

SHARP PRACTICE

... takes another turn



by Brian Loomes, UK

It is a measure of how seriously clock enthusiasts take their subject that they keep on coming up with new aspects of the subject and new as-yet-undiscovered clockmakers. Readers of *CLOCKS* are pretty good at that. In August 2017 I wrote an article about Thomas Sharp of Stratford-upon-Avon, and his

successor, Thomas Gibbs, all brought about because reader, Colin Hodgson, had come across details of a robbery at Gibbs's premises, a maker by whom Colin happened to own a longcase clock.

Colin also discovered the existence of a business notebook kept by Sharp and Gibbs in succession in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I managed to get a copy of this document, which ran to almost 200 pages, and it

Figure 1. This round painted dial was probably supplied from the Birmingham japanners Osborne or Wilson to clockmaker John Sharp of Stratford-upon-Avon. It has a diameter of 16in and proves to have been made for a tavern clock, not a longcase.

formed the basis of an article on each maker in November and December 2017. Each maker kept his notebook for slightly different reasons, yet each



Figure 2. The movement, seen here from the left, has plates which are what we call 'A-shaped', though only slightly so. This is a typical feature of most tavern clocks.

illustrated in detail several aspects of the working life of a rural clockmaker that we had not come across previously.

It seemed as if Thomas Sharp's son, John, also took up clockmaking for a while and ran the business (with his wife) commencing some time between

Thomas's supposed retirement in 1795 and after his death in 1799. We had to guess at some of this as Thomas Sharp seems to have been alienated from his son, when John ran away from home in 1779 at the age of 17 to become a soldier. The only mention Thomas Sharp



Figure 3. This right-hand view shows the four-wheel single train and that the clock winds anti-clockwise. Tavern clocks usually had just the one train, being non-striking.

ever made of his son, apart from his birth, was this.

1769 October 29 Jno Sharp went away with out leave.

Novr. 16 1769 listed for a Solger in the Queens Ridgment of Dragoons, the 7th Ridgment under Major Blans troop.

Some readers may remember that Thomas Gibbs had bought the remnants of the 'Royal Wood' from Thomas Sharp's widow in 1812. This wood was from a mulberry tree supposedly planted by Shakespeare himself in the garden of his birthplace. It had been used to make souvenir trinkets by Thomas Sharp (and others), who had bought it when it was cut down in the 1740s.

But now the story takes a new turn as yet another *CLOCKS* reader, this one wishing to remain anonymous, wrote to me, having read the articles, to say

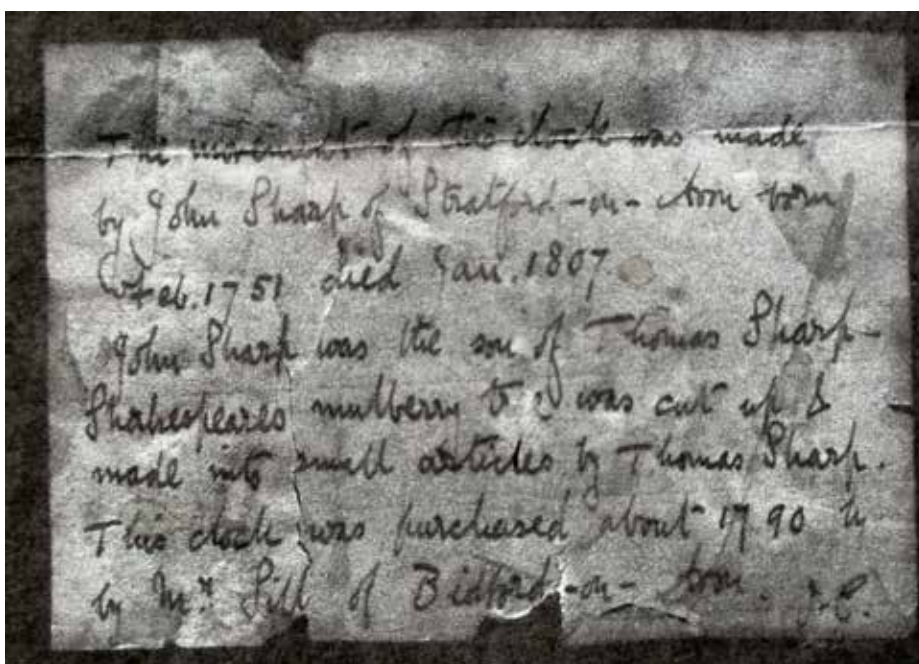


Figure 5. Dial of a 30-hour longcase clock by John Sharp of Stratford. Photograph by Ken Spiers, from *CLOCKS* issue of March 1994. The dial was made by Osborne of Birmingham.

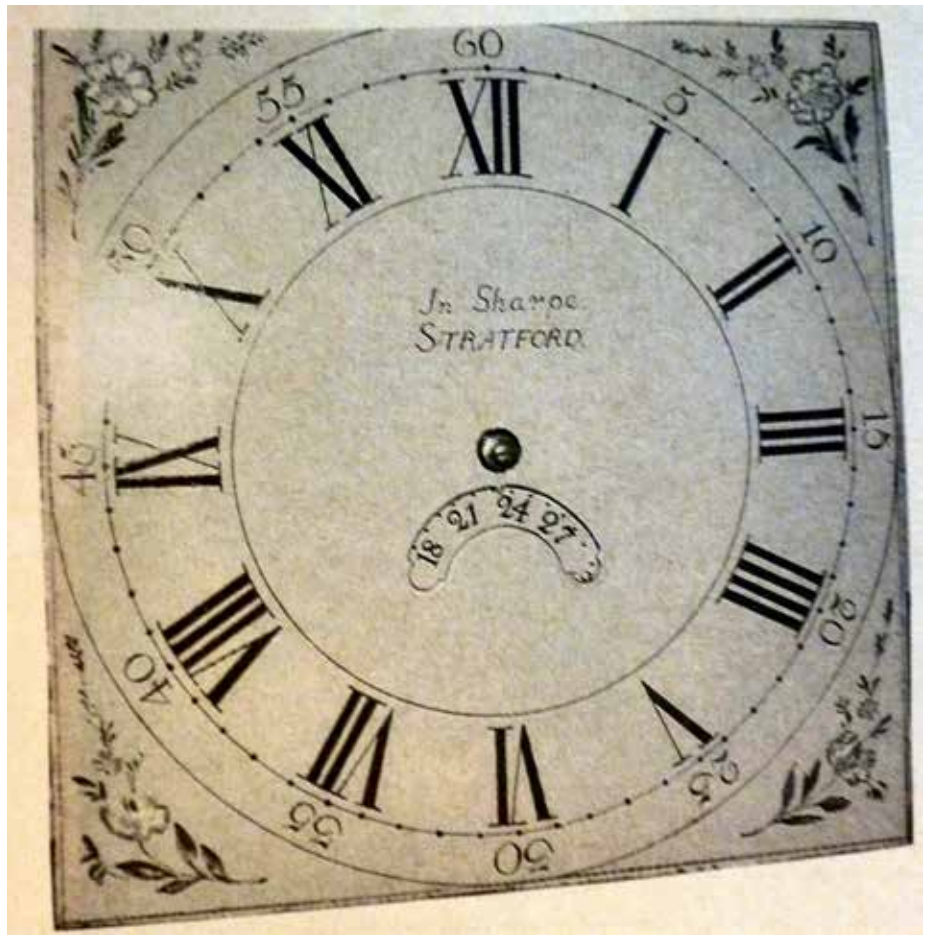
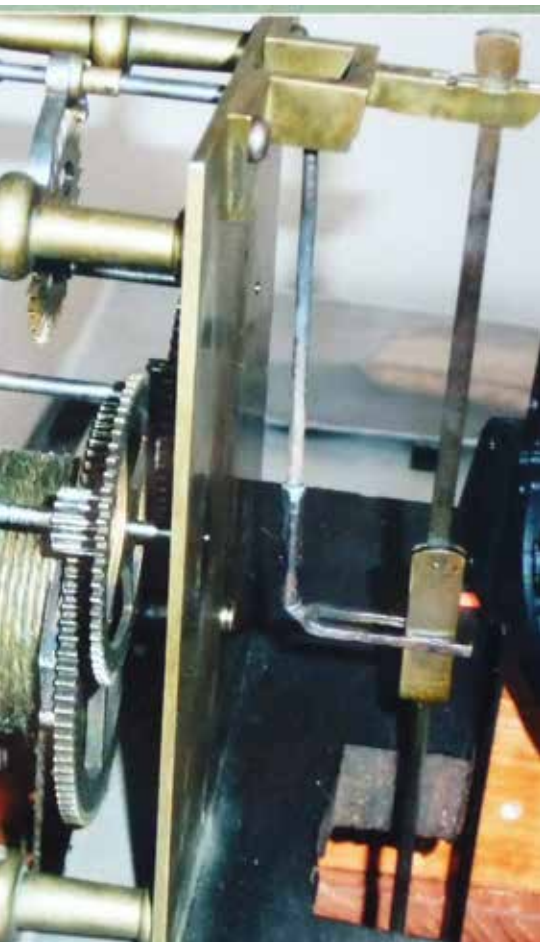


Figure 4. The note left with the clock by 'J. C.', presumably some previous owner. He tells us it was bought when new (around 1790 he believed) from John Sharp by a Mr Sill of Bidford-on-Avon. It is exceptionally rare to have a document, which records what was known of the original ownership of a clock.

that he actually owns a clock signed by John Sharp of Stratford and sent me the photographs shown here. This confirms nicely our suppositions that John Sharp took over his father's business, maybe around 1795. This clock has a 16in dial and is a tavern clock, today without the case. A handwritten note, probably preserved today because it was pasted on to a wooden backing, gives interesting information and again mentions the 'Royal Wood'.

The note reads:

The movement of this clock was made by John Sharp of Stratford-on-Avon born Feb 1751 died Jan 1807. John Sharp was the son of Thomas Sharp. Shakespeare's mulberry tree was cut up & made into small articles by Thomas Sharp. This clock was purchased about 1790 by by (sic) Mr. Sill of Bidford-on-Avon. J. C.

We don't know who Mr Sill was, nor the writer of this note, whose unclear initials look like 'J. C.'. Guessing by the style of the handwriting I would think it was written about 1900. Thankfully JC thought it worthy of writing this down, intrigued no doubt by the fact that the tradition of the Shakespeare mulberry wood continued.

But JC has his dates slightly wrong. John was born January 1752 and died in January 1806 (it was John's widow who died in January 1807). Even so it was a pretty close account from someone writing over 100 years later, and a mark of his efforts to preserve the details of the clock and its maker.

The dial is a Birmingham-made japanned dial and looks to me to be from the workshops of Thomas Osborne or James Wilson, though unmarked. If I had been guessing based on the dial style and the lovely 'diamond-pattern' brass hour hand, I would have estimated the age as about 1800. If the tradition is correct that Thomas retired in 1795, that would imply that his son, John, took over after 1795. JC was much closer to the event than we are and maybe he had knowledge of Mr Sill to give him greater guidance. Perhaps it was JC who bought the clock from Mr Sill. Even so I would think the clock dates around 1800 or just before.

Thanks to the depth of interest and of two readers of *CLOCKS* we now have details of a clockmaker whose existence was virtually unknown a year ago, and an example of his impressive work. After all a tavern clock was an unusual product

from a rural clockmaker at this period. Another indication that John Sharp was a very innovative clockmaker appears below.

What impresses me most is the note preserved with the clock, written by JC, someone who seems to have been a previous owner, in a successful attempt to document its history as he knew it. What an astonishingly rare thing is such a clock. We might expect Royal accounts to record the purchases of clocks by makers like Tompion. But how many such records do we know for country clocks of this type and period? A mere handful.

But this is not quite the full story. I kept a little bit back. When the un-named correspondent sent me details of his tavern clock, he mentioned something that Colin Hodgson and I should both already have been aware of. A longcase clock by John Sharp was illustrated and discussed in some detail during its restoration by yet another *CLOCKS* reader, Ken Spiers, on account of its exceptionally unusual striking system, too complicated to go into here. The dial is pictured below. And where was that? And why should we already have known about it? It was in the March 1994 issue of *CLOCKS*! 📌