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Finding Mister Pye

A Horologist Turns Super-Sleuth

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Recently a client of mine from long ago, John Metcalfe, got in touch about his family pride and joy, a longcase clock. It is signed in a very strange way: 'Jo: Pye Com. Herif.', **Figures 1 and 2.**

John lives near Edinburgh, and his family have owned the clock for many years, passing it down through several generations. They have loved it, cherished it, polished it, nourished it, exactly as it is now, but have never understood why the maker was unknown or why it was signed in this unique way. They assumed 'Jo: Pye' was the maker and that 'Com. Herif.', whatever its derivation, puts it in the county of Herefordshire, not in the town of Hereford. But could I help?

I love these challenges – usually. Once we get down to investigating the answer is almost always discoverable. I agreed, perhaps rashly, to have a go.

As we all know, some clocks are unsigned but the great majority are signed with a maker's name and a place name, whether a city, town, village or hamlet. Some books will tell you that the 'law', whatever that might mean, made it compulsory for a clockmaker to sign his clock. There is a half-truth in that but there is not space here to explain at length. Let us settle for the fact that the majority are signed, and most of those have a maker's name and a place name.

But Herefordshire is an entire county covering over a thousand square miles. I never before saw a clock where the dial gave a county as a location. I needed a place before I could start searching for a name. Where could I begin? When, just for fun, I tried to put what seems to me to be an uncommon name, Pye, into a general genealogical pay-to-search engine for anywhere in Herefordshire, any period, I got two-and-a-half million options! Another showed a mere two-and-a-half thousand!

Yet the dial is clearly a professional job, the engraving is of high quality, sharp, clear, well done and certainly intended. But what does it mean and why? More to the point, could I find out who Jo: Pye was and where he worked with no clue at all as to where to begin? Well, I was willing to give it a go.

Two things were immediately obvious – the clock (the dial and movement, that is) was not made in Herefordshire but London, and it was now in a much later country case.

I did not recognise the name and a quick check in what I call my 'big red book' soon established that no clockmaker is recorded anywhere at this period named Jo Pye or similar. The book in question is the newest, 21st century edition of *Watchmakers & Clockmakers of the World* (2006), which contains almost 100,000 names. If he is not in there, he is unknown, but new names do still crop up and quite often. Could this be one?

I knew there was a book *Herefordshire Clockmakers & Watchmakers* by Tony Branston and John C. Eisel, the latter having died before publication. It was one of John Robey's series of county books published under his Mayfield Books



Figure 1. The 12-inch dial of a typical London longcase clock of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, with all the typical features including twin-cherub spandrels and ringed winding holes.



Figure 2. The dial is signed: 'Jo: Pye Com. Herif.'. Most London-made clocks of this period would have the word 'Fecit' after the place. Is there a message there for us?

banner in 2005. What could be simpler than to look up the name in that book? If only it was that easy.

Well, I did look him up in that book and found that the compilers not only knew the name but, to my utter amazement, they knew of this actual clock – as it was in a former life. The entry is shown in **Figure 5**. It was time to ask the owner more about the background to the clock. Did they buy it at auction?

John replied, '... I inherited the clock after my mother, who



Figure 3. The movement, seen here from the left, has five finned pillars (the fifth hidden between the barrels), and inside countwheel striking with re-setting trip lever at the top. All normal for London work at this time.



Figure 4. Movement from the right showing the wooden seatboard is a bad fit for this case, so later timbers have been added to support it. The dial sheet can be seen to be one solid casting, typical of London work.

died in 2018. She inherited the clock from my grandparents from my father's side who lived in Ross-on-Wye. I can remember the clock well from my childhood when we visited, it used to stand in the hall and I remember its chimes. So it's a family heirloom, although none of my father's siblings know anything about how the clock came into the family, they suspect it was via inheritance. My grandmother was from the Scudamore family, which was a well-known Herefordshire family.'

The twelve-inch square dial, standard clock is a very fine example – London made, the best that money could buy in its day – excluding special clocks and those made by top-rank makers, who worked for royalty. It has all the classic London features. No maker in Herefordshire could have made it unless you assume he bought all the parts from London and assembled them – which makes no sense. It was made about 1710 to 1720. It appears to be complete as made, barring the minute hand, which looks to me like a replacement.

London clocks of this time followed a standard design of very high quality but this means that although we can usually tell when it was made to within five or ten years, unless signed with a known name, we can never know by its style alone, who the maker was. The standard model was very similar whoever the maker.

Such a fine clock would have been housed originally in a grand case of walnut veneer (maybe marquetry) on to a pine carcass, the square dial having a caddy top to give height and grandeur, elegance, slimness, whatever seemed most suitable for a tall ceiling. Walnut seldom survives from that age in reasonable condition. With the damp conditions of homes of

that period the veneers would lift, bubble, peel back and the timbers begin to rot from damp floors. Rough polishing by servants would aggravate the problem and, with marquetry especially, bits of loose inlay would flick off with every violent lunge of the duster. Direct sunlight would melt the glue and fade that area. After 30 or 40 years the case would be a real eyesore, destroyed by careless ownership, but the clock part would still run well despite neglect. Such pieces were so well made as to be almost indestructible.

By the time that case was shabby, square dials were very much out of fashion and virtually every fine clock made in London had an arched dial. The owner would have seen such clocks in the homes of friends, so we don't need to see a picture, as we can predict exactly what happened, confirmed to some degree by the report in the book.

So, the owner of the day had a clockmaker fit an arch to the dial and case it afresh, by this time almost certainly in the finest and costliest timber money could buy, known as the 'king of woods'; mahogany. What was to all intents the 'new' clock would have looked splendid in its new case with spectacular figuring. This adding of an arch was a simple thing any clockmaker could do, and we see examples frequently, where this has happened during the clock's lifetime. There was nothing sinister or untoward about this, just the family 'improving' or 'modernising' their household clock.

The note about this actual clock in *Herefordshire Clockmakers & Watchmakers* must have been recorded more than 70 years ago, by Eisel or maybe someone gathering names for him. We know this because the clock can be traced back that far in John's family ownership. It explains, what I already knew

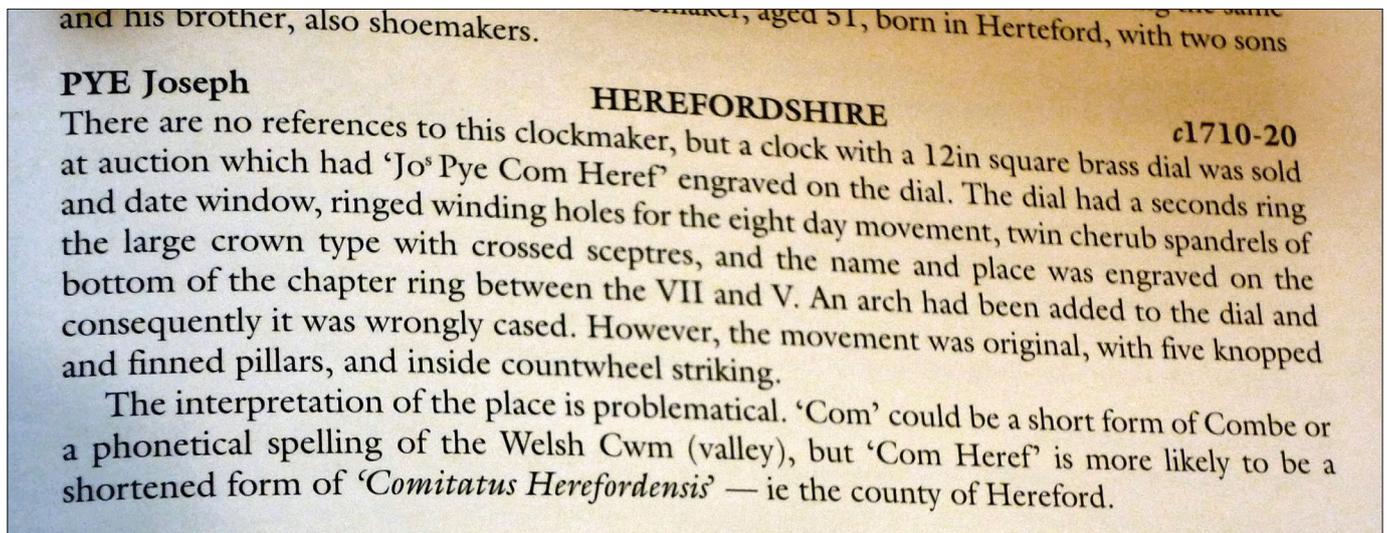


Figure 5. Extract from the book *Herefordshire Clockmakers & Watchmakers* by Tony Branston and John C. Eisel, published by Mayfield Books in 2005.

from its appearance – that the clock is not in its original case – and why. But not why it is in this present case.

Some of this is confirmed by the Eisel record of it at auction. But that was not the end. We needed to ask ourselves how it came to be in this simple and plain country case of about 1790. I can guess. If bought then by a dealer, he knew tall clocks were hard to sell to modern homes, and it was common practice to reduce the height by whatever means. So it was re-cased again into this smaller, tidy oak case from a 30-hour clock. This time it was re-cased for commercial profit, as was done often in the past 100 years and even to a lesser extent is still done today.

But first, they (or someone) misrecorded the name as Jos. Pye, when we can see clearly it is written as 'Jo:'. 'Jo:' (sometimes 'Joh:') is an abbreviation for John, not Joseph, or more strictly an abbreviation for the Latin version Johannes. When this clock was made there was no such name as the Joe we recognise today, as in plain GI Joe. The place name is also an abbreviation for Latin *Comitatu Herefordensi*. I cannot recall ever having seen before a clock signed as being made in a county.

The task of finding the owner of the name is hard enough, but if you are looking for the wrong name, then that really does not help. Yet the entry explaining how they knew about it was exceptionally helpful in my search. An arch had been added to the square to make the clock into what we call an 'arched' dial.

The first longcase clocks made in London were square. To make what could be a short clock tall enough to look graceful and elegant in a grand house with high ceilings, it was usual for the case hood to have a shaped caddy on top, thus adding height.

The movement has five knopped and finned pillars (the fifth hidden between the barrels), **Figure 3**. The knobs are the shaped bulges in the centre with a 'half-knop' at each end. Their purpose is to give extra strength where needed. The fins are the thin flanges that serve no purpose at all and are there just to enable the maker to show off a bit of fancy work. It has inside countwheel striking with re-setting trip lever at the top. Rack striking was known at this date and was used by a few perhaps more adventurous makers but it was seldom used yet by the majority. Rack striking involves the use of a spring, and any spring will fail sooner or later. It could also

cause problems if the clock was abused and for these reasons we think rack striking was avoided at this early time. All the features of this clock are normal for London work at this time.

The case that houses the clock today is a simple oak country one dating from the late eighteenth century, **Figures 6–8**. My feeling, based on long and cynical experience of such swapping, is that this was done by a dealer, presumably having bought the clock with added arch at auction. He would have had a choice of clock cases to hand, which a private owner would not. This gave him a good clock in a case that was attractive and would fit into any low ceiling a modern house or older cottage might offer – in other words a clock he could sell.

Again, because of the current owner, we know this must have happened over 70 years ago, at which time case-swapping was normal practice. In fact, it was often the situation that a dealer, faced with a potential buyer who liked a clock but not the case it stood in, would offer the option of putting it into a different case of the buyer's choice.

Several features indicate that, though the wooden seatboard the movement sits on is clearly old, it is not original, as the cut-out for pendulum clearance has been enlarged crudely, **Figure 4**. The board is not wide enough for this case and has screw or nail holes that could not contact any timbers in the upstands of this case, which we can see from several aspects to be a much later replacement, **Figure 9**. Sometimes replacement timber struts were fitted to hold the new clock. If these are stained, in itself a further giveaway as there was no reason to stain hidden rough timberwork except to camouflage its age. No clockmaker ever used stain here originally – why would he?

Now comes the awkward bit of attempting to track down any John Pye in Herefordshire who was of an age to make a clock at the time this was made, or maybe was old enough to buy the clock then. It is possible the name was that of the person the clock was made for. This is unusual but happens occasionally and, after all, the signature did not include the word '*fecit*'.

The only way was to find any John Pyses alive as adults between the ages of say 20 and 50 around 1710–20. Genealogy search engines, of which I subscribe to several, are excellent, but it takes a while to get used to how each one works. If you are too specific you get zero results, too general and you get hundreds.



Figure 6. The clock in its present case, a neat oak country case previously containing a 30-hour clock and dating from the last quarter of the eighteenth century.



Figure 7. This shot of the hood shows that the clock dial seems to be a reasonable fit.

I set off with over 400 possibles but, by modifying the period and jiggling around, I finally got down to a number it was feasible to check in detail. Sounds simple but it took me several hours. I came up with thirteen John Pyes who might fit:

- 1677 baptised John son of John & Elizabeth at St Devereux
- 1685 baptised John son of Richard & Izzard at Peterstow
- 1704 baptised John son of James & Mary at Kilpeck
- 1716 John married Jane Smith at St Devereux
- 1717 baptised Margaret daughter of John & Margaret at Goodrich
- 1717 Charles Pye ESQ at The Mynde in parish of Much Dewhurst (Dewchurch) + 5 messuages at Kilpeck,
- 1717 John Catholic at Kilpeck
- 1717 John Catholic Esq at just Herefordshire
- 1717 John labourer Catholic Goodrich just Herefordshire
- 1717 John Catholic at Goodrich
- 1719 John married Margaret Gatcomb at Fownthorpe
- 1723 baptised John son of John & Margaret at Foy
- 1732 baptised Chas son of John & Margaret at Foy



Figure 8. The hood door is open in this view, always a telling way to spot any alterations to the wooden surround, or 'mask', that frames the dial in the same way a mount frames a picture.

Among my search notes are several references to Catholic recusants in 1717 and property seized as fines. A recusant was one who refused to follow the law of the land, particularly as far as the observation of religious practices was concerned.



Figure 9. Relatively new timbers at the top of the trunk are almost always evidence that the case has been modified to make an unrelated clock sit in the correct position.

I have been involved in genealogical research for over 60 years, yet this is a source I have never seen before now. It must have been recently released to the public from National Archives, though I found these through a genealogy search engine. It acts as a kind of nonconformist census of 1717, an amazing tool for research. It shows us that almost all the groups of Pye families are probably branches of the same Roman Catholic family, amongst whom are a few Johns, any of whom might possibly have ordered a London clock – and might have asked for it with his OWN name on the dial. I looked up one or two examples of the actual document, hoping it might include individual goods, but it lists only property in the sense of land and buildings.

It might seem odd that some of these same Pye families went through a ceremony of conformist baptism in local churches though known to be conformists. The reason was to avoid drawing attention to themselves and even more fines.

It began to seem obvious that the Roman Catholic Pye families owned estates in many different parts of Herefordshire and so, just on the off chance, I Googled them. The results were amazing, as they owned castles, mansions, estates; an unbelievable variety of real estate. That might even explain why they opted not to be pinned down to an individual location in Herefordshire, since they owned most of the county!

In the end, it seems likely that many of the references to John Pyes fined for recusancy in different locations were, in fact, pointing to one person – and he really was John Pye of Herefordshire.

All photographs taken by owner John Metcalfe.

Tennants

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