

# A QUARTET OF ALARMS

## A 30-hour Normandy alarm

part 3 of 4

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The two previous parts of this article have discussed timepieces with alarms where even the country of origin is not certain and only a vague region could be deduced. This month we are on much firmer ground with a French posted-frame clock made in Normandy. The movement is of typical Normandy construction that is instantly recognisable once a few of them have been seen. It sits in a tall oak and pine case that has a particularly interesting construction of the hood and its doors.

The complete clock is shown in **figure 20** and while the case deserves special consideration it is the dial and movement that will be discussed first. The round brass dial, **figure 21**, with its original single hour hand and an

*Figure 20. The alarm by Viel of Treviers in its tall oak and pine case.*

alarm-setting disc is only 8in (200mm) diameter. It is significant that the bell overhangs the top of the dial slightly as this confirms that there was never a fret, as found on most lantern clocks, even round-dial French ones.

The dial is signed 'Viel A. Trevieres', all in capital letters apart from the two letters 'r' which are in lower case type the same height as the capitals, **figure 22**. Trévières is a small village in the Calvados department in the Basse-Normandie region of north-western France. It is just inland from the coast and only about 20km west



of the Normandy landing beaches, whose seventieth anniversary is being commemorated on the very day this is being written (though no doubt that will have faded from memory by the time this appears in print). Even today Trévières has fewer than a thousand inhabitants and the nearest town is Bayeux, of tapestry fame.

A clockmaker named Viel is not recorded in any published lists, but Howard Bradley has found him mentioned in court announcements in the Bayeux region in April 1814, **figure 23**. It appears that Mr Viel, clockmaker living at Trévières, had to get legal redress to obtain payment for a clock that Pierre Osmont had bought and the bailiffs were sent in, the clock seized and sold by auction in the local market place. This shows that Viel was working in the early nineteenth century and it is likely that the clock described here dates from about this period or perhaps the late eighteenth century.

**Figures 24 to 26** show the posted-frame movement with iron rectangular-section pillars and iron plates, riveted together, not held with screwed nuts. The lower ends of the pillars are extended to form tall feet that are characteristic of lantern clocks made in Normandy. Some examples, said to be from Brittany (but without any supporting evidence) are even longer and are more like legs than feet. The two movement bars swell out at the bottom to give increased stability and are fixed in the usual English and French manner with two small lugs at the bottom and a wedge at the top. 



Figure 21. The round dial with a single hand and an alarm disc.



Figure 23. The only known record of Mr Viel, clockmaker of Trévières.

The brass bushes may be original, or at least like-for-like replacements. All the wheels are brass with an iron rope pulley. There is an anchor escapement and it runs for a day with a single drop, although the current owner has added a weight pulley to halve the drop and double the duration.

The typical brass alarm crown-wheel and its rope pulley pivot on a post while the lower end of the alarm verge sits in an arm, both being riveted to the rear movement bar. The usual two-armed lever to lock and unlock the alarm sits between the left-hand pillars, with a typical French screwed-in pivot at the rear. The detent at the front drops

into a slot in a let-off disc, **figure 27**, to release the alarm. This disc and a friction spring are riveted to a brass pipe with the alarm-setting disc fitted to the front end. When the taper pin that holds the hand is pushed in it also compresses the spring so that the disc can be set against the tail of the hand yet still be carried round with the hand. This is the conventional arrangement except that on English clocks there is a pin on the spring to lift the detent without the need for a separate disc with a slot.

French lantern clocks are often housed in tall cases with no close-fitting mask round the dial as would

be expected on an English longcase clock. There is no evidence that this movement was not originally in this case—it may have been a generic one made to house a variety of different clocks rather than being custom-made for this particular movement. These posted-frame lantern-type movements can sometimes be of a week duration and it is debatable whether they should be termed lantern clocks or longcase clocks. The only book devoted to them is *FRANSE LANTAARN KLOKKEN* by Ton Bollen, published in 1978 but it is not difficult to find copies on the internet. Despite it being written in Dutch, those, like myself, not fluent in the language can still learn a great deal from looking at the 121 photographs with captions that are not too difficult to understand. All the clocks shown are referred to as lantern clocks and there are no illustrations of cases though many, especially those from northern France and the Massif Central, would have been in tall cases.

The case, **figure 20**, has an oak



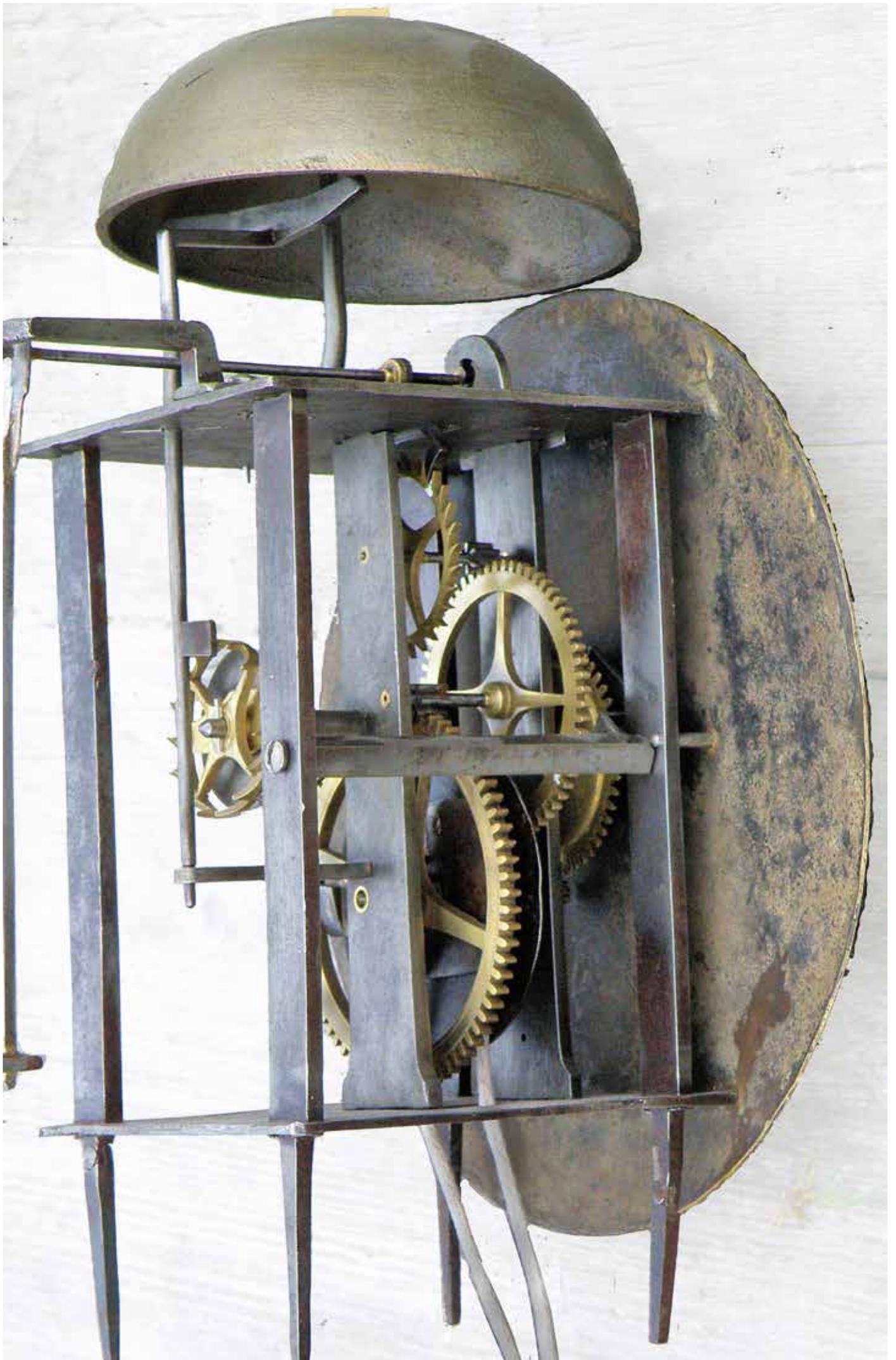
Figure 22 (above). Close-up of the maker's name.

carcase and a long slim panelled trunk door that appears to be pine that was originally stained. It hinges on the left, compared to an English country case which usually has a single plank of wood with hinges on the right. There is a tall base and wide overhanging mouldings on the top of the hood, but it is the hood construction that is unusual, **figure 28**. The hood is integral with the trunk and is not removable and, as well as the usual opening glazed door at the front, there is another one on the right-hand side. Not only that but they both have iron, not the usual wooden, frames, which enable larger sheets of glass to be used, the window at the front being about 10in (25cm) wide. These two doors fill the whole width of the front and side so, to support the superstructure of the hood, there is a vertical square-section iron rod at the front right-hand corner.

While there is no problem inserting the movement in through the front door, access to hang the pendulum is very restricted and this is the main



Figure 24. Front of the movement.





reason for the side door. Forging iron bars into strips having a rebate for the glass and an arch, then fire-welding them together to produce frames that were flat enough not to distort and break the fragile glass, would have tested the skill of any blacksmith.

Some English lantern clocks were originally houses in tall cases and they also usually have a fixed hood, often with an opening side door or even doors on both sides. As some of these were made to house balance-wheel clocks, access for hanging the pendulum cannot have been the main reason for these doors.

Viel's alarm is another example of the diversity of European posted-frame movements, but in the final part of this series we move nearer home to look at how the Whitehurst firm in Derby redesigned the alarm mechanism so that an alarm-setting hand could be used that did not need a separate anti-clockwise circle of number, as is necessary with the conventional arrangements.



## Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks are due to the owner of the Viel clock for the opportunity to examine, photograph and write about it, and to Howard Bradley for useful comments and information.

*Figure 25 (opposite page). Movement from the left.*

*Figure 26 (above left). Movement from the right.*

*Figure 27 (above). The alarm let-off disc and clutch spring.*

*Figure 28 (left). The hood with two glazed opening doors.*