

THE RAY FAMILY

Seven generations of clockmaking

by Brian Loomes, UK

This article began when I had an enquiry about an unusual clock signed on the circular silvered brass dial 'W S Ray, Brighton'. How old was it, was anything known about the maker and was it, as the owner had been told, a regulator?

Well, looking first at the regulator aspect ... Strictly-speaking a longcase regulator was a clock made purely for precision timekeeping and nothing else. As such it would not have many of the incidentals we are used to with domestic longcase clocks, which to the maker of a regulator would have been seen as non-essential frippery. After all it was not made as a pretty household clock, but for a more formal location which called for precise time—a scientist's study, a bank manager's office, government offices, a clockmaker's workshop. All non-essentials (decoration of the case or dial, moonwork, calendars, strikework, sub-dials *etc*) were omitted, not just for the sake of austerity, but because some of them would draw power from the going train and might interfere with the main function of accurate timekeeping.

So most 'true' regulators have a plain circular silvered dial (occasionally a white japanned dial) with no decoration, simply numbering and the name of the maker. A few London makers of precision clocks specialised in these and would supply them to the trade as well as to private individuals or government bodies. They had precision escapements, usually of the dead-beat anchor type, hour, minute and seconds registration shown by separately-positioned hands (*ie* not concentric), maintaining power to avoid time loss during winding, and a compensated pendulum to avoid variation from expansion caused by temperature change.

Cases would be ultra plain, often with a glass door to reveal the compensated pendulum and brass weights. Specialists revelled in their own specific forms of these features, sometimes of their own invention or devising, yet they might still have been asked to supply them lettered with the retailer's name, as if he was the maker.

But for many a simpler type of precision clock was required, still keeping



Figure 1 The shop regulator by W S Ray of Brighton was probably made about 1854, when he took over the business from his father. The mahogany case has a typical glass door to display the brass driving weights with spoked pulleys. This example strikes the hours.

accurate time but one that was a bit more user-friendly. Clockmakers with a retail shop would take pride in having such a master clock on display, not only for their own use in time-testing, but for passing customers to pop in to set their watches by. For these clocks, which we sometimes call semi-regulators, the dial would be more conventional, one such as a customer could readily understand, yet one which was visibly different from a household clock and in which the clockmaker could take great pride. Such a clock is the one pictured here.

From what we discovered about the life of its 'maker' we know that this clock must date between 1854 and 1874. It was probably his shop clock, and therefore made within a year or two of 1854, which was the year he succeeded his father in business there. It has most of the essentials of a precision clock with deadbeat escapement and Harrison's maintaining power.

But it also has several features we would not expect to see on a true regulator. These include a little flourishing touch of carving to the case, a conventional two-handed dial layout, hourly striking, a non-compensated pendulum—it has a wooden pendulum rod to help against expansion or contraction.

The presence of these features makes the clock more typical of what customers were used to and would more easily understand. Yet the very formal case with glass door gives that more austere, regulator-like appearance, which would be what his customers expected to see in the premises of a master craftsman.

As his shop 'master clock' it would be used to test the timekeeping of any other clocks he was making or repairing, as well as being within sight of callers, who could set their watches by—even if need be by peering through the shop window. I know one or two clock shops or jewellers' where even to this day they have their ancient shop regulator standing on view behind the counter, usually so positioned that you would have to enter the shop to see it.

It seems to me that this particular master clock was well within the range of skills of William Ray himself. I think he made it in his own workshop and could therefore include such features as he thought most important for him and his



Figure 2. The silvered brass dial has conventional layout for the hands. The movement has a dead-beat escapement and Harrison's maintaining power. A hint of decorative carving to the mahogany cases gives the impression of a director's clock on a pedestal.



Figure 3. Oak hooded clock with alarmwork, made in the late eighteenth century by Daniel Ray of Battle, the third clockmaker of that name but the first to work in Battle. Photograph courtesy of William Bruce Antiques.

customers. He could also take far more pride in the clock than anything bought in from specialists in London however famous they might be.

I have come across a few shop regulators over the years that were obviously the work of the shop owner, and they often have quirky idiosyncrasies that a London regulator specialist might think beneath him. I once owned one by Emanuel Burton of Kendal, which was of 30-hour duration. This might at first seem amusingly provincial, until we remember that all pull-wind clocks have maintaining power as a built-in feature! Burton was an excellent and highly-regarded maker and knew what he was about.

In his book *THE CLOCKMAKERS OF SUSSEX* the late E J (John) Tyler gives some detail about William Stevens Ray, and his clockmaking father and

grandfather, the latter moving to Sussex in the late 1700s. I knew John and I miss the exchange of notes we used to engage in regarding local clockmakers. But it was not till I looked this maker up in his book that I realised the Ray clockmakers of Sussex were the same family as those who worked earlier in the county of Suffolk and whose work I have come across on several occasions.

A bit of searching soon uncovered more of the life of W S Ray. Research at this period is made easier for us because we can use the census records. He was born in 1826 at Battle, the son of watchmaker William Ray senior. The 1841 census for London Road, Brighton, shows William Ray (senior), a watchmaker aged 40 with wife, Mary Ann, son William aged 15, and Harriet Nash a bonnet seller aged 35.

The 1851 census surprised me in revealing that William Stevens Ray, unmarried, aged 26, was not working in Brighton, but was lodging with Richard Smith, gardener, aged 55, at 14 Warwick Road, Leamington Spa, Warwickshire. His occupation is listed as housekeeper, which seemed odd, and on checking the originals I saw this was a mis-transcription of watchmaker. He was at Leamington Spa from at least 1851 to 1853. We can assume he was working as a journeyman at this period.

By August 1853 he had moved back to Brighton, presumably to work with his father, William Ray senior, who was probably in failing health and died in February 1854. The directory for 1854 lists William Stevens Ray at 83 North Street, Brighton. William Stevens Ray, described as of Brighton, jeweller, son of



Figure 4. Tavern clock made about 1770 by William Ray of Sudbury, the third generation clockmaker of a family capable of making any type of clock they were called on to supply. Photograph courtesy of Bonhams Auctioneers, London.

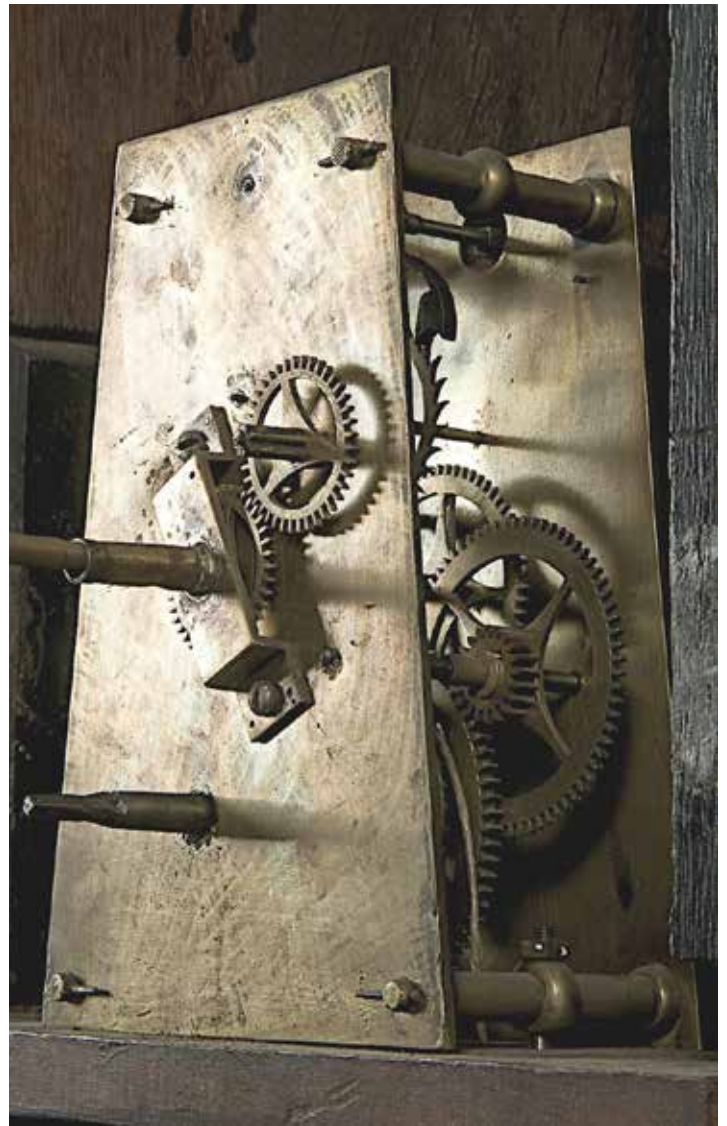


Figure 5. The typical timepiece movement of the tavern clock, here seen with the dial removed. Photograph courtesy of Bonhams Auctioneers, London.

William Ray, was married at Stamford, Lincolnshire to Mary (Ann) Norton, daughter of farmer Noah Norton, on 2nd August 1853, both being of full age.

Their issue, born at Brighton, were: September 1854 Elizabeth Mary, 1856 William Redmore (named after his great uncle, a clockmaker at Sudbury and London), 1858 Minetta, 1859 Annie, 1861 Robert, 1863 Harry (Norton) (also a clockmaker 1884-86 but wrongly listed as H W Ray). His wife, Mary, died in 1869, and he re-married in July 1870 to Mary Ann Brooker (born 1848), by whom a child, Percy Stanley, was born in 1873. William Stevens died in the autumn of 1874 aged 48, his widow in 1881 at Brighton also aged 48.

The 1861 census for Brighton shows him as a jeweller and watchmaker, with wife, Mary, born Stamford, and three

children. Living with them was Mary Hobcroft, aged 58, a nurse, and two house servants 16-year-old Elizabeth Parsons and 19-year-old Ellen Lusked. The 1881 census shows his widow, Mary Ann.

He also took over the Battle business on the death of his aunt Sarah, sister of his father, in 1863. He later sold this to Thomas Chettle in 1867, who had worked for the Ray business from at least 1847. In 1869 William Stevens Ray advertised that he had made a watch that was presented to Garibaldi.

John Tyler's book contained several family details which I could not confirm, and being local, it is likely he knew some descendants or had access to local knowledge. Much of the earlier history of the Ray family of clockmakers in Suffolk was discovered by two dedicated

researchers, Arthur Haggard and Leonard Miller, both of whom I was privileged to know, and both now unfortunately deceased. Details were published in their 1974 book, SUFFOLK COCKS & CLOCKMAKERS, my own signed copy of which is now much thumbed.

William Ray senior had moved to Brighton by 1841. Before that he had been assisting his mother at Battle. She was Lydia, widow of Daniel Ray (III) of Battle, who came from Sudbury. William married Mary Ann Goldsmith and is recorded in the 1851 census at London Road, Brighton, a watchmaker, aged 51, born at Battle, living with his wife, Mary Ann, aged 49. He was buried at St. Nicholas church, Brighton, on 10th February 1854 aged 53.

Daniel Ray (III) was baptised at St Peter's, Sudbury, Suffolk, on 14th



Figure 6. The four-wheel eight-day timepiece movement of the tavern clock has typical tapered plates, often known as A-plates. Photograph courtesy of Bonhams Auctioneers, London.



Figure 7. Late eighteenth century eight-day longcase clock in oak by William Ray of Sudbury. Photograph courtesy of Bearnes Hampton & Littlewood, Auctioneers, Exeter.

December 1763 son of clockmaker William Ray and his Mary. He trained in London, then worked back in Sudbury, where he was freed in 1788. Daniel Ray was married by licence in London at St. Botolph Aldgate on 15th October 1789, then a bachelor of Battle, to Lydia Mottram spinster of that parish, witnessed by her parents, Edward and Ann Sarah Mottram.

He moved to Battle shortly before 1790 as a protégé, it is said, of clockmaker Thomas Keeley, though I am not sure how that came about. Keeley was previously in London, then Battle, where he bought property before 1772 and died in 1790. Daniel Ray worked at 66 High Street till his death and was buried there on 1st October 1809. He was succeeded by his widow, Lydia, who continued to oversee the business almost until her death in 1852 at the ripe age of 84. She passed the business to her three unmarried daughters, Sarah, Elizabeth and Henrietta, in 1845. Sarah seems to be the one who ran things or perhaps just the one who survived longest.

Daniel (III) was the second son of

Sudbury clockmaker, William Ray, who was born 1735 and worked there till he died in 1809. It seems likely that Daniel left Sudbury because his elder brother, also a William (full name William Redmore Ray born 1762), would be expected to inherit the family business at Sudbury when the time came. William Redmore, who was apprenticed in London, seems to have remained a bachelor, and did ultimately take over from his father and worked there till his own death in 1841.

William, father of Daniel (III), was born in 1735 the son of Daniel Ray (II), who was born at Sudbury in 1701, the son of yet another Daniel, Daniel Ray (I). Daniel (II) married twice, his second wife, Elizabeth Beecham, coming from Manningtree in Essex, where they took out a marriage licence in 1749. This led to the confusion that there was a clockmaker of this name working there, although in fact the marriage took place at Sudbury. Daniel (II) died in 1772 and besides his two sons already mentioned, William and Daniel, who continued the

trade, he is believed to have left four other children, a boy and three girls.

Not much is yet recorded about the first clockmaker we know in the family, Daniel (I). He is said to have been apprenticed in 1681 and died at Sudbury in 1723 describing himself as a locksmith in his will, in which he left 'all my working tools to my son, Daniel Ray'. Lantern clocks are known by him, though not many. I know of only a single one, now converted to spring drive. He is also thought to have worked at Colchester in Essex about 1700 where at least one clock is signed, though he is not recorded there by Bernard Mason in his book on Colchester clockmakers.

There were a good many other watchmakers named Ray scattered around Britain, including a few quite close to Sudbury, who Haggard and Miller thought were not connected to those of Sudbury origin. I thought it likely they were wrong, so I researched these other local ones. But it was me that was wrong. These included William Ray, who was born at Lavenham in 1803 and

was working at Bury St Edmunds from about 1830 till 1879 or later, and his son, William junior born at Bury in 1833 and succeeded his father there till 1884 or later. David Ray of Bury was born about 1812 and died in 1848 and also worked at Brandon. A W Ray is recorded at Southampton about 1910.

The most intriguing one in this 'unconnected' group is Clement Ray of Yarmouth in Norfolk, who was making lantern clocks about 1680, though Haggard and Miller do not mention him, but of course their county of interest was Suffolk, not Norfolk. I did begin to investigate Clement Ray, which you would think was an unusual combination

of names in the late seventeenth century. But not so. I came across more than a dozen such, including some at, and close to, Sudbury in Suffolk. This suggests there may be an ultimate connection but if so, that connection so far eludes us.

If we exclude these apparently unrelated clockmaking Rays then the family in question covered seven generations we know about, which must be close on a record. The owner of the shop regulator had no knowledge of any of this initially.

But he did say: 'The clock was bought by my wife's grandfather in Croydon in 1946. We know nothing about its life before then. He kept it for 40 years and it

then passed to my father-in-law. The clock has been serviced every five years.'

It is always interesting to know a bit of history about a particular clock, as it is so often lost with time. But what strikes me as interesting is that this clock was probably still in the maker's family till the 1880s or later. So in 1946, when the present owner's family bought it, it was then less than 100 years old and had not long ceased to perform its original function. This probably accounts for the good condition as it maybe had no more than one or two owners since it stood in W S Ray's premises as his shop regulator.

