

THE 'LONDON MAHOGANY'

A detailed examination of a clock style based on an example by John Waldron of Cornhill.

A recent enquiry came from a correspondent in Toronto, Canada, the lady owner of a clock by John Waldron of London. She is in fact a retired nurse, who was at the time just returning to work in a hospital to help in the battle against the Coronavirus—what a heroine! Some of her emails were quick snatches she sent between shifts.

The clock was bequeathed about 30 years ago from her husband's side of the family, before which it lived in Hackney, not three miles from where it was made. I doubt it had travelled much further till its journey to Canada. These clocks often remained in their original locality, as did their owners, until recent generations.

This is a classic clock of a certain type, of which many hundreds exist. But what struck me about it is that it survives almost untouched by the ravages of time and owners. One reason may be that it

by **Brian Loomes**, UK

has done little travelling, but whatever the reason it seemed an ideal candidate to analyse by its entirely original parts. Minor changes are the filled in panels to the hood sides, the filled-in mahogany piece in the front of the pagoda top, and probably the finials.

As far as I can see from the dial it is exactly as it was made, even down to the original hands and in its original case. Just two or three minor modifications about the case that are typical of owners doing their own thing. As buyers, collectors or dealers in clocks we seek perfection in the sense of total originality unchanged since the day it was made. But perhaps we are sometimes too

Figure 1. John Waldron's clock is instantly recognisable as a classic 'London mahogany' longcase or tall clock as they call them in its present home in Canada. This style is sometimes called a 'London pagoda'. The finials may be replaced or modified.



critical. We are apt to forget that different owners may have changed details to suit their own tastes. If anything that can give a little comfort to the hesitant novice, who may feel that an occasional sign of that helps convince him the item does have serious age—provided of course that he recognises those changes.

Clockmaking in London was quality-controlled from the early seventeenth century by the Clockmakers' Company, a closed-shop trade guild who legislated as to who could, and who could not, work in the trade in London, in an attempt to impose minimum-level standards. This meant that those who made clocks were obliged to produce a workmanlike product, which was up to its task, or run foul of the many and varying penalties the Company could impose. The result is that any London-made clock we come across today was subject to quality control and

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is likely to have been a well-made item when new.

Another result of that quality control was that the style of clock currently fashionable in London at any one moment in time tended to be used by virtually all exponents of the craft. If they felt they had a winner, they stuck with it. This makes clocks by London makers very easily datable by their consistency of style, once we have a basic knowledge of that style. Provincial clocks offered much more of a mish-mash of individual styles, personal tastes and regional preferences.


Mahogany was known in England as a cabinet wood from the late seventeenth century, but it was not in regular use, and certainly not in use for clock cases making, until about 1750, more usually from about 1760 onwards. The brass-dial eight-day London longcase clock housed in mahogany, eg the 'London mahogany' longcase discussed here, was a style which lasted from about 1760 for about 20 years. Examples were 



Figure 2. The hood of John Waldron's clock has characteristic grooved pillars, we sometimes wrongly call 'reeded'. A standard feature is that the lower third of the front pillars are (dare I say always?) piped with brass reeds. The piped reeding is very much a London feature though occasionally copied elsewhere and sometimes with wooden piping.



Figure 3. The hood with the door open reveals aspects we need to see to help authenticate the clock's originality to this case—such as a perfect, accurate fit to the wooden surround.

made after this, but with changes in style which put those into a slightly different category. London mahogany clocks vary tremendously in price, a factor which can be very puzzling to the novice but behind which there are several reasons.

These London mahogany clocks are all based on the same principle but there are three distinct variations or grades—depending, I suppose, on how much the client wanted to spend. This clock is the basic 'ordinary' grade, having a square-cornered trunk and grooved hood pillars with brass rod inserts set into the lower third. On the next grade up the trunk corners are fitted with grooved, brass-piped quarter-pillars (strictly called pilasters). The very best variation was as stage two but with the addition of quarter-round, brass-piped pillars at the base. This latter version is very uncommon.

All grades of London mahogany

case are of such high quality that it is difficult to speak in terms of the higher or lower grade type, but it is important to understand that there are these categories, as this is one of the factors which has a bearing on the very variable prices of 'London mahogany' clocks. Apart from condition, colour and figuring, which are aspects affecting the value of all clocks, the other single most important aspect is height, as it is obvious that a very tall example will be hard to find a home for today.

The case of this London-made clock is made from the finest mahogany, the best and most expensive timber for furniture making that money could buy at that time. It was shipped halfway across the world from the West Indies and the Americas, on otherwise empty slave ships making the triangular journey of England, Africa, America, to west-coast English ports

such as Bristol, Lancaster (then a port for sea-going ships), Liverpool and probably Glasgow but principally of course London. It is said that timber merchants would compete to be first at the docks to grab the choicest timbers, most especially the highly-figured veneers, which were always used for frontal areas that showed most—plain solid for the sides.

It is quite amusing to think that the clock timber was transported several thousand miles eastwards across the ocean, made into a clock, which remained there for two centuries, then went back westwards across the same ocean for a few more thousand miles to its current home.

Cases were not made by the clockmaker, who worked in metals, but by a craftsman, who worked in wood. In London clock cases were always the



Figure 4. This closer view shows the cross-grain veneer to the mask more clearly with slight chipping and cracks caused by shrinkage; the latter always happen with short veneers. On the right can be seen the return sections of the door hinges.



Figure 5. The dial is conventional showing those aspects we expect to see and which most arched dials display—strike / silent switch, seconds dial, day of the month. It is the way in which they display that is interesting.

product of fine cabinetmakers, some of whom may have specialised purely in clock cases. Very few marked their work with their name which means we hardly ever know the casemaker's name. This style was *the* principal type of case used on London clocks, and sometimes on clocks made within a few miles' distance, at this period, roughly between 1760 and 1780. It is so typical that we refer to this exact type as a 'London mahogany' or sometimes a 'London mahogany pagoda' style

The two main areas of any clock case are the door and the base, where the best-figured woods were almost always placed. These two areas catch the eye and were the features that sold the clock, then and now. This new timber was so hard that workmen are said to have complained it took the edge off their tools. It became regarded as the 'king of woods'

as being handsome, stable, durable and immune to woodworm unless rotted by damp. Its nearest rival, walnut, was less stable and prone to worm.

In the nineteenth century much plainer African mahogany flooded into England, which by contrast could be whittled with a penknife. It really can—I have tried it! African mahogony can usually be seen in the mouldings of any Victorian longcase, a miserable and boring wood with a yellow tint to it. They tell me it makes good firewood.

The pagoda is the top pediment, which some see as the cross-section of a bell, so older books sometimes call it a bell top. The pagoda made this kind of clock imposing but very tall—examples in excess of 9ft are not unknown. This was highly suitable for the tall ceilings in London homes of the time. Today many ceilings have lower height restrictions,

which can make these clocks hard to sell.

Many owners, and even more dealers, solved this problem by removing the pagoda, which leaves a very nipped-looking arched top, sometimes called a dome top. Look at a few websites and you will soon spot some. In fact probably most of the so-called 'dome-tops' began life as pagodas. A London cabinetmaker once confessed to me indiscreetly that he had a standing order from one well-known clock dealer that every clock that came into his workshop as a pagoda went out as a dome top! The public has always been at the mercy of dealers who will tailor clocks to suit the general taste, thereby making more saleable a clock that otherwise might be 'TUS', as an antiques dealer friend of mine used to describe them—Totally UnSaleable! He was prone to slight exaggeration.

The term 'London pagoda' alone is



Figure 6. The sides of the hood have wooden infill pieces where originally would have been frets in brass or wood or possibly glass windows.

Figure 7. The infill panel is of slightly different colour. No casemaker would have left such a panel without a finishing beading of some kind.

not precise enough as cases in this style were also made in walnut from maybe 1750 but when imports of mahogany became more readily available, walnut fell out in favour of the worm-free 'king of woods', and walnut is unusual by 1770. Mahogany was known in Britain by maybe 1720 but was seldom used in longcase work before maybe 1760. Thanks to his tragically short life we know that John Waldron's clock dates between 1763 and 1770.

Looking up a clockmaker should be very straightforward but in fact is seldom simple. We always begin with the 'bible', my own book *WATCHMAKERS & CLOCKMAKERS OF THE WORLD*, which gives us a choice of two such in London, with other Waldron clockmakers elsewhere:

- 'WALDRON, John (I?). London

a.1756, CC1763-88.'

- 'WALDRON, John (II?). London (Cornhill) 1767-d.1770.'

From what I have now learned I realise these two entries are just jumbled dates for the one man, John of Cornhill. There were several clockmakers with the surname Waldron, who were quite possibly related. This particular clock is signed by John Waldron of Cornhill, London, which pins it down to just one of them. But how did two overlapping entries occur?

John Waldron is listed in Britten and Baillie but only briefly. Without going into too much detail Britten's pioneering book was compiled in the late nineteenth century and contained about 14,000 makers, mostly in London and mostly taken from the records of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, a 'closed

shop' trade guild that tried to force every clockmaker to join.

Mr G H Baillie, who died long ago, copied from Britten and added to that by publishing his book in 1929 briefly detailing about 25,000 clockmakers, extending it in his 1947 version to 35,000. After many years of stalemate because of copyright, I was eventually able to include my own personal list into a compendium volume, which I compiled and which was published in 2006 as the twenty-first century edition. It contains not far short of 100,000 names. I could only remove entries I could prove were erroneous, and so we get occasional entries like the two John Waldrons.

I did establish that there was only one clockmaker in Cornhill called John Waldron, and his life will be investigated in Part Two. 📖