

# DONISTHORPE'S EARLIEST CLOCKS

## part 3 of 3

## Blacksmith, clockmaker & preacher

In Parts 1 and 2 of this article (*CLOCKS*, May and June 2014) Joseph Donisthorpe's two earliest known clocks were considered and we now need to look at his life, and a couple of his later clocks and see where they fit into the overall picture. He was born on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1702 in the village of Markfield in north-west Leicestershire, the eldest child of George Donisthorpe and Esther Pegg, who had married there just eight months earlier. It is said that the family were descended from a French refugee, de Durandesthorpe, who came to England after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. But there is no truth in this as George was baptised at Thornton, Leicestershire, in 1653, and his family can be traced back to living in the area as early as 1470. The family name probably originated from the nearby village of Donisthorpe.

As a consequence of Joseph Donisthorpe's religious activities we know a considerably more about him and his character than most other clockmakers of this period, but a great deal of caution is needed when reading about his life. Virtually

everything that was subsequently written about him comes from the book *HISTORIC MEMORIALS OF BARTON AND MELBOURNE GENERAL BAPTIST CHURCHES* by J R Godfrey, published in 1891, about 150 years after the events described. This account is no doubt based largely on local oral and family tradition and paints a somewhat romanticised and not entirely accurate picture of events. Other information comes from the pen of his well-known apprentice Samuel Deacon, who is by no means a dispassionate reporter of the facts. By putting firm dates on Joseph's activities wherever possible, an attempt has been made to clarify the events in his life, in

particular the period leading up to the making of these early clocks.

Joseph's father, George Donisthorpe, was a carpenter, and 'after much too brief a period at a common day school' Joseph began to help in the business. When 14 years old he was bound apprentice to an aged relative in the village of Normanton-le-Heath, just seven miles away, who was a blacksmith, with the understanding that when Joseph had served his time 'the old man would retire in his favour'. Normanton-le-Heath, a village southeast of the ancient market town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, should not be confused with any of the other Normantons in England—there is even another one in Leicestershire.

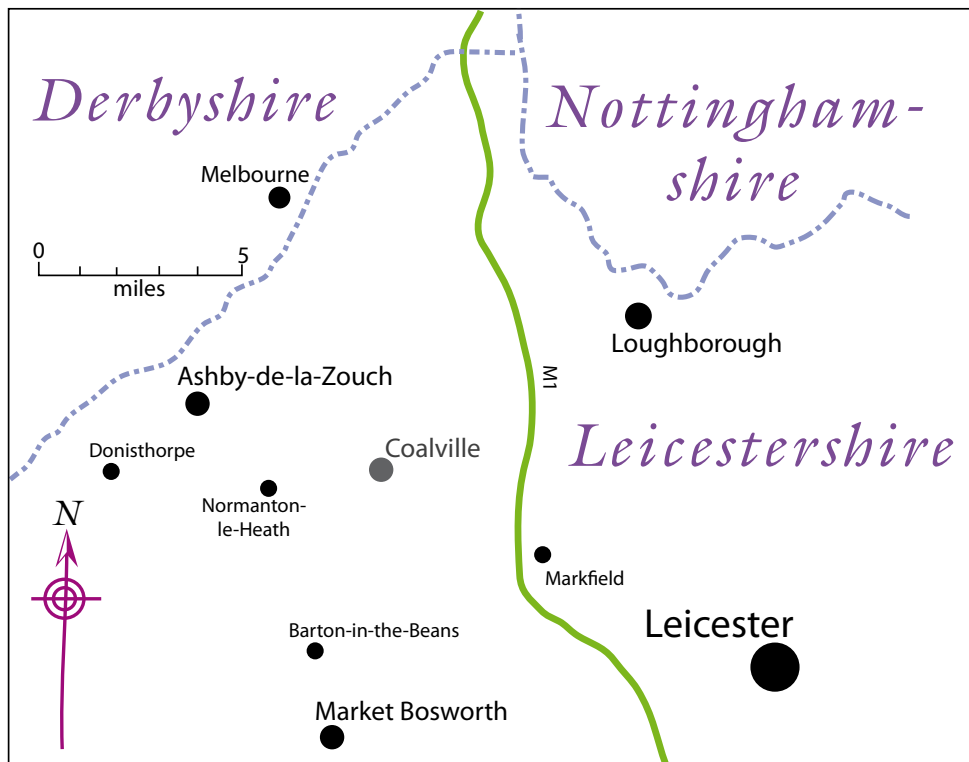


Figure 28. Sketch map of northwest Leicestershire showing places associated with Joseph Donisthorpe.

As the name is Anglo-Saxon and means 'settlement of the Norsemen' (ie the Vikings) it comes as no surprise that there are so many places of this name, especially in the Midlands and North of England. **Figure 28** is a simplified map showing the location of the places mentioned in this article. It includes the town of Coalville, which is a nineteenth-century development, and the modern M1 motorway, to assist in locating these small

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villages.

The account continues: 'With such a fair prospect before him, he applied himself diligently to his calling; and in addition, sought, in his leisure time, to acquire the art of cleaning and repairing clocks and watches. In both these mechanical pursuits he gained considerable proficiency ... He was fairly successful in business, and highly esteemed by his neighbours.'

If this rather idealised account is accurate it does confirm that he had considerable mechanical talents. The

average village blacksmith, while skilled in forging iron to make horseshoes, hinges, tools and general ironwork, would not be able to make a clock, even a turret clock, without a great deal of experience or training. There is no evidence that Joseph Donisthorpe had any formal training in clockwork—in any event the only clockmakers working in the area at that period were in Leicester, about 16 miles away. It is not known if,

as a blacksmith, he was called on to repair any local church clock, and none made by him are recorded.

By carefully studying the clocks he cleaned and repaired he would have learned enough to make new parts, eventually acquiring the knowledge, experience and skill to construct complete clocks. If the evidence of the two clocks discussed in Parts 1 and 2 is anything to go by, the experience he needed was developed gradually over a period of many years, instead of the usual seven years of intensive learning during a specialised apprenticeship.

The normal blacksmith's tools



Figure 29 (left). Clock by Joseph Donisthorpe dated 1757 in an oak case.

Figure 30 (above). Dial of the 1757 clock converted to two hands in the early nineteenth century.

are totally unsuited for making domestic clocks and he would have had to build up a collection of the small tools needed, probably making many of them himself. Whether he built a wheel-cutting engine to slit the gear teeth or used the services of a clockmaker who had the necessary

equipment, we can only speculate. The pinions might have been bought in as ready-slit forgings from specialist suppliers, which was often done by many clockmakers. While the wheel trains and strikework of these two clocks are very conventional in construction, the frames and pivot blocks are unique and are the work of someone not following a local tradition.

In 1729 Joseph Donisthorpe married Elizabeth Groves and they had three daughters and five sons, the last two dying young, the remaining three sons all becoming clockmakers. At this period he attended the local established church, but he was a disturbed young man, seeing 'frightful visions of the night' and even the glib reassurances of the local clergyman were of no comfort to him. It is said that 'His own weakness in falling on several occasions into the sin of drunkenness, his witnessing the beastly dissipation

of his neighbours at social parties, and especially the vice and profanity of the clergyman ... made him extremely wretched, and almost drove him to despair.'

In the 1740s there was an evangelical revival in the Midlands when a charismatic Baptist preacher visited a number of North Leicestershire villages. Among those who attended these meetings in 1743 were Samuel Deacon senior, farm labourer and grocer of Ratby (father of Samuel junior, the clockmaker) and Joseph Donisthorpe, the Normanton blacksmith. These sermons had a profound influence on Joseph: 'But while walking home from Ashby one evening across the fields, pondering his sad condition' he recalled the religious messages he had listened to. 'Sitting down on the first stile he came to, he reflected long and deeply on the spiritual knowledge to which he had just, and so unexpectedly, attained.' His

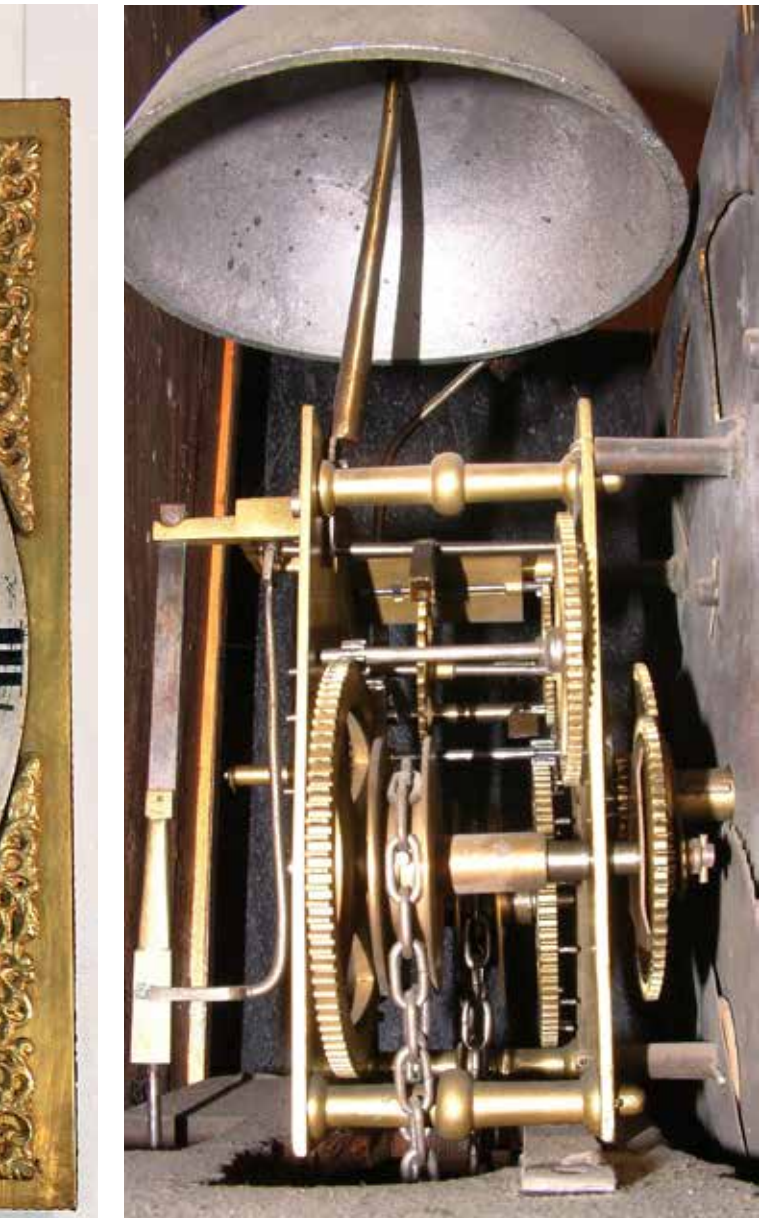


Figure 31. Left-hand side of the 30-hour movement.

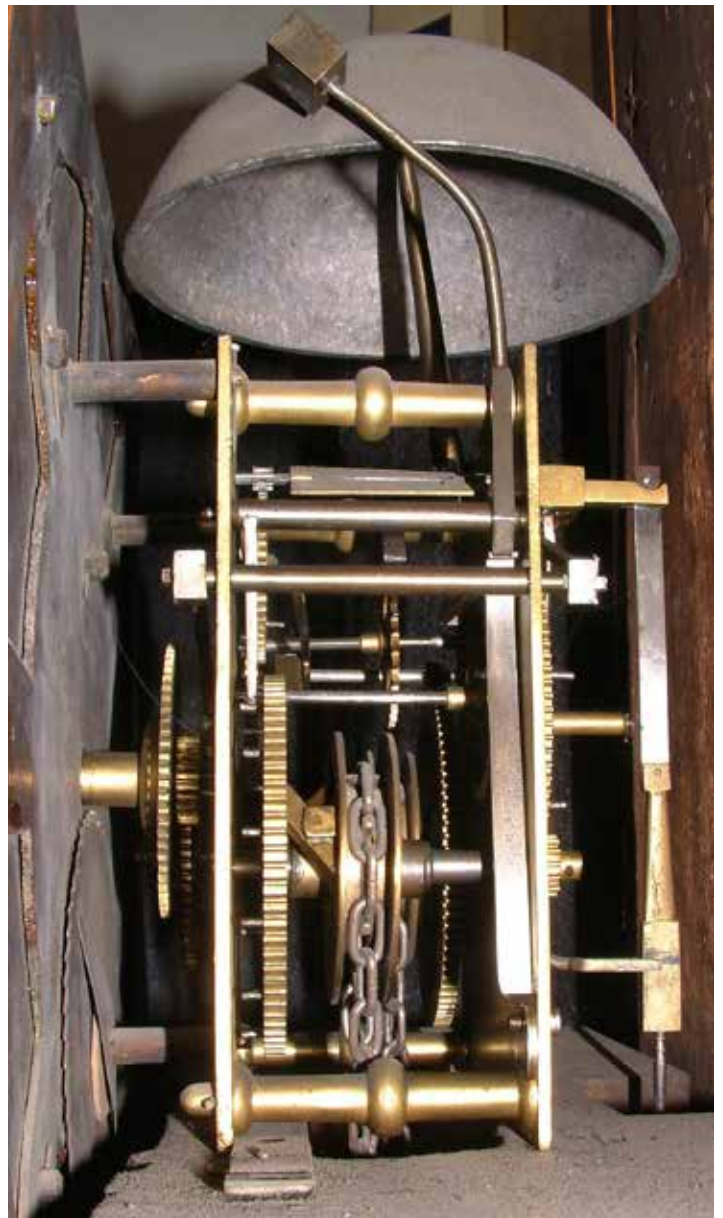


Figure 32. Right-hand side of the 30-hour movement.

life was changed dramatically and from thenceforth he became a devout and somewhat fanatical convert to the Baptist cause.


His wife was not convinced (initially at least, although she was soon converted) and 'thought him mad and wept tears of pity and alarm over his supposed insanity. He next told this new truth and experience to his customers, as they called upon him in business, to servants and labourers also as they came to his shop. He further imparted the good news to his neighbours and friends as he met them in the street, or, as led by curiosity, they came to his house at the close of the day ... The Normanton blacksmith and his new doctrine, soon became the general theme of conversation ...'

Many were converted, but others were put off by his ardent preaching and he lost some customers as a result. 'His business as village blacksmith made him vulnerable

to attack, dependent as he was upon the farmers and gentry of the district. They went therefore in a body to his house, to see what they could do in the matter. They advised him, in a friendly manner, to leave off making himself ridiculous and disturbing the sweet calmness of the village. But finding friendly counsel insufficient, they next resorted to threats, saying, that if he did not yield to their request, their work would be taken from him and given to another.'

But when he was resolute in his convictions 'they called for their bills, paid what was due, took away their work unfinished as it was, and left him without any visible resource ... This state of things would have been a trial to any one, but the circumstance in which he was then placed, made it a particularly heavy one for him. He had seven young children, and was expecting another shortly, and had had little opportunity of doing more than

provide for himself and those dependent upon him ...'

This information about his children should enable these events to be timed quite precisely, but the tale seems to have been distorted slightly and the dates do not quite correspond. When the eighth child, a boy, was born is not known, but he did not live long and was buried on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1745. Knowing the date of birth of the previous child we can estimate that Joseph and his wife would not have known that another baby was on the way until after about January 1744. But it was in this month that their sixth child died, aged less than three years old. In any event the eldest child, Mary, died in August 1743, aged almost 13, so there was never a time when seven children were alive with another on the way. The closest we can pinpoint these events is late 1743 to early 1744, which does tie in with Joseph first hearing the Baptist message 

in 1743.

To counter the loss of his local blacksmithing work 'His first idea was to itinerate through the villages, as a mender of pots and kettles, and cleaner and repairer of clocks and watches; but before he could carry this idea into execution, providence found him work at home. A person from London, visiting in the neighbourhood, had with him specimens of certain iron wares, which he hoped to get made in the country at a cheaper rate than was possible in the town ... Donisthorpe was mentioned to him, and learning that he was honest, and a good workman ... found [his terms] satisfactory, gave him a pretty large order ... Other work came in ... and devoting himself also to the development of the clock and watch business, he was afterwards able to gain a comfortable living ...'

It has been said that Donisthorpe became an itinerant mender of pans and kettles, but it is clear from this quotation that while he contemplated doing so he never did and it is about this time that he must have decided to concentrate on his clockmaking activities instead.

*HISTORIC MEMORIALS*

says that Donisthorpe's religious conversion probably took place in early June 1741, but as discussed, it was more likely to have been a couple of years or more later than this.

About 1746 Joseph Donisthorpe was appointed as a Baptist pastor at Melbourne in south Derbyshire. He was described as 'In the prime of life—being about 44 years of age—some 6ft in height, rather stout, with brawny muscular limbs, clear strong voice, a sweetly serious and compassionate face ...' His physical appearance is certainly what one would expect from someone who was a blacksmith.

About 1754 he was appointed as one of the pastors of the Baptist church at Loughborough, walking the nine miles from Normanton to preach there each week, having already been a preacher at Barton-in-the-Beans, along with Samuel Deacon senior, father of the clockmaker.

It was not until 1756, when Joseph was in his 50s that he took his first clockmaking apprentice, recorded as John Dutton, but this is probably an error for John Dalton. This is despite Joseph Donisthorpe not having had any formal training as a clockmaker, being largely self-taught. Such a situation would not have been tolerated in a large town or city, where tradesmen were closely regulated by the guilds, but

a clock has been reported dated 1752 no further details about it are known and his next two dated clocks have plated-frames with pin count-wheel striking. A 30-hour clock in Leicester Museum (now in store, along with the Deacon workshop and the rest of their extensive clock collection) is dated 1757 on the name plaque, **figures 29-32**. It is in a country oak case with a caddy top to the hood, similar to the case of Clock 1 (Part 1, figure 1) apart from a more elaborate shape to the trunk door. It has a more conventional base construction, but stands on a tall plinth, possibly to allow a longer weight drop to overcome the problem of short duration as discussed in Part 1. The overall height is

7ft 2in, being 9in taller than Clock 1. It might have been made by the same country joiner, who, after a decade of experience in constructing clock cases produced a rather more conventional design.

The 11in square dial has poorly cast spandrels of the early eighteenth-century female head in foliage pattern. These continued to be used in the provinces long after they were out of fashion in larger towns and cities. The clock has been updated in the early nineteenth century to two hands. Although front and rear views of the movement



*Figure 33. Dial of a 30-hour clock signed 'Donisthorp' on a circular silvered name plaque.*

in a small rural village there were few controls. Nevertheless, an indenture was drawn up and the necessary tax was paid. We can only speculate that Donisthorpe's reputation was sufficiently high for a father to entrust his son's career with him.

By this time, or thereabouts, Donisthorpe abandoned the posted-frame construction of the two clocks discussed in Parts 1 and 2 and adopted plated-frame movements for his 30-hour clocks. While

(which would have been much more informative) are not available, from a careful inspection of the side views it can be seen to be of plated-frame construction with pin-countwheel striking where all the detents are on one arbor. The original rope drive has been converted to chain using a modern conversion kit. Both Donisthorpe and Deacon always used rope for their pull-wind clocks and the fitting of modern pulleys and click is to be avoided whenever possible. From **figures 31 and 32** note that Donisthorpe had abandoned the solid dial sheets of Clocks 1 and 2 in favour of gapped dials. What

appears to be packing under the front of the movement actually sits under the lower pillars and is probably to help strengthen a sagging seatboard.

The clock shown in **figures 33-35** has a similar circular name plaque to the 1757 clock, but whereas that one is signed 'Donisthorp Normanton', this slightly later clock has just 'Donisthorp', both being without the final 'e', not a slip that the clockmaker would have made if he had done the work himself. On both these dials the half-hour markers have disappeared, while the engraving is of a superior quality to Joseph's own work on Clocks 1 and 2, especially the scrolls seen in **figure 33**. On all these clocks the name is in upright capital letters and while it might be thought that this is the easiest to produce, the converse is the case. The slightest variation in height or not being level sticks out like a sore thumb, and letters like 'O' need to be slightly taller otherwise an optical illusion makes them look too short. On the other hand, with flowing italic copperplate script these variations are much less obvious. A more up-to-date feature of this dial is the use of spandrels of the cockleshell pattern, popular on small

provincial dials in the 1740-65 period.

This clock is punch dated 1758 on the movement and confusingly is numbered both 8 and 10, also done with punches. Since the number 10 has been almost obliterated by the hole for the hand arbor it must have been punched before the holes were drilled, that is at the start of making the movement rather than at its completion. However, behind the dial is

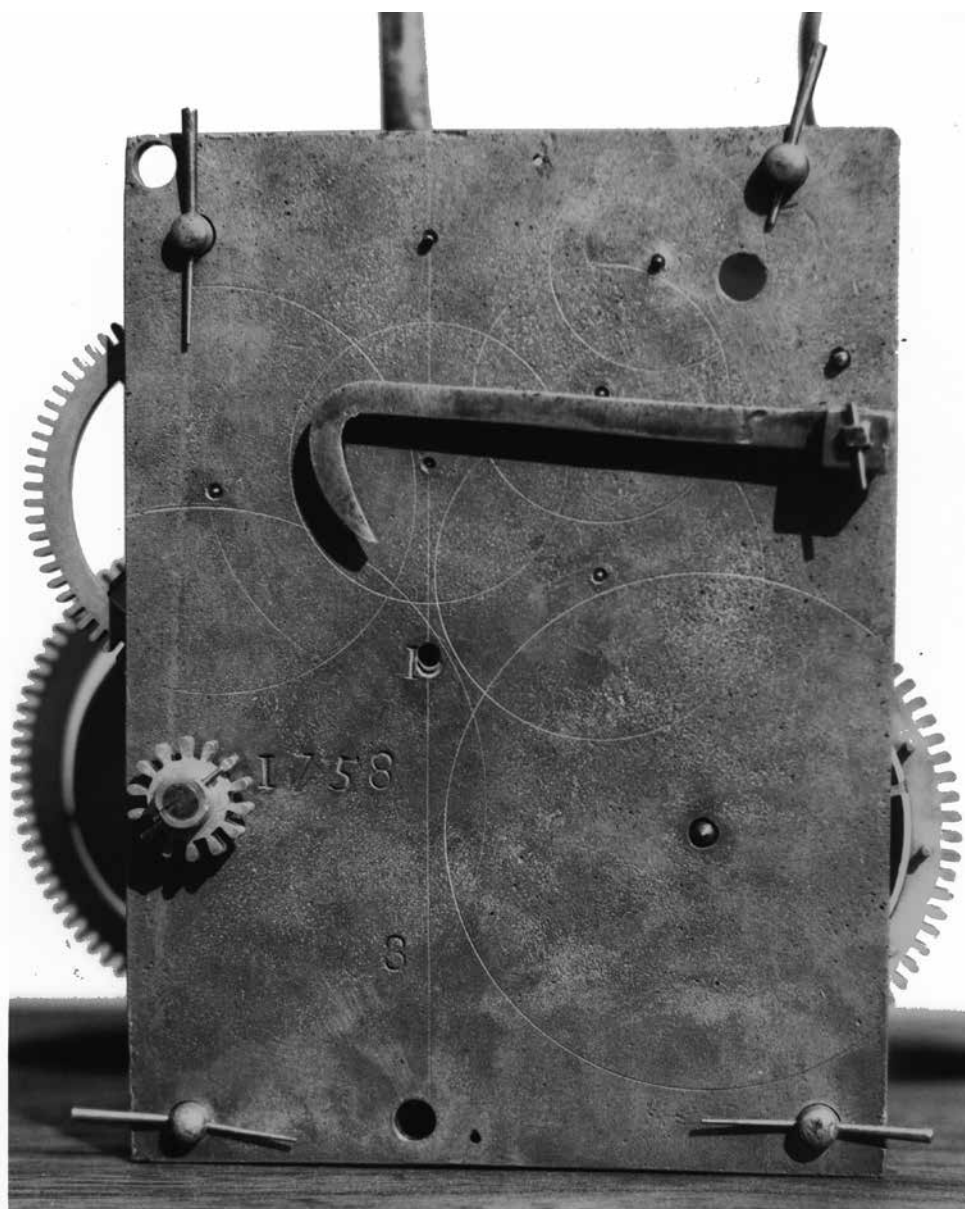
scratched 'This is for No. 10' and on the hour wheel 'For the 10<sup>th</sup> clock'. These two movements are typical of those made subsequently by Donisthorpe, with the going great wheel almost on the edge of the plate and the pendulum back cock set way off centre. The slotted countwheel has been abandoned in favour of the pin count-wheel, a system not often used outside the East Midlands. While he was an apprentice Samuel Deacon made movements identical to this for his master, but once he was working for himself he developed his own design. This

design, or perhaps the tenth of a batch? If it was the tenth clock Donisthorpe had made, then, taking into consideration the two posted-frame clocks and the two dated 1752 and 1757, this gives a very low production rate of less than one a year. If it is the tenth plated-frame 30-hour, depending on when Donisthorpe first made them, this might give a more realistic production rate. I personally think that making a batch of ten clocks is rather too many at one time—half that number would be more realistic.

Joseph's wife must have died sometime before May 1760 when he married again, this time to Mary Groves (perhaps Elizabeth's sister) by licence, but he had no further children.

In 1762 he took Samuel Deacon junior as an apprentice. Deacon claimed that he was apprenticed in August 1761, but the indenture was signed in February 1762—perhaps he had been taken on for a six-month trial.

How Deacon came to work for Donisthorpe has been recounted several times. Samuel had been sent to work on farms in Derbyshire and



*Figure 34. Front of the movement with the date 1758 and the numbers 8 and 10 (almost obliterated by the pivot hole for the hour wheel) stamped on the front plate.*

was based on the Donisthorpe type of movement, but with some refinements.

Was the 1758 clock the tenth one he made, the tenth of his new plated-frame

Nottinghamshire and then to far-off Hertfordshire, all with members of the Baptist church. A visitor to the farm from Leicestershire, who was impressed by a pair of wooden nutcrackers that Samuel had made, told him that clockmaker Joseph Donisthorpe was looking for an apprentice, presumably because John Dalton was about to finish his seven-year training. Young Samuel Deacon

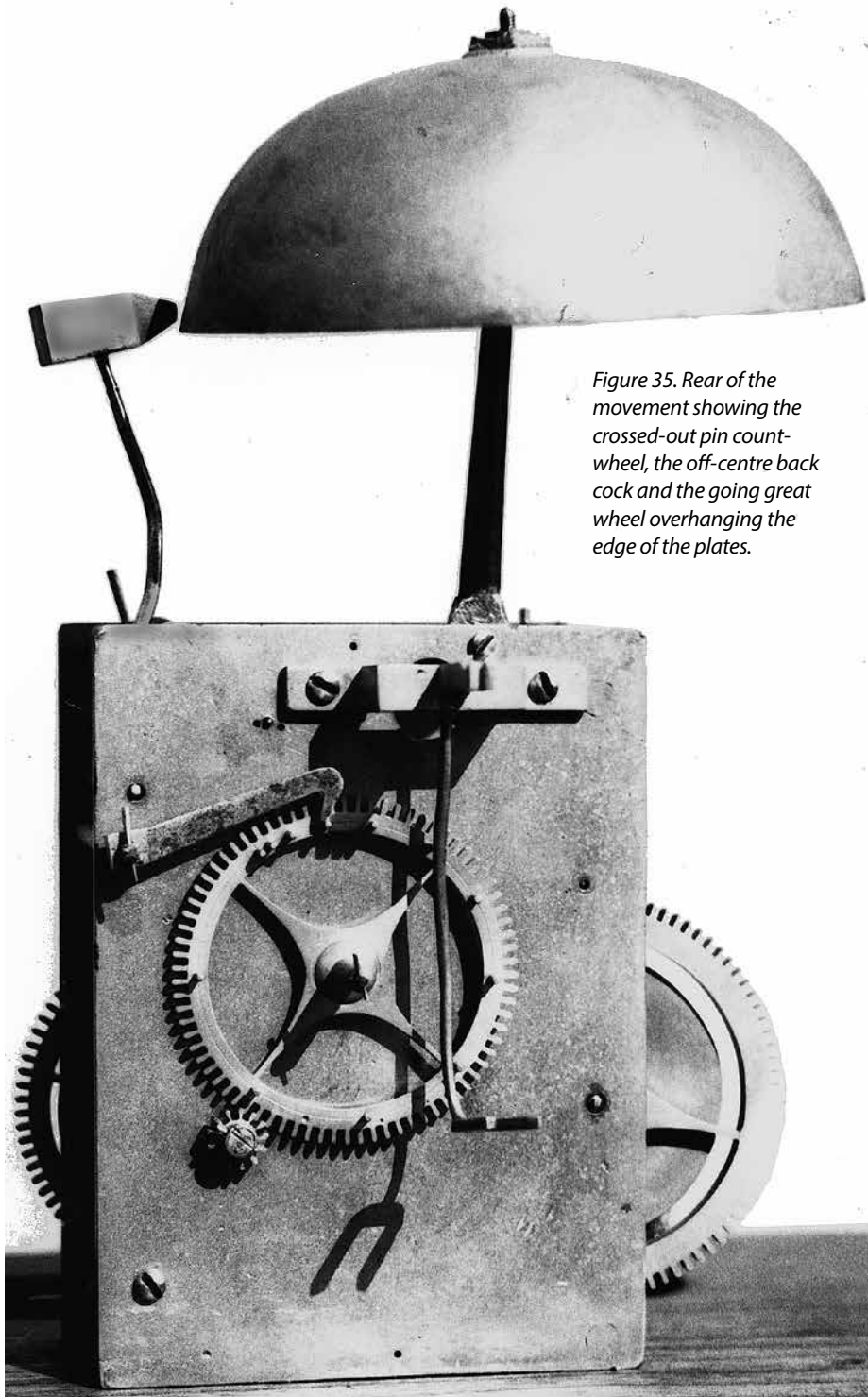


Figure 35. Rear of the movement showing the crossed-out pin count-wheel, the off-centre back wheel and the going great wheel overhanging the edge of the plates.

went back to Leicestershire to train with Donisthorpe at Normanton, and the rest—as they say—is history.

Deacon, who wanted his side of the story to be recorded for posterity, wrote: 'This Mr Donisthorpe is a man Posesed of good Natural Parts, a Bright Witt and an Insinuating behaviour. One that has it in his power to Deceive People more than a many others. He appears to be remarkable humble, But surely a prouder Spirit never Inhabited a Body of flesh & having a high opinion of himself. He was Varcely [scarcely?] Tender of his own honour. But after his conversion, he was very Zealous for the cause of God ... all his Children Soon turned their back on religion.' This was a case of the kettle calling the teapot black, for Samuel Deacon himself had a very high opinion

of his undoubted talents, once declaring that the person who recommended him to his master had appreciated his 'genius'—he was not one to hide his light under a bushel.

Later Deacon stated that he 'soon found that my master wanted a person to get him a great deal of money in a little time, and took pains only to teach me that which answered this end, so that I learnt but little of the theory of my business with him.' This is in contrast to the picture of Donisthorpe portrayed by *HISTORICAL MEMOIRS*. We may never know the truth of the matter, but later in life Deacon could be vindictive against anyone who upset or disagreed with him. Significantly even *HISTORICAL MEMOIRS*, a book that lauds the founders of the Baptist church rather than criticising them, says 'Mr. Deacon had his

failings'. It is rich of Deacon to complain that his master wanted to earn money from him, when only a few days before his marriage Deacon sold silver spoons to his future wife—at a profit!

Part of the problem may have been that his master was spending too much time on church matters in Loughborough, instead of being in the workshop giving Deacon the personal attention he clearly thought his 'genius' deserved. This state of affairs could not continue and in 1766 Joseph Donisthorpe and his remaining family (three children having died and George, the eldest son, having gone to Birmingham in the early 1750s where he became an important clockmaker) moved from Normanton to Loughborough.

Further apprentices were taken on: John Chapman in 1767, who would have worked alongside Samuel Deacon for a few years, and Robert Earp in 1771. Robert Smith was apprenticed in 1774, but this must have been to Joseph's son, also named Joseph. John Chapman became a leading Loughborough clockmaker and took several apprentices, making not only clocks but also pinions for the clock trade and other small iron components for the local stocking-knitting industry.

Joseph's second wife must have died by 1770 when he married thirdly to Sarah Thornton, who was 32 years his junior. But he was not to live much longer. On the last Tuesday of May 1774 he went to the 7pm evening service at the Loughborough Baptist Church and was in the act of giving out the second hymn when 'his voice faltered, and he fell down insensible in the pulpit'. His apprentice Robert Earp probably continued his training with Joseph junior, who is likely to have been running the clockmaking business by then.

Joseph Donisthorpe is an interesting and skilled self-taught clockmaker, who was fired with religious fervour and whose achievements have been belittled by Samuel Deacon. While his clocks are well made, they do not show the same degree of technical sophistication as those of his pupil—no musical clocks are known for instance. Without his passionate preaching his exploits would never have been recorded and we would have been deprived of the story of his interesting life. 🍷

### Acknowledgements

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