

JOHN WAINWRIGHT

His only lantern

by **Brian Loomes**, UK

I heard recently from a past contact in Sweden, Olov Johanson, who a good few years ago now kindly loaned me a couple of photographs of his miniature arched dial lantern clock by John Wainwright of Wellingborough, which pictures I used in my book *LANTERN CLOCKS* in 2008. Olov is now in mature years—I won't say how many but he is even older than me, which gives you a clue. But he is still keen on clocks and wondered if I could tell him anything more about his clock or its maker.

By way of background he tells me he bought the clock in 1961 when he saw it by chance hanging in a watchmaker's shop in central Stockholm where he had called in to get a new watchstrap. He fell in love with it but could not



afford to buy it. By good fortune the clock was still there unsold a year later, and so he went in and bought it. Today Olov is retired from Mobil Oil where he was a sales manager, and still has the clock in his home near Stockholm—no doubt well oiled!

Figure 1. Miniature alarm timepiece by John Wainwright of Wellingborough bearing his serial number 1544, which we can date to about 1740. Photograph by Olov Johanson.


He and I have at least one thing in common. In 1961 I too was drooling over clocks I could not afford to buy. Like the first Thomas Loomes lantern clock I ever saw, priced outrageously at £100, which was then 



Figure 2. The movement from the left shows the verge escapement going train with alarmwork set on the backplate. Photograph by Olov Johanson.

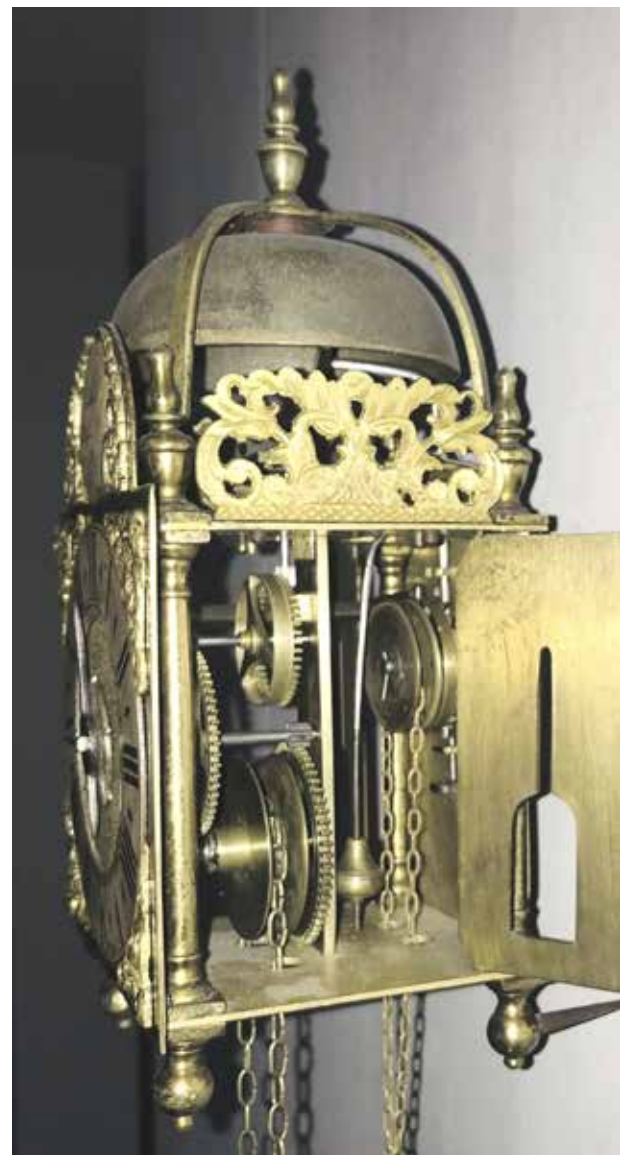


Figure 3. The movement seen from the right. Note the slots in the door which allow the pendulum a wider swing than would otherwise be possible. Photograph by Olov Johanson.

more than I earned in a month. Get out the violins, John!

I know what you are thinking—what did Olov's clock cost then? It cost 400 Swedish Krona—about £30 Sterling! He was not robbed.

Like most such clocks it is a non-striker, which I am supposed to call a timepiece alarm or I shall be chastised again by purists. But you know what I mean and I am used to it. The absence of strikework implies it was made for bedroom use, the small size for travel, and they are often referred to as travelling alarms. This particular clock is typical of many hundreds of examples and virtually all its features are standard of the day. So what makes this clock so special it is worth writing about? Simply

the fact that it is the only lantern clock we know by this clockmaker. I have made a note of those clocks I happened upon by John Wainwright and all but this one were longcase clocks.

It carries the serial number 1544, which makes it more interesting than many. When I see a number like this it always reminds me of the time an owner took offence by what I said once about his old family clock, which carried a four-digit number starting with 15. I was totally wrong, he said, as his clock was at least 200 years older than I said, because it was Elizabethan and had the actual year engraved on it!

I was the first person to have studied the handful of clockmakers who numbered and sometimes dated their

clocks. They were discussed as a group in my 1976 book *COUNTRY CLOCKS*, a tiny book now almost forgotten and one of my favourites. There is a chapter on 'The Numbers Men'. These makers include several who are now very well known to enthusiasts principally through my writings about them, but then were names that were almost unrecognised—Jonas Barber, Henry Philipson, Will Snow, Richard Blakeborough, Thomas Hampson, Samuel Roberts. Some of these makers have even had books written about them since then, but that is where it all started. They are interesting for several reasons not least being that we can set their clocks in date sequence, see how their styles developed and sometimes



Figure 4. Full view from above showing the verge escapement in detail. Photograph by Olov Johanson.

even estimate how many clocks each man could make in a year or even how many each made in a lifetime.

Numbering is not as straightforward as we might first think. We have to ask a question sometimes put forward by those accustomed to watchmaking—did some clockmakers ‘jump’ ahead by, for example, starting their number sequence at 500, or 1000. We know some watchmakers did that in an attempt at blowing their own trumpets, in seeming to be big wheels in the watchmaking world. But I am convinced that the great majority of clockmakers did not jump numbers. Or perhaps I should say there is no evidence that they did.

From years of deliberating such

things I concluded that a one-man-band clockmaker could make about 25 clocks a year, roughly one every two weeks. This assumes that he had buyers enough to take that output, and that was not always the case. We know from records such as those left by Sam Roberts that they occasionally had very lean times. But Roberts worked in an area of sparse population not a busy and thriving town like John Wainwright’s Wellingborough.

In this tally I accept that the output of a man working alone would include considerable help from his wife and children and maybe also an apprentice boy, but not a mature male employee. John Wainwright’s wife and children did not sit around on an evening watching

Big Brother. It is said they sat round the fire undertaking simple work tasks, such as filing, polishing parts, and making links for, and assembling, clock chains, a simple but tediously repetitive process done using a special pair of pliers.


Only those who are self-employed can understand how absolutely vital it is that the family all muck in. When we first set up our own business my wife and I used to work through till 2am, then have a kip in an armchair for a few hours and start the new day. The local motor patrol cop used to see our showroom lights on and pop in for a cuppa in the early hours. As a small pre-school child in the 1970s our son, Robert, learned his alphabet by filing index cards for *WATCHMAKERS &* 



Figure 5. The top plate with double-headed alarm hammer. Photograph by Olov Johanson.

Figure 6. Simple country case in straight-grain oak of the single-handed clock, date around 1750. Photograph courtesy of Mulvey Antiques, Penrith.



CLOCKMAKERS OF THE WORLD, a book I was working on for 12 years. There were always a few we could not find but we blamed the dog for eating those.

In the case of John Wainwright we can guess he began working about 1710 and finished about 1750. For easy reckoning let us assume he made 2000 clocks in that period, which works out at 50 a year, one a week. This is twice what we might have expected. But we can guess that for much of his working life he had an apprentice working with him, which may help account for his output. Its number puts this clock's year of making around 1740.

I doubt if Wainwright made this clock himself from scratch. He would have bought his castings from a specialist maker of lantern clocks, finished them and assembled them himself. Of more than a dozen clocks I happen to have noted, all the others were longcases. The clock seems to have survived unscathed; all its parts being original except the weights (which look modern) and possibly the hand, which is so strangely simple as to have no style. Personally I think the hand *is* original. It is certainly

ancient and pitted and we do see such simple pointers just now and then. Hands on single-handed clocks are usually exceptionally strong, and seldom break in use, though there is always the possibility of loss through a retaining pin slipping out. Chances are if someone was fitting a replacement they would opt for a conventional pattern, so all ways round I think this is the hand John Wainwright made for it.

Reading his numbering, his serial number is usually positioned beside his signature and preceded by 'No.', eg 'No. 1800'—which must mean 'number 1800'. Why the ending in o is a mystery, yet we often see it. It is certainly not an English word. Perhaps it is supposed to represent the Latin ablative case of Numerus (numero) to mean 'by number'. Anyway I feel sure that John Wainwright, Latin scholar or not, used it to ensure some innocent did not mistake it for a year, Elizabethan or otherwise. His meaning is clear to most of us, if not all.

The Wainwright numbers on my list are 123, 673, 926, 954, 982, 1079, 1084, 1140, 1174, 1184, 1278, 1303, 1349, 1372, 1412, 1440, 1534, 1544, 1570, 1605, 1622, 1713, 1774, 1794,



Figure 7. Dial of a 30-hour longcase clock numbered 1800, the highest number I have yet recorded and surprising that Wainwright made single-handers this late in his career. Photograph courtesy of Mulvey Antiques, Penrith.

and 1800. No doubt there are many more out there and at times such as this I am usually bombarded with reports of new numbers. His son, Samuel, was born in 1730, worked initially at Wellingborough (by 1752) and then by 1763 at Northampton, where he continued John's numbering sequence with known examples being 1867 (Northampton), 1869, 1947, 2054, 2081, 2288, 2308, 2311, 2742, 2791, 2826, 2866, 2885, 2890, 2901, 3102, 3020, 3063, 3500, 3507. His son, William, born 1724, moved to

work in Northampton, where he died in 1768.

John Wainwright is thought to have worked for Thomas Power till the latter died in 1709 at the age of about 79. He then worked there in his own right from about 1709 to about 1751, after which date he was also at Northampton. In 1718 he took as apprentice George Ganderson, son of Charles Ganderson of Barton, Northamptonshire. In 1725 he took Fisher Canwarden and in 1731 he took William Linacre. The first two of these are never heard of again

but they seem to me very unlikely surnames and I know from personal searching that some of these records are appallingly written, so it is possible these are misrenderings. William Linacre is known for an odd clock but maybe worked mostly as a journeyman, perhaps even for his former master.

John Wainwright himself was buried at Allhallows, Wellingborough, on 7th July 1753. He left behind a fine body of work, which stands as a testimony to this hard-working clockmaker from Middle England. ■