

William Barlow

& the first clockmakers in King's Lynn

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The origins of clockmaking and watchmaking in Norfolk are lost in the distant past. With most areas in Britain, even including London, we are aware of the very earliest makers only because their names have been seen in old documents. The county of Norfolk is no exception. In other words the first clockmakers exist only as names, as no example of their work has yet been recorded. The three cities of Norwich, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn were the major centres in the county of Norfolk, and here I propose to look at the earliest makers in King's Lynn. By chance the oldest known domestic clock made in King's Lynn happens to be the oldest so far discovered in the entire county of Norfolk and is dated 1610, **figure 1**. Ironically, whereas we generally know certain facts about the lives of the earliest makers and nothing of their work, in this

Figure 1 An extraordinary and very spectacular weight-driven clock, a sort of precursor to a lantern clock, made in King's Lynn in 1610 by an otherwise unrecorded maker, 'Jhone Smyt'.

instance the opposite applies, in that we know an example of the maker's work but nothing at all about his life!

Even his name is a puzzle, as he signed himself 'Jhone Smyt'. What do we make of that? At a time when anybody who could write, and especially an engraver capable of such amazing work as this, well knew how to write the name 'John Smith', the most common name in the English language, this engraver chose to misspell it. That was no accident but a deliberate spelling. Why? I first became aware of this clock more than 30 years ago, when the late E L ('Larry') Edwardes, a keen horological researcher and author of several highly-respected clock books, showed me a photograph of it. He asked if I knew anything about the maker. I did not, nor did anybody else, either at that time or today, as the maker's name is recorded only from this one clock. The clock is signed, strangely enough on the back, 'Jhon Smyt in Lynnee wyt my hand'. At that time we even had to discuss where 'Lynnee' was, and eventually decided it was King's Lynn. This was not so obvious then as it might seem now, as no clock as bizarre as this was ever expected to emerge from King's Lynn. This clock surfaced



Figure 4. Back view of the Thomas Tue lantern clock dated 1663. Re-converted balance wheel escapement. Photograph by Lewis Hickson.



Figure 2. The clock is signed most unusually and in extraordinary script on the back 'Jhone Smyt in Lynnee wyt my hand'. Photograph Christie's London, copyright Christie's Images Ltd, 2000.

Figure 3. This clock is signed 'Tho. Tue de L'inn fecit Dece'br ye 5th 1663' in the space once covered by the alarm disc, implying it was first sold anonymously. Fret not original. Almost certainly a London clock, the design old-fashioned by 1663. Photograph by Lewis Hickson.



again at auction in 2000.

The clock is clearly very un-English. It is European in style, nature, construction and engraving, presumably made by a worker from mainland Europe—Flanders, the Low Countries, France, or maybe even Germany. And this to my mind explains the odd signature. The maker is trying to spell, in his best attempt at English phonetics, the French name

'Jean' and surname 'Smith', which surname did exist in mainland Europe but would be pronounced 'Smeet' (hence the long 'y' not the short 'i') and without the 'th' ending. It is well-known that French does not have the 'th' sound. Also the expression made 'with my hand' is not English as we would probably say made 'by my hand' or made 'by my own hand'. We can only guess that Jhone Smyt

moved to King's Lynn from the French-speaking European mainland, sailing across what was then called the German Ocean but which today we know as the North Sea. In fact in the 16th century King's Lynn was said to have been 'muche haunted of longe tyme withe Hollanders, Flemings and other nacions of the east countryes' (of Europe).

The old name for the town was



Figure 5. Lantern clock of the 1690s by William Barlow of King's Lynn made originally with a verge pendulum swinging between the trains but converted later to anchor escapement. The original broken hand has been repaired wrongly.



Figure 6. The same clock after cleaning. The hand has now been repaired correctly.

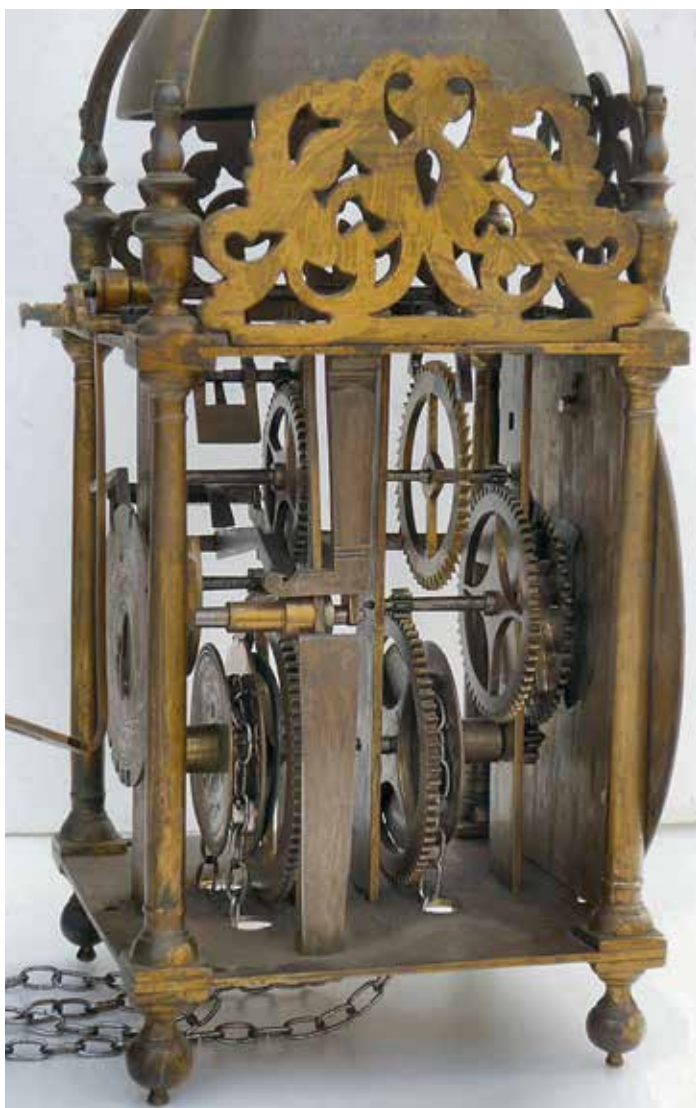
originally Lenn, later becoming Lynn Regis about the time of Henry VIII. Some clocks are signed at 'Lynn Regis', including a lantern clock by William Barlow pictured in Hana's book *ENGLISH LANTERN CLOCKS*, which the author interprets as Lyme Regis!

The first English maker of truly English clocks in King's Lynn was Thomas Tue, who was born about 1613 and purchased

his freedom to trade in King's Lynn in 1662 as a gunsmith. He was then about 49 years old, but he did not wait till then to begin producing his own work. We know he worked there before 1662 as at least three of his clocks are dated before that year (1646, 1649, 1655). He dated most of his clocks conveniently in a visible position on the dial. So we believe he was already working in Lynn

when he married in 1648 at Willingham in Cambridgeshire to Bridget Green. He was then 35 and she was 38, a bit old in those days for a first marriage.

When we learn that Thomas's son, William, was also made free at King's Lynn as a gunsmith in 1661/62, we must suppose he was at least 21, which implies he was born about 1641 and must have been a child of a previous



marriage of Thomas. So we can deduce that Bridget was his second wife. Two more of his apprentices were freed in King's Lynn—Robert Roll in 1678/79 and Edmund Smith in 1689/90, both as gunsmiths. In 1691 he was one of those who signed the inventory of the goods left on the death of John Geldart or Gildar, the watchmaker who had moved in, to become the third craftsman who plied the clock trade there (though Tue outlived him).

Thomas Tue's wife Bridget died on 26th March 1699 aged 79. He himself died in November 1710 at the remarkable age of 97. Clifford & Yvonne Bird quote in their book *NORFOLK AND NORWICH CLOCKS & CLOCKMAKERS* the text of a memorial once in St Margaret's church but now apparently lost: 'Here resteth the bodies of Thomas Tue and Bridget his wife. He was twice Churchwarden of the Parish. He made and gave freely to the said Parish a new clock in 1681 and a clock at St James and a Moon dial here at his own Cost and Charge. His wife died on the 26th March 1689 aged 79 years and he departed November 1710 aged 97 years and nine days'.

It appears that his foremost profession was that of a gunsmith, the profession

he called himself by when making his will in November 1710. His clockmaking skills seem to have been limited to turret clocks, yet several lantern clocks are known bearing his name and the dates of making: 1646, 1649, 1655, 1663, 1666, 1697, 1698. Those I have seen appear to be in the very distinctive style of London clocks, presumably bought and retailed by Thomas Tue, though I cannot say this is the case with all of them. One is signed 'Thomas Tue at Lin 1646'. The 1655 clock, signed 'Thomas Tue at Linn fecit', was stolen from King's Lynn museum in 1991. Another is signed 'Tho. Tue de L'inn fecit 1663'. Oddly enough the 1663 clock is signed where it would originally have been concealed by the alarm disc (now missing), which might imply that Tue was supplying others in the trade.

One example is signed in the dial centre 'Francis Stamper' and on the front fret 'Thomas Tue—Lynn', which implies that he bought that clock from Stamper, a well-known Quaker clockmaker in London, to re-sell. I know of no longcase clocks by Tue, though by the time they would have come on the scene there, he was a man of very mature years, so perhaps he stuck with the more blacksmith-like lantern clocks.

Figure 7. The movement of the Barlow clock before cleaning, showing the hammer spring with traditional filed decoration. The escape wheel has a different profile from the original wheels.

Figure 8. The Barlow movement from the right shows the divided trains with a gap in the centre for the original short pendulum to swing. Pictured before cleaning.

Figure 9. The top plate shows the Barlow movement before cleaning, the empty holes being where the cocks were for the original short pendulum, which was replaced later with a long pendulum to improve timekeeping.

Figure 10. A different lantern clock by William Barlow, slightly earlier, this one signed on the fret 'Wm. Barlowe of Lin fecit'. Pictured unrestored. Photograph Bukowskis Auctioneers.

His will runs to four pages and was signed on 17th November 1710 and was proved on 8th December (Norfolk Record Office ANW will 1710 F362). It is not very illuminating, except to point out that he



owned several properties in King's Lynn and small plots of land here and there in the county. He seems to have left no children, or grandchildren, presumably having outlived his son, William. His nearest kin were one Thomas Tue, the underage son of his deceased nephew, Joseph Tue, a labourer, his niece, Anne Daniel, a widow, and niece Ann, wife of John Cufande, and their under-age children. At 97 it is not surprising that Thomas had outlived almost all of them.

The third clockworker to live in King's Lynn was John Geldarte (sometimes written Gildart or Gilder). He was baptised in August 1647, at St Martin's Coney Street in York, the son of Joshua Geldarte, a goldsmith, by his wife, Anne Smeaton, whom he had married in 1646. She was perhaps related to the watchmaker John Smeaton. John Geldarte was married at St Saviour's, York, on 11th February 1672/73 to Mary Baxter and they had two sons (twins?) baptised on the same day at St Andrews on 5th September 1673 named James and William. He was made free in York in 1674 as a watchmaker, son of Joshua Geldarte goldsmith.

York seems not to have suited him. Perhaps there was too much competition

there, for he was made freeman at King's Lynn, Norfolk, in 1685 by purchase. It is interesting that he is specifically described as a watchmaker, the other early ones being principally gunsmiths. As a goldsmith's son he would have been brought up in that finer sort of more detailed and delicate work than that of a gunsmith, such as Thomas Tue, or William Barlow, both of whom made and worked on turret clocks and even lantern clocks, which involved work of a much heavier type.

Moving into King's Lynn in 1685 his working life there was brief, as he died only six years later in 1691 still described as a watchmaker and aged only 44. No work of his appears to be recorded today, but it seems he really did make watches, as his inventory survives.

This was taken on 6th February 1691/92 and included:

'In the shop:	
Five watch movements	£4.0s.0d.
One silver watch case	8s.0d.
Five doz watch glasses	15s.0d.
Four doz of keys	12s.0d.
Three watch chains	7s.6d.
Some watch springs	5s.0d.
A new watch fixt	£2.10s.0d.

A second hand watch old 5s.0d.'

One of the appraisers was Thomas Tue. (inventory extract courtesy of Norfolk Record Office reference ANW 23/4/86).

One view suggests that, because he had a stock of five movements already made up, he bought his watch movements in ready-made and cased them as and when he got an order. I am not convinced of this. Amongst his tools is listed a dividing plate, used for wheel cutting. Is this evidence that he did make watches, or just new wheels to replace broken ones? If he did make his own watches he might just as likely have made them ahead of requirement, so that they were more readily completed when an order came in.

William Barlowe was the fourth maker of domestic clocks in King's Lynn, but only the third whose work we know. He was made free at King's Lynn in 1693 as a gunsmith, though from the style of his clocks we can deduce that he was working before that date—just as Thomas Tue had worked before his freedom. Geldart had died in 1691, and whilst he no doubt undertook some domestic clock work, it

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is doubtful if a watchmaker would have worked on turret clocks. So it looks as if Barlow took up his freedom to trade there following Geldart's death, which would have left a gap in the trade. By this time (1693) Thomas Tue was 80 and probably not up to clock work, though he had made turret clocks as late as 1681.

About 1700 William Barlow made a clock for the chapel of St Nicholas at a cost of £9.0s.0d. In 1705 he made an agreement with the church wardens to convert the church clock of Methwold, Norfolk, to pendulum.

He died in 1723. His will described him as a gunsmith and was dated 20th April 1723 and was proved on

10th July 1723, leaving everything to his widow, Rebecca. One William Barlow was married in 1683 at St Gregory's Norwich to Marian Pue—either this is

a different person or Rebecca was his second wife. His marriage to Rebecca has not been traced.

'This is the last will and testament of me William Barlow of Kings Lynn in ye county of Norfolk gunsmith.

Imprimis I give and bequeath unto Rebecca my dear and loving wife all and singular my goods, chattels and personal estate of what kind and nature soever whom I do make sole executor of this my will she paying all my debts and burying my body decently to ye ground. In witness whereof I have to this my will set my hand and seal ye twentieth day of April AD 1723. Will Barlow.

'Signed sealed published & declared by ye said Wm Barlow ye testator to be his last will and testament in ye presence of us who have set our hands in witness thereunto in his presence: Susan

Chensey, Elizabeth Ashby
her mark, Edward Bradfield.'

Probate was granted on the 10th July 1723 to Rebecca Barlow. (Will reproduced courtesy of Norfolk Record Office NCC will register 108 Megoe.)

I know of four genuine lantern clocks by Barlow—and one other which is far from genuine. Of the genuine ones, one, originally with centre verge pendulum, is signed 'Wm. Barlow Lynn Regis'. Another is signed on the front fret 'Wm. Barlowe of Lin fecit' and dates from the 1680s. Another, formerly centre verge pendulum, now long pendulum, is signed on the chapter ring 'Wm. Barlow of Lynn fecit' and dates from about 1690. Another, a winged version with centre pendulum, is signed in the dial centre 'Wm. Barlow Lynn Regis' and dates from about 1700.