sum to buy a mourning ring was a regular custom for very many years. Thomas Burnett and his wife lived in London, which was probably where John Risbridger's wife came from and is a further indication that these rural clockmakers were very much in touch with events in the capital. With the death of John Risbridger in 1735 the Brentford business became extinct.

The younger son of the first William Risbridger of Dorking, William Risbridger (II), was born in 1687 at Dorking and followed his father in the trade there till his death in 1744. William (II) of Dorking had succeeded his father in 1718 at the age of 31, his father having died relatively young at the age of 58. William (II) was married to Elizabeth Fenn in 1712, aged about 25. Their only son was also named William and was born in 1713.

William Risbridger (III) also followed the clock trade in Dorking, marrying there in 1740 to Sarah Dudley, who died in 1750. William (III) seems to have remained a widower for almost 40 years till he married for the second time at the ripe old age of 77 in 1790 to Rebecca Williams. He survived this marriage by only four years, dying in 1794 at the age of 81. William (III) was the last of a four-generation clockmaking family, who between them were working from about 1660 to 1794, not far short of a century and a half. Not many families can claim a working period of that dimension. 🍷