

# THOMAS WRANGLES

## and an unusual bracket clock



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PART 1 of 2

This bracket clock is unusual as it incorporates features normally associated with different periods. This gives the impression initially that the clock is in a later case—a clock of the 1790s in a case of the 1840s. But further examination shows this is not so. The single-sheet brass (silvered) dial with rolling moon is associated with bracket clocks with the period around 1790-1800 and perhaps a little earlier. After that it was out of fashion. The case style is one we associate with the period around 1830-40. Most of these cases have clocks with circular white (painted)

*Figure 1. The bracket clock by Thomas Wrangle of Scarborough stands just under 20in high.*

*The front of the case is in mahogany with brass inlays, the rest in fruitwood, originally stained to simulate mahogany.*

dials.

Thomas Wrangles is recorded vaguely in the books as working from about 1780 to 1807. At first sight I assumed he would have been long dead before this case style appeared. But research showed this was not so.

Although this dial is brass and is a single-sheet rolling moon example we

might expect about 1790, the numbering style (with Roman hours and no minute numbers) is clearly that of the 1830s-1840s era. The corner decoration too has flowers of that similar, later period, though here engraved—when 1830s flowers would have been painted. The matching pattern 'moon' hands are also in the style of the 1830s or so. The dial above 'VI', which on most clocks would show the date number, here reads off the day of the week by its initial. This is a very unusual feature.

So, what at first seems to be an old-fashioned dial has some very up-to-



Figure 2. The single sheet brass dial is unusual, perhaps unique, for a bracket clock in displaying the calendar (day of the month) below XII and the day of the week by its initial letter above 'VI'. This indicates that the clock was made purposely as a one-off, not bought in as a standard item simply to be retailed by Wrangles.

date stylistic features. Thomas Wrangles was perfectly aware of what he was doing, but opted to use engraving on a traditional-style brass dial instead of the usual painted dial supplied by the Birmingham dial-making specialists. Why would he do that?

The clock is built with anchor escapement, which by the 1830s-1840s was only just becoming more normal on bracket clocks as a timekeeping improvement on the verge pendulum found on most bracket clocks of this traditional style. So again the clockmaker demonstrates that he was familiar with the newest practices. But also

he has engraved the back plate with a 'herringbone' type of border and all-over floral pattern, a very old-fashioned feature. This engraved back plate was well out of fashion by the 1830s, when most had a totally undecorated back plate. The engraving is not of the finest. In fact it is slightly crude. The dial on the other hand is expertly engraved. How could that be?

Well, we can only guess. Perhaps Wrangles preferred the traditional brass dial style, with which he would have been very familiar during his early, formative years in the trade. My guess is that he had some engraving skills

himself, though not sufficiently expert as to undertake the engraving of the dial, the part most constantly on display. So he paid a professional engraver to perform the dial work but did the back plate himself.

Regarding the case, the structure of all the parts is in oak including the door frame and back door frame. The back door centre panel is replaced in fancy wood (it looks like burr walnut) for what was probably originally glass to show off the engraving. There was no point in having engraving that was hidden. The door veneer is probably mahogany.



Figure 3. This side view of the case shows the typical brass fittings of the 1840s. The fruitwood has been cleaned back, thus removing the simulated mahogany finish it once would have had.

The rest of the veneer and door inside framework are of fruitwood, which can rarely be identified but is usually assumed to be pearwood because of its very close grain. The supporting seatboard is probably pine, which is now free to move back and forth because of shrinkage.

The case could originally have been stained black or 'ebonised'. But as the front is mahogany and as there are hints of redness about the pearwood it seems more likely the whole of the case was stained to look like mahogany, which was cheaper than using all mahogany. Cases with this type



Figure 4. The centre panel on the rear door is burr walnut and almost certainly replaces the original in glass, which would have allowed the engraved back plate to be seen.

of brass inlay were normally mahogany or ebonised. Stained cases typically become shabby as the stain wears though to show yellow fruitwood flashes here and there and the cases were then very often stripped down to produce a uniform fruitwood colour of yellowish brown, which of course was never the intention originally.

All in all, the clock and case would seem to date about 1830-1840. But how does the period of the clock tie in with what we know about Thomas Wrangles? I have seen only two or three clocks by him over the years, conventional longcase clocks of the late eighteenth

century. But the name is unforgettable as being a very unusual one. A little research into local records established a few facts about him.

He was baptised at Scarborough on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1756, the son of Christopher and Jane Wrangles. He married there on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1776 to Susan Moor. They had at least nine children. Mary was born in 1777, Jane in 1780, Susan Hampton in 1782, John Hampton in 1784, Christopher in 1786, Ann Elizabeth in 1789, Thomas in 1792, Ann in 1794, another John in 1798. Most of his children reached adulthood. Many married and had their own offspring. ●—●



Figure 5. This back view shows the original anchor-escapement pendulum and the naïve engraved design on the back plate, probably done by Wrangles himself.



Figure 6. The anchor escapement and back plate engraving can be seen in this view.

The most poignant of them was Thomas. The only information I can find about him is that he was a sailor on the Royal Navy ship, *HMS Dove*, a four-gun schooner, which was bought in May 1805. The ship was captured by the French in August of that same year so was only in service for four months. He became a prisoner of war at Givet, a town of 3000 people in France, close to the border with Belgium, where some 1200 prisoners were housed at that time in conditions close to starvation. He died

there on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1812, one of five prisoners who died in the first quarter of that year. He was 20 years old.

This means that he was no more than 13 years old when he went to sea, which must have been in the year 1805. Did he run way to sea to fight Napoleon? He could have lied about his age and

signed on as a cabin boy. Or he could have been press-ganged into service, for which the minimum age was 15— but gangmasters didn't care about fine details. I am inclined to think he signed on as a cabin boy or a 'powder monkey' to carry gunpowder for the gunners.

How could a 13-year-old child survive scrabbling for scraps of food amongst 1200 prisoners? It is amazing that he clung to life for six-and-a-half years. Did he simply not return home one day and disappear without trace until the

Figure 7. The pine seatboard 'table' appears original, its present loose fit probably accounted for by shrinkage.



naval authorities advised his parents of his death six and a half years later? Tragic events such as these are seldom revealed in researching a family history.

Thomas's wife, Susan, was buried 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1818. Thomas then took out a licence on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1819 to marry Mary Tate, giving his age as 60, hers as 50. They were married on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1820 at Scalby, Mary's home location, now a part of the north of Scarborough, then probably a separate village. Mary died at Scarborough in 1840.

It was about that year that Thomas moved to live at Norton adjacent to Malton. He was married there for the third time on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1840, giving his age as 70 (he was actually 81), to another Mary, Mary Baynes aged 65. The 1841 census shows him living in a terraced cottage in Providence Row, Norton, a watchmaker, giving his age as 80, with his wife, Mary, giving her age as 65. Thomas is believed to have died in 1844. He would have been 85. A record exists of a will for Thomas proved in 1844, describing him as (formerly) of Scarborough but now of Pickering.

The fact that he still described himself as a watchmaker and not as retired suggests he was still working at his trade. His move to Malton in 1840 implies that the bracket clock was made before 1840.

Another surprising detail came to light when I found the burial of his father,

Christopher Wrangles, in 1790. He is also described as a clockmaker, though one previously unrecorded. He is in none of the clock books and in 50 years of documenting such things I have not come across a clock by him. But another detail I came across was a petition in 1788 for charity for himself and his wife, Jane, to the authorities at Trinity House, a charity for impoverished merchant seamen. In that Christopher gives his age as 66—he was actually 73. So he must have worked as a long-serving sailor and was not a clockmaker at all, at that time anyway. Trinity House did not subsidise impoverished clockmakers, only mariners. Yet two years later he supposedly was a clockmaker.

He must have had a reason to lie about his age, perhaps thinking he might otherwise be thought too old to merit charity. People often 'adjusted' their age when it seemed prudent—such as when there was an embarrassing difference of age between bride and groom. Did he simply become a 'clockmaker' by working with, or for, or by helping his son, Thomas—by learning on the job? If Christopher was untrained it raises the question of how did Thomas learn his trade.

Clearly, he was a skilled clockmaker. Making a bracket clock such as this, especially one with an anchor escapement, was a very different kettle of fish from making a longcase clock.

Bracket clocks were costly (perhaps two to three times the price of a longcase), less accurate, more temperamental and more prone to problems than longcases, which meant that a rural clockmaker had little demand for such clocks. Therefore very few bracket clocks are known by country clockmakers.

If he was apprenticed, which I feel he surely would have been, it would have been when he was 14, that is in 1770. No apprenticeship record seems to survive for him, but there could be many reasons for that, especially if he was from a poor background. I counted 43 clockmakers who worked in Scarborough up to the end of the nineteenth century, most of them being retailers of watches towards the end of that period. There were very few clockmakers working in Scarborough in 1770 as the town could hardly have offered a living to more than one at any one time. The only likely one was Joseph Wood, who was there in the late 1760s and 1770s.

Christopher Wrangles died (in 1790) before his grandson, Thomas, was born (in 1792). But his widow, Jane, lived on till 1802, when she died aged 81. So if Thomas had heard tales of the adventures of life at sea, it must have been from his grandmother, Jane, or perhaps from his own parents. Sadly his adventure was shorter than anyone could have expected and one that led to an early death in a filthy French jail. 🇫🇷