

# CUMBRIAN QUAKER CLOCK

## by Simpson of Wigton

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Clocks made by English Quakers are often said to be plain and simple, to reflect their belief in simplicity in all things and spurning decoration. Simple, sometimes primitive, rural clocks are often claimed to be Quaker-made just on this basis and especially if they are unsigned, but this is not necessarily so.

London clocks made by known Quakers are no different in their use of decorative engraving and they have the same designs of cast-brass spandrels as used by clockmakers who conformed to the established Church of England or were Catholics. Quaker clockmakers

who worked in the provinces were little different and Samuel Stretch can be taken as a typical example of a Quaker clockmaker. He worked in the North Staffordshire town of Leek, where he made lantern clocks with dials and frets in a similar style to those used on London clocks, and on his best clocks these almost certainly came from the capital.

When he moved to Wolverhampton in search of a larger potential market for his clocks, he bought a building and gave it to the local Quaker community to be used as a Meeting House, so he was clearly committed to the Quaker cause. He moved to Birmingham and finally to Bristol, where his longcase clocks are in the same style as other non-Quaker



Figure 1. The Simpson clock in a hooded wall case.

Figure 2. The 9in square dial.



clockmakers. The Quakers were driven by a strong work ethic, and if making plain clocks resulted in lost sales then they would quite happily conform and supply the latest fashionable items.

However, in areas where there were relatively large communities of Quakers, they would tend to do business with fellow members of their faith, where their wares were made to cater for their less flamboyant tastes.

In particular there were two groups of Quaker clockmakers who made distinctly different types of rural clocks. One group worked in North Oxfordshire and their clocks have the centres of the dials decorated with either concentric circles or circles of wiggework, made using a broad graver that was 'walked' around the dial to produce a series of zigzags. The movements are usually 30-hour with iron posted frames, and either hung on the wall with a hoop and spikes like a lantern clock or hung in a rustic oak case.

The second group of Quaker clockmakers was based in Cumbria, where their dials are sometimes, though not always, identified by a series of small cup-and-ring circles made with a specially shaped drill bit in a hand brace of the type used by carpenters and joiners. This seems to be a local style, also used by at least one clockmaker



Figure 3. Close-up of the Quaker ring decoration and the original hand.



Figure 4. Rear of the chapter ring showing the half-lap joint.



Figure 5. The shell and C-scroll spandrels.

who is not known to have been a Quaker, but mainly by others who were.

The movement and dial of the clock shown in **figure 1** was made about 1760 by the Cumbrian Quaker clockmaker J Simpson of Wigton in the old county of Cumberland, north of the Lake District National Park. This is either John Simpson or his brother Joseph. The pine hooded wall case is unlikely to be original and has been restored with a dark green painted finish and discrete gilt embellishment. There is no opening door and the hood can be pulled forward for the very infrequent occasions when the single hand needs adjusting.

Though nominally a 30-hour clock, with the striking disabled by blocking the fly it runs for 3½ days, and this is where a weight-driven wall clock has an advantage over a longcase clock. Unless it is wound daily, it is not always easy to remember when a longcase clock was last wound and a trunk door needs opening to check the state of wind. With a hooded wall clock this is immediately apparent and rewinding can be left until the weight has almost reached the floor.

The centre of the 9in (228mm) square dial, **figures 2 to 3**, has just 12 relatively large cup-and-ring turnings, whereas other Cumbrian clocks are known with a multitude of smaller rings

scattered all over the dial plate. These other cup-and-ring dials are much earlier than this one, but there is nothing to suggest that it has been reused from an old clock.

The rear of the chapter ring, **figure 4**, shows that there is a separate section between IX and XII, fixed with half-lap joints riveted together. The edges of the joins align with the Roman hour numerals and are barely visible from the front. This was probably done to salvage a faulty casting and there is nothing to suggest that it is a later modification. The relatively thin hand is original. There are cast-brass spandrels of the shell and C-scroll design, **figure 5**.

The well-made movement has an anchor escapement and three-wheel trains, **figures 6 and 7**, with four-spoked brass wheels, Huygens' loop winding and a circular spring click only on the striking greatwheel—all typical of English 30-hour clocks. But there are some features that are not usual; for instance instead of the hour wheel being held against the starwheel with



Figure 9 (this picture). The strikework and hammer.

a friction spring, it sits on a step on the hand arbor with a gap between the wheel and the starwheel, **figure 8**. The wheel and pinion counts, as well as the dimensions are shown in the panel on page 37.

The chain pulleys have only five spikes and the original narrow chain had long links of about 28 links per foot. This type of chain was often used





Figure 6 (top). The going train.

Figure 7 (above). The striking train.



Figure 8. The hour wheel and starwheel.

and-error to make the correct size of link.

Instead a chain of 42 links per foot was tried, but with the spikes engaging with every third link, instead of every other one. Though the chain has a small amount of twist between the spikes, it has worked remarkably well for the last 20 years.

Whereas the strikework on 30-hour posted-frame clocks shows little variation, movements with plated frames can have a number of different arrangements for the warning and locking detents. On this clock the lifting piece pivots on a post on the front plate, with a warning flag passing through a slot in the plate. An external link piece is squared on to the locking arbor, with

on clocks from this region, but it is no longer available. The chain on this clock was very rusted and corroded and had to be replaced. These chains were probably made by winding iron wire round a rectangular bar and sawing down the centre line to produce the separate links.

This was contemplated, though it would have needed quite a lot of trial-

the countwheel detent squared on at the rear.

Two fine scribed lines on the front plate indicate the position of the lifting piece when the striking train is unlocked and runs to warn, and when the lifting piece falls to release the warn so that striking can commence. Since these lines do not show clearly when photographed, they have been marked

with a pen in **figure 10**.

Instead of the strike train locking on a hoop, locking is on a pin on the second wheel. Since there is no slope on the locking detent to assist its lift out of the gap in the hoop, the countwheel detent and the slots are curved to perform the same function. A hoop prevents the locking dent falling too far, but with pin locking the countwheel detent runs on the raised section of the countwheel during striking. Various views of the movement are shown in **figures 10 to 14**.

The bell, **figure 15**, has 'J. DOWEL' cast on the inside. This man is not known as a bell- or brass-founder, but he might have been related to a clockmaker of this surname working in Wigton in the 1880s.

The rear of the movement is competently engraved 'J Simpson WIGTON', **figure 16**, which is either John or Joseph Simpson, or more likely both working as partners. They were Quakers, both baptised in 1736, probably twins, and were working together as clockmakers in Wigton from about 1758 until John died in 1796 and Joseph shortly after.

The business was continued by Joseph's eldest son, John junior, born in 1757, until he died in 1837. They were prolific clockmakers, with over 50 of their longcase clocks surviving, mainly 30-hour, but some eight-day



Figure 10. Marks on the front plate to indicate warning and unlocking.



Figure 11. Front of the movement with the hour wheel in place.

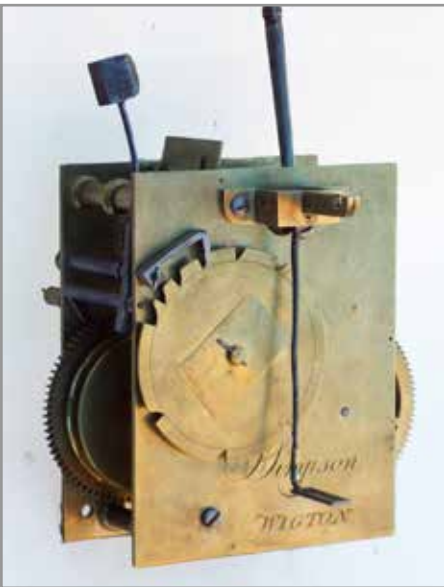


Figure 12. Rear of the movement showing the curved countwheel slots and the engraved signature.



Figure 16. The expertly engraved signature on the rear plate of the movement.

in good-quality mahogany cases, and two known musical clocks. John Simpson engraved his name on other clock movements, a skill at which he was clearly very proficient. Scratched repairer's marks indicate that this clock was at Millom in 1852 and Workington in 1855.

It is unlikely that a clockmaker would send his movements to a specialist engraver, so we must assume that the signature on this clock was actually engraved by John (or Joseph) Simpson. This means that another horological myth can be scotched. It is said that these cup-and-ring dials were made by clockmakers who were not skilled in the art of engraving. This might be true of some makers of clocks with this type of dial, but



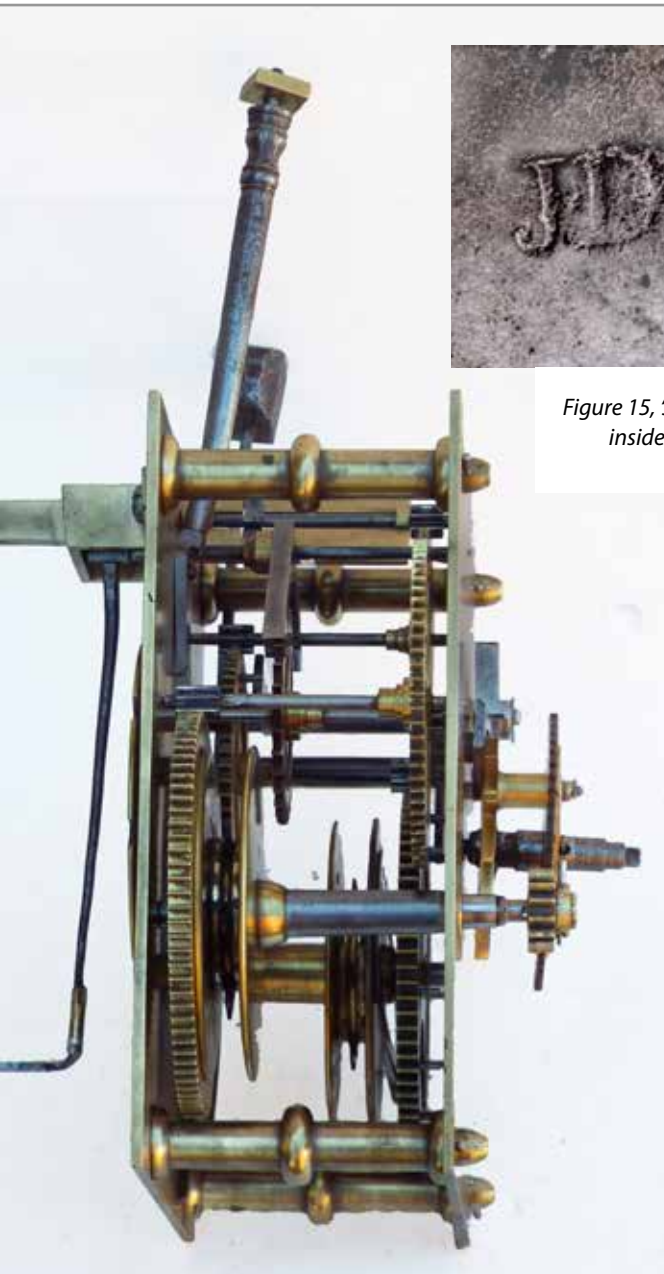


Figure 15, 'J. Dowel' cast inside the bell.

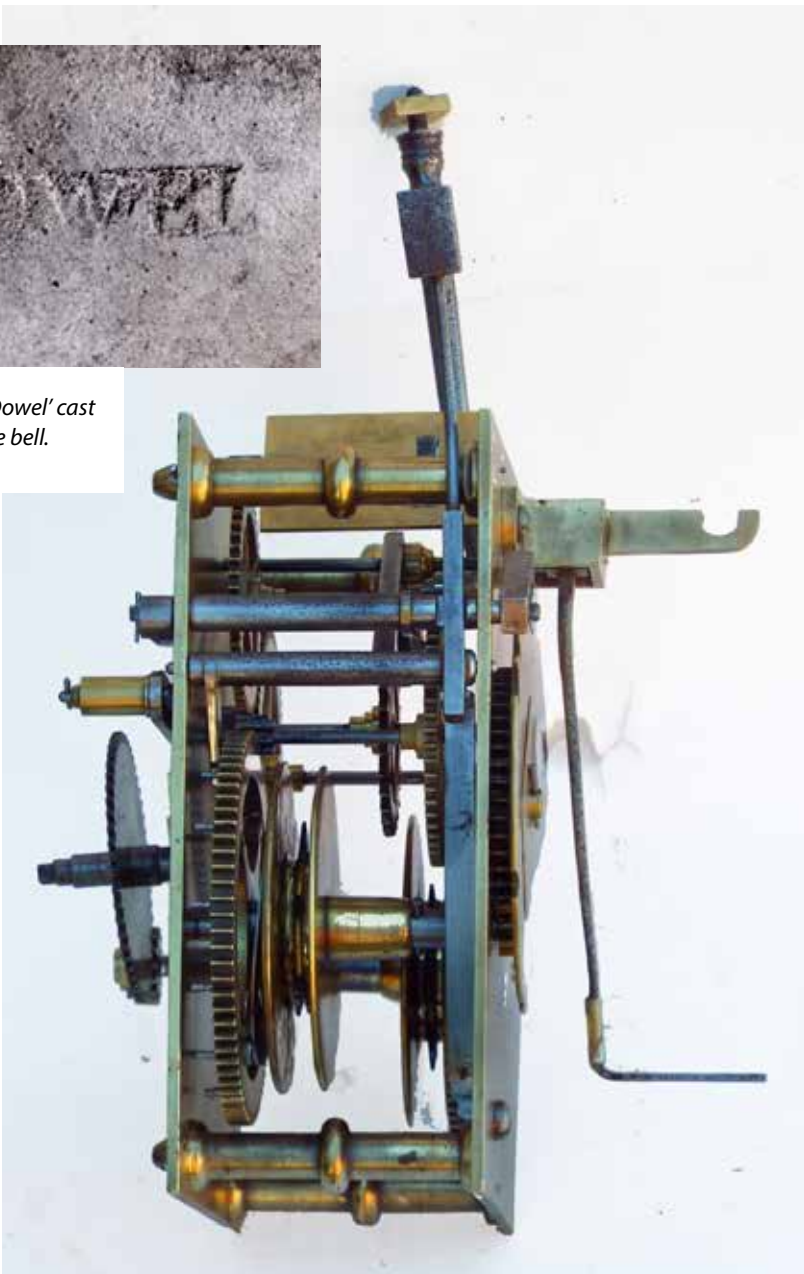


Figure 13. Movement from the left.

Figure 14. Right-hand side of the movement.

clearly not this one. J Simpson was capable of engraving a conventional brass longcase dial, so this clock was presumably made for another member of the local Quaker Meeting—as their community was called—who wanted one made in the typical Quaker style of the region to emphasise his dedication to the Quaker cause.

This is the only known Simpson dial with cup-and-ring decoration; his other surviving clocks have dials with quality acanthus engraving, similar to that on many other clocks of the period made in the north of England. Not only is it the only known Simpson cup-and-ring dial, it is also the latest one known, most of the others being made in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. 📌

## WHEEL COUNTS

Going train		Striking train		
Escapewheel	30	6	Fly	7
Second wheel	72	6	Warn wheel	50
Greatwheel	90	14	Hoop wheel	48
Hour wheel	54		Greatwheel	78
			Countwheel	48
			Hammer pins	13

**Duration: 30 hours**

**Overall dimensions**  
 Case: 22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>in tall x 17in wide x 9in deep (570 x 430 x 229mm)  
 Frame: 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in tall x 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in wide x 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in deep (133 x 108 x 57mm)