

JOHN DOWSON

of London



The clock shown in **figure 1** has a dial signed 'John Dowson BATH' yet is housed in a quality London mahogany case. The instinctive first reaction is that it is a recent marriage, but, as we shall see, this is not so and is a good example of why one should not jump to conclusions before carefully examining the evidence.

John Dowson is not a well-known clockmaker—in fact he was probably not an actual maker, but a retailer. There are records of a man of this name working in London in Holborn, Gray's Inn and later in Hatton Garden,

by John Robey, UK

as well as in Bath, Somerset, where he also traded as Dowson & Atkinson. These are all the same man, but there is no connection with Dowson & Atkinson, wharfingers in Southwark, London. While some details of his

Photographic captions, left to right

Figure 1. Eight-day longcase clock by John Dowson, Bath, from the 1760s, in a London mahogany case.

Figure 2. Ebonised bracket clock signed for John Dowson, London, about 1750. Photograph courtesy of P A Oxley.

Figure 3. Dial of the Dowson bracket clock. Photograph courtesy of P A Oxley.

Figure 4. Mahogany bracket clock signed for John Dowson, London, about 1750, with a rolling moon in the arch. Photograph courtesy of John Nicholson Auctioneers.

Figure 5. The dome-topped hood of the Dowson of Bath clock.

business interests are known, his family history is largely a blank, apart from his birth and death.

John Dowson was interred in Bunhill Fields Burial Ground, the dissenters' graveyard near Upper Moorfields, on the north side of the City of London,

DOWSON

and Bath



on 16th March 1795, aged 76, and is included in the Wales Nonconformist Burials. We can deduce that he was born 1719, but where is not known. He is not listed in the 1777 list of members of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, to which many Welsh ex-patriots in the capital belonged. Dowson is not a particularly Welsh name so it may be that he just attended one of London's Welsh chapels. There is a possibility that he may have been the son of Anthony Dowson from Yorkshire who was apprenticed in The Clockmakers' Company to John Tarles in 1699, but apparently not freed. He may be the John Dowson recorded in nonconformist records as marrying in London in 1739, when he would have been 20 years old.

His earliest positive record is in October 1747 when, as a watchmaker in the parish of St Andrews, Holborn, he took an apprentice. Then another one in March 1754, this time at Gray's Inn. His own apprenticeship is not





Figure 6. The Bristol-made dial of the Dowson clock.



Figure 7. The eagle in the arch.



Figure 8. 'Head-in-a-ruff' corner spandrel.

known, but he became a Freeman of the Goldsmiths' Company by redemption in 1757 and was elected to the livery six years later. Not being apprenticed to a freeman (membership by servitude), nor having a father who was a freeman (membership by patrimony) he had to buy his way into the Goldsmiths' Company to trade legitimately and gain respectability. He never registered his own maker's mark as a silversmith or goldsmith, confirming that he was primarily a seller of goods made by others.

Only two apprentices in seven years, neither of whom appear to have had long-term connections with the clock and watch trade, suggests that John Dowson did not regard cleaning and repairing watches as a major part of his business. He retained both premises and is listed in

trade directories as a goldsmith at 77 Holborn Bridge and Field Court, Gray's Inn from 1765 to 1790. A couple of directory entries in the 1760s list him simply as a merchant.

From later advertisements in the Bath newspaper his Gray's Inn premises were stated to be his warehouse, so the Holborn Bridge premises were probably a retail shop—at least one bracket clock has this address on the dial—and also where he lived. From at least 1779 until his death 16 years later he was a goldsmith at 89 Hatton Street/ Garden, which probably became his main residence. For a couple of years, in 1788-89, he is also listed at Angel Court, Snowhill, London. So for much of his working life he operated from three premises in central London, and at another one for a short period.

From 1772 to 1793 he was elected as one of 24 directors of the Hand in Hand Fire Office. This was formed in 1696 to insure only houses (the Union Assurance Society insured only their contents). It is regarded as the world's first mutual insurance company and one of the first to own its own fire engine. This would have been a prestigious appointment that required financial capital to underwrite any claims, but of course the main objective was to make money.

Since prehistoric times the warm mineral springs at what is now known as Bath have been highly regarded for their healing properties. A major Roman town, *Aquae Sulis*, was built over the site, but after they left Britain it was little more than a market town until the early eighteenth century. It then became a genteel and

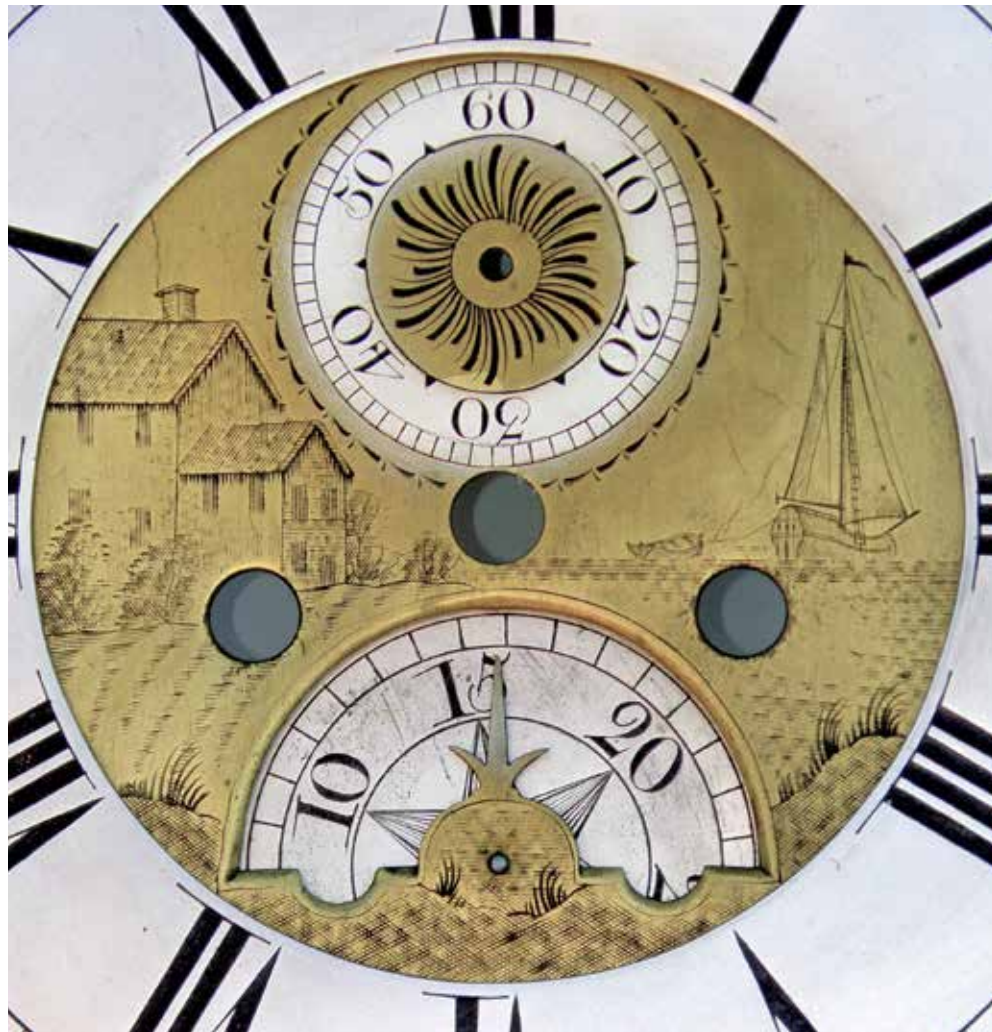


Figure 9. The centre is engraved with a building and a ship, typical of Bristol dials.

fashionable city with many rich visitors from London and elsewhere, including royalty, who came to see and be seen, as well as those who hoped to be cured by the mineral waters. Many new streets lined with fine Georgian houses were built, filled by the rich, famous and the aspiring celebrities of the day.

Many also chose to move from London to live a genteel, and cheaper, retirement in Bath. This presented a golden opportunity for enterprising merchants and tradesmen to supply fashionable clothes, jewellery, fine furniture and, of course clocks and watches to affluent customers. One of those who visited Bath was Thomas Tompion, who supplied a large month-going equation 'clock' (it is actually a timepiece) and a sundial in 1709 to the newly-built Pump Room, where they still stand today. The sundial would,

of course, have originally been sited outdoors.

For an enterprising tradesman such as John Dowson, Bath was an obvious place to expand his business. While there is no documentary evidence he appears to have opened a branch by 1760, as this is the date of a watch signed there, as reported by Britten, presumably based on a hallmark. In about 1767 he was in partnership with Thomas Field, who had himself moved to Bath from London.

John Dowson was probably the 'and Comp' of 'Thomas Field and Comp, Clock and Watch Makers and Goldsmiths' who had a shop in Northgate Street near St Michael's Church. This partnership lasted for about six years until September 1773, when Thomas Field left to trade elsewhere in the city.

During the next three months John Dowson, 'Clock Watch-maker and Goldsmith' advertised in the *Bath Chronicle* that he was continuing the shop in Northgate Street, and 'notwithstanding MR FIELD and him are parted, he continues in business as before having sent from his shop in London a set of able hands He has also sent down from his warehouse in Greys Inn London a large assortment of Silver and Jewellery and Cutlery Goods which are of the best and newest taste.' An opportunity was never missed to emphasise the connection with London with its taste and fashions.

At some time during the next ten years he began trading as Dowson & Atkinson, goldsmiths and jewellers, initially in the Market Place from 1783 to 1787, then in Cheap Street by 1795, where Michael Atkinson was paying City Rates in 1781. These premises were in the busy shopping streets clustered around Bath Abbey and only a short distance from the Pump Room and the other fashionable places where people met and socialised.

This partnership lasted about 12 years until their deaths. John Dowson died in London on 16th March 1795 with probate being granted a month later, and only three days after that, on 16th April, Mrs Atkinson announced 'All persons who are indebted to the estate and effects of the late Messrs DOWSON and ATKINSON, Goldsmiths, Jewellers and Watchmakers are requested to pay the same to Mrs Atkinson at their late shop in Cheap Street' who was continuing the business.

Although the first names of neither Mr or Mrs Atkinson are stated it is highly likely that they were Michael and Ann Atkinson who baptised three children at Bath Abbey: Ann in 1781, John in 1782 and Benjamin in 1787. Michael Atkinson was probably quite a lot younger than John Dowson—perhaps he had been a former employee taken into partnership so that he could be left in charge of the Bath shop while John Dowson spent most of his time looking after his London interests.

This is not just the usual closing of a business due to the break-up of a partnership, but both partners had died, Michael Atkinson in March 1793 at Bathampton, almost exactly two years before John Dowson. The Atkinson family appear to have moved the two miles from Bath to Bathampton to live, while the Cheap Street shop in the centre of the city

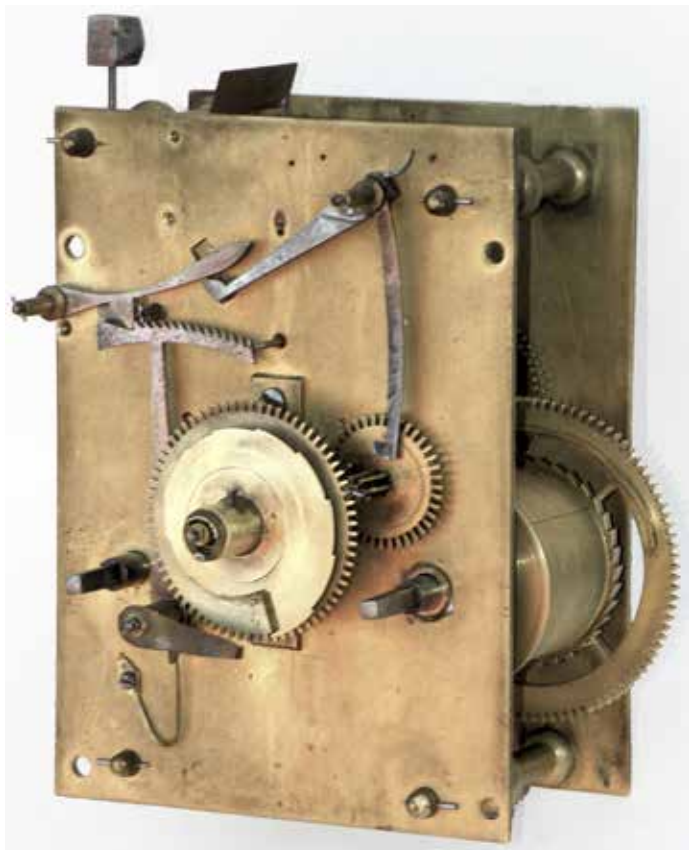


Figure 10. The eight-day Dowson movement.

Figure 11. The rear of the movement and the top of the seatboard.

was used primarily for trading. In 1800 Anne Dowson, probably John's widow, was listed in Cheap Street, while in 1805 John Atkinson, son of the former business partner, was a goldsmith at 67 Cheap street, implying that Ann Atkinson had by then also died. He too died at Bathampton, aged 42, in 1824.

John Dowson of Hatton Garden, London, wrote his will in July 1794, proved in April 1795, which, as often is the case, leaves us with more questions than answers. There is no mention of his wife, who we assume is the Ann Dowson in Cheap Street, Bath, in 1800, nor any children or

other members of his family. He may simply have not had any, they might have died or had become estranged. He makes one major bequest of £1000 (depending on how it is calculated, worth from about £100,000 to £8.2 million in today's money—in any event a sizable sum) to an Elizabeth

Figure 12. The underside of the seatboard.





Hamilton 'now living with me'. The implication is that he had left his wife in Bath to live in London with Elizabeth Hamilton as his common-law wife.

He left £100 to each of the three children of Ann Atkinson, widow, 'who now reside in my house in Bath', which they were to receive when they reached the age of 21. The sum of £100 was left to Benjamin Atkinson, wine merchant of Stall Street, Bath, who died in 1827, his occupation given as brandy merchant; he may have been a brother of Michael. He was generous to his servants, leaving each of those 'living with me at my death £100 over and above what is due to them as wages' as well as £10 each for mourning. He left 4s and 5s a week for life to two women, probably employees, as well as £400 to Thomas Hart, grocer (who was an executor, along with Elizabeth Hamilton) and John Smith £100, both of London, and £40 to a John Roylock of Hatton Garden, all of whom were probably close friends. His property at Holborn Bridge and another at Crouch in Hornsey parish, five miles from the City of London were to be sold, but there is no mention of his premises at Gray's Inn or Hatton Garden, nor any further mention of premises at Bath.

Apart from the Dowson watch mentioned earlier, three London bracket clocks supplied by him are

known. One, with a strike/silent in the arch, is in an ebonised case and dates from about 1750, **figures 2 to 3**. A mahogany-cased clock of about the same date has a moon in the arch, **figure 4**. A later ebonised clock of about 1775 having a moon in the arch and Dutch striking, signed at Gray's Inn was sold by Sotheby's in 2004. Dowson & Atkinson of Bath are briefly mentioned in *The Clockmakers of Bristol* by A J Moore, published in 1999, which includes Bath makers rather than in *The Clockmakers of Somerset* published by the same author the previous year. He records auction sales of a mahogany arched-dial longcase clock by the partnership and an oak one.

The clock shown in **figure 1** is signed for John Dowson alone and there are two periods during which he traded by himself in Bath. Firstly, from about 1760 to about 1767 when he went into in partnership with Thomas Field, and then in 1773-83, the period between the break-up with Thomas Field and the start of the partnership with Michael Atkinson. On balance the earlier period seems more probable for the date of this clock.

Figure 5 shows a close-up of the dome-topped hood of the high-quality mahogany case. While this is a typical London design of the 1760s period, the dial, **figure 6**, is clearly not from the capital, but was made in Bristol, only 12 miles from Bath. The arch has a silvered disc engraved with an eagle and the words 'Tempus Fugit' in a ribbon scroll, **figure 7**, flanked by the almost ubiquitous cast brass dolphin spandrels. The corner spandrels are of a design sometimes called 'head in a ruff', **figure 8**, which is said to be unique to clocks from the West Country, but this is not strictly correct. They also appear on clocks from northwest England in a marginally different form with one group probably being recasts from the other. The chapter ring has lost its half-hour markers and quarter-hour divisions by this date, but the main difference between this dial and a London one of the same period is the centre. A London dial would have a plain matted centre with an applied silvered seconds ring and a small square calendar aperture. Often at this period the name of the London 'maker' — in reality usually the retailer—would be engraved on a small curved plaque (similar to that shown in **figure 3**) above the calendar or on a silvered boss in the arch.

The centre of the Dowson dial, **figure 9**, has pictorial engravings

of a domestic building, more like a farmhouse than a cottage, on the left and a sailing ship on the right. These are typical subjects produced by Bristol's clock-dial engravers. The seconds dial, with a decorative pattern in the centre is engraved directly on to the smooth dial sheet and is not an applied ring.

A previous restorer has silvered this subsidiary dial to contrast with the brass finish of the rest of the centre. While it certainly looks effective, it is not known if this is how the dial would have looked when it was first made. A smooth ground was often silvered to display any decorative engraving to its full advantage. Sometimes when a chapter ring is removed it reveals silvering beneath, showing that there had once been silvering in the centre that had been polished away, but there were no such indications here. The calendar shows through a large curved aperture, typical of the West Country, the Midlands and all points further north, apart from Scotland where the box calendar and especially a date hand were preferred.

The eight-day movement has the usual rack-striking layout, **figure 10**, though the strikework is rather lightly constructed, this being a feature of Bristol-made movements. The lifting piece is made of thin springy iron, rather than the more usual brass, and the rack tail has been repaired. As shown in **figures 11 and 12** the bell sits close to the top of the movement and hence the hammer is quite short.

Particular attention was paid to the seatboard and the cheeks on which it sits, **figures 11 to 14**. There is no evidence that the seatboard is not original to the movement and apart from the addition of a very old strengthening piece to repair a split, there are no signs of any alterations to it or the case and no packing is needed to achieve a perfect fit. All is as it should be after two and a half centuries of aging and fair wear and tear. I am confident that this is how the clock was supplied to its original customer. In any event if a different dial and movement had been put into a London case in recent times to increase its sale value it would have been a London dial, not a provincial one.

The very wealthy who lived in The Crescent, The Circus, or one of the other very fine Georgian buildings for which Bath is justly world famous, would have bought the best-quality clocks made by one of the most highly regarded of London's clockmakers—probably directly from the maker

Figure 13. The cheeks on which the seatboard sits have never been altered.

himself.

Those a little further down the pecking order who wished to display to their friends and acquaintances that they too furnished their houses in the best possible taste and fashion, but could not afford the very finest (while of course not admitting it to them), would have gone to one of the many local suppliers such as John Dowson. Appearances were paramount, so a mahogany case in the latest style would have been specified, though a large pagoda top with elaborate fretwork in the hood might have had to be foregone for a more sober dome top, as here.

The dial and movement were of less concern, as only those knowledgeable in such matters would realise that while the case was from London, the dial was a more local production. From a distance the dial would look similar to a London one, the main give-away being the large calendar aperture. Just like today the 'clock' was regarded as being primarily the case, with the 'face' and 'works' being of less importance to the layman.

John Dowson's clock is not the only one that has a similar combination and I have been informed of other examples that have Bath dials and one with a Warminster dial, all in their original London cases. No doubt this practice was not confined to a fashionable spa town like Bath and I would be pleased to hear of other examples. While a dial and case of widely differing periods are unlikely to have started life together this might not be so if they are from different areas. Any such mismatch must be investigated very carefully to determine originality or otherwise, but do not jump to the obvious conclusion that they have been united in recent times. As this clock shows, first impressions can be misleading.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 14. There is no packing between the seatboard and the cheeks.