

EARLIEST ENGLISH

Perhaps an attempt to r

by John R



Figure 1. The iron dial with a brass chapter ring.



Figure 2. Paint under the edges of the chapter ring

Figure 4. Enhanced image of the dial centre.

Knowing my interest in the history of roads and trackways in the Peak District, a retired local antiques dealer showed me a large wooden chest made from a tollboard that was on the Leek to Ashbourne turnpike road, complete with the original toll charges painted on it. During our discussion he mentioned that he had a clock dial and movement that he thought was unusual, though he was not a clock expert. He subsequently showed it to me and allowed me to keep it for a short while to take off the dial, photograph it and examine it closely.

It should be emphasised that it was (and still is) in a very distressed condition, rusty, the front pivot of the

escape wheel arbor broken, and the hammer assembled the wrong way round. As a consequence the images shown here are not as good as I would have liked and even with some lightening and improvement in contrast they are not ideal. However, if any attempt is made to restore the clock, especially the dial, this would compromise it as a historical artefact.

It turned out to be



WH PAINTED DIAL?

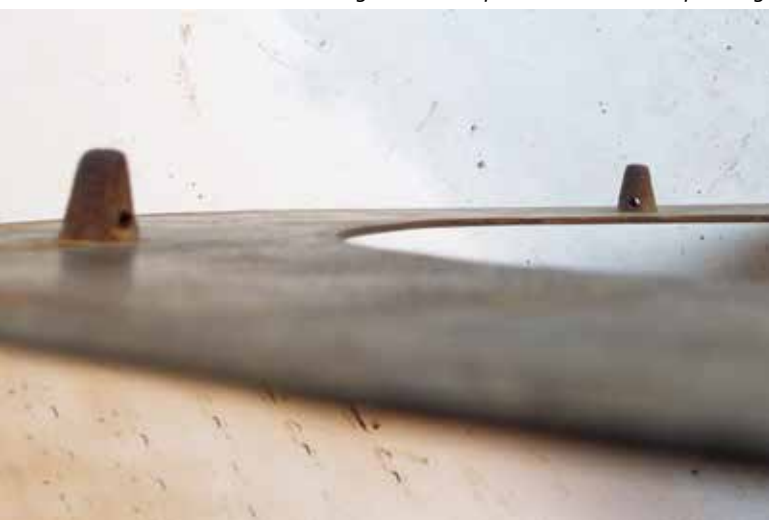
make a cheaper design

obey, UK



Figure 3. Enhanced image of the bottom-left corner.

Figure 5. The tapered feet on the chapter ring.



indeed a very interesting clock, having a posted frame with a hoop and spikes for hanging on a wall, an unsigned brass chapter ring fixed to a 10in (250mm) square painted iron dial sheet, **figure 1**. The thin iron sheet, only 0.055in (1.4mm) thick, had been painted with a thin base coat, probably of white lead, most of which

had flaked off due to rust. However, there were traces of colour in the corners and the centre. Removing the chapter ring revealed that the white base coat extended only a short distance under the brass ring, leaving a bare section under most of the ring, **figure 2**. Since it would have been simpler to paint the entire surface and the saving on the cost of the extra paint would have been minimal, why it was done like this is not easy to explain.

Little detail could be seen by the naked eye of the coloured corners until they were digitally enhanced. Nothing could be discerned on the top corners and very little on the one on the lower right, but the lower-left corner gave some



Figure 6. The movement with the hour wheel removed.

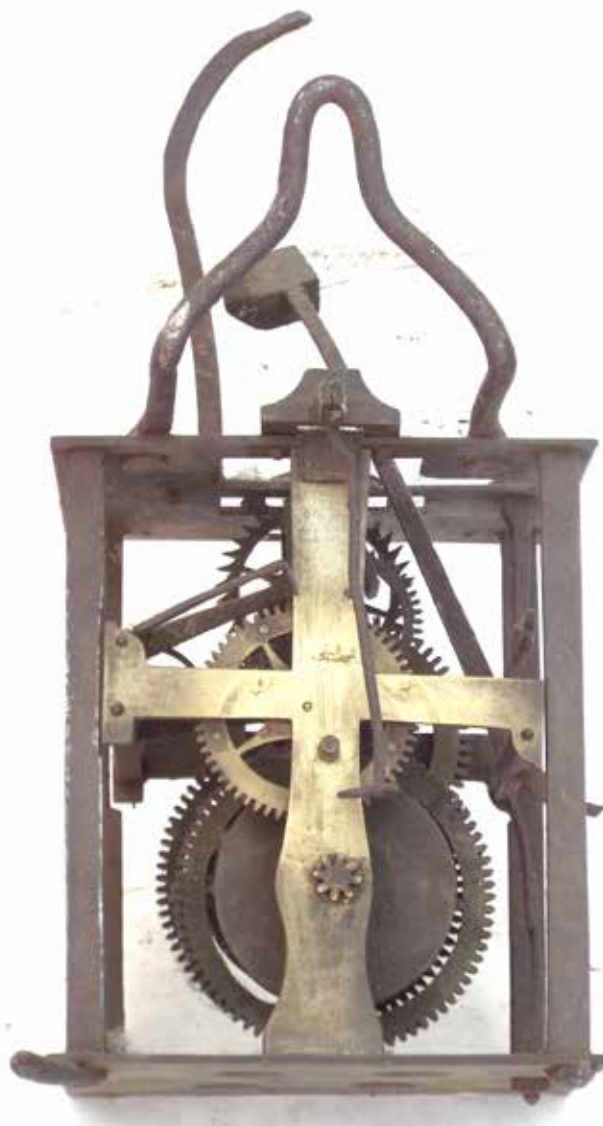


Figure 7. Rear view with the countwheel removed to show the swelled-out movement bar.

interesting results. By lightening the image, then increasing the contrast and colour saturation and finally rotating it, the result was as shown in **figure 3**. This shows that there were scrolls in yellow, red and black, presumably each corner being identical. On the other hand, there were just traces of blue paint scattered over the centre, **figure 3**, indicating that it was originally plain blue. This blue centre with colourful scrolls in the corners would have made a vibrant and eye-catching clock on the wall of a cottage or farmhouse.

The brass chapter ring is also quite thin, ranging in thickness from 0.055in to 0.11in (1.4mm to 2.9mm). There are well engraved 'floating' fleur-de-lis half-hour markers. These are the only stylistic features that enable an approximate date to be ascribed to the clock. The single hand is missing, which would have also helped with dating. However, these

half-hour markers are of a design that first appeared in the early eighteenth century and remained popular until after the middle of the century, so they do not provide a narrow time frame. The chapter ring is fixed to the dial sheet with the usual pinned feet, which provide a 'hidden' method of attaching the chapter ring. In comparison, on the Continent chapter rings were usually held by visible screws, while the dial was often also held on the movement by screws. One unusual detail is that these short feet have a noticeable taper, instead of being straight (**figure 5**), which is something I have never noticed before.

The movement, **figures 6 to 9**, also has some interesting features, though not as unusual as the hybrid iron and brass dial. It has a fairly lightly built posted frame of the type usually associated with southern England. The plates are made of brass, being 5¹/₄in

wide and 4in deep (133mm by 100mm), with rectangular iron pillars just over ³/₈in by ¹/₄in (6.7mm by 9.4mm) and 6in (152mm) tall.

The dial is fixed to the movement by four small iron lugs riveted to the rear of the dial sheet. Two of these lugs sit on the top plate and two beneath the bottom plate, all of them being held by taper pins through the lug and plate. This is just one of several methods used to attach dials to posted frames. On this clock it is completely original, and will be discussed later.

There are just two features of the movement that are worthy of note. Firstly, the vertical sections of the movement bars are not straight but swell out slightly at the base and where the greatwheel arbors pass through. This gives greater stability at the base and strengthens the bar where it is most needed. Secondly, the 'hoop' for hanging the clock on a wall



Figure 8. The left-hand side of the movement.

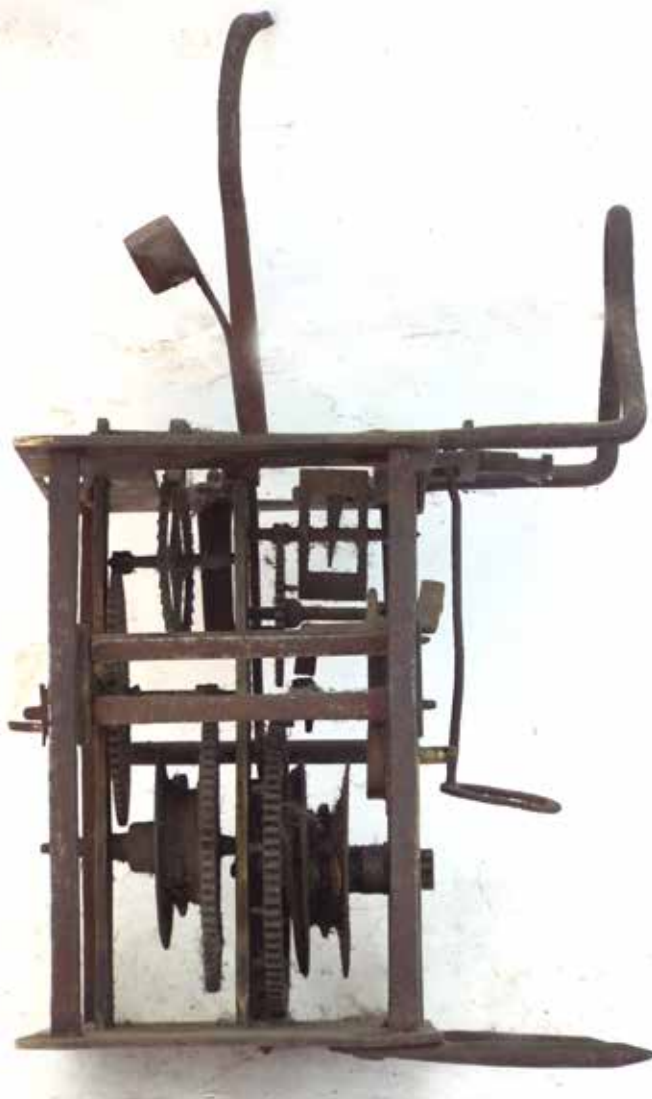


Figure 9. The movement from the right.

Posted-frame movements are thin on the ground in the North Midlands.

is not a simple hoop shape. It is riveted under the top plate and extends towards the rear for 2¹/₄in (57mm) before turning vertically upwards for 3in (75mm) in a very distinctive shape rather like a Gothic arch, **figure 10**.

Posted-frame movements are quite thin on the ground here in the North Midlands, so enquiries were made to see if anyone recognised these bars and hoop shapes. This drew a blank until I mentioned it to Lee Borrett who specialises in rural and rustic English clocks. His photographs of a clock by Richard Savage, who worked in Much Wenlock, Shropshire, and Shrewsbury, show very similar features, **figures 11 to 14**. The hoop is of a very similar form, while the movement bars have similar swellings.

However, as usual in horology things are not clear-cut, and though the general shapes are similar there are some

differences. The hoop is wider and screwed to the iron (not brass) top plate, while the movement bars have differently shaped ends to the cross arms, and appear to be unique to Savage's clocks. Other noticeable differences are that the Savage clock has round corner pillars and very distinctive brass wheel collets. These are known on at least five of his clocks, but the shaped hoop is only known on this round-dial clock. So, can the clock with the painted iron dial be attributed to Richard Savage? Probably not, but it may have been made by someone who was familiar with his work, such as an apprentice or a later local clockmaker.

Details of Richard Savage's life are given in *CLOCKMAKERS OF BRITAIN 1286-1700* by Brian Loomes, published in 2014 by Mayfield Books, and is the go-to reference for detailed information on clockmakers born before 1700. Savage

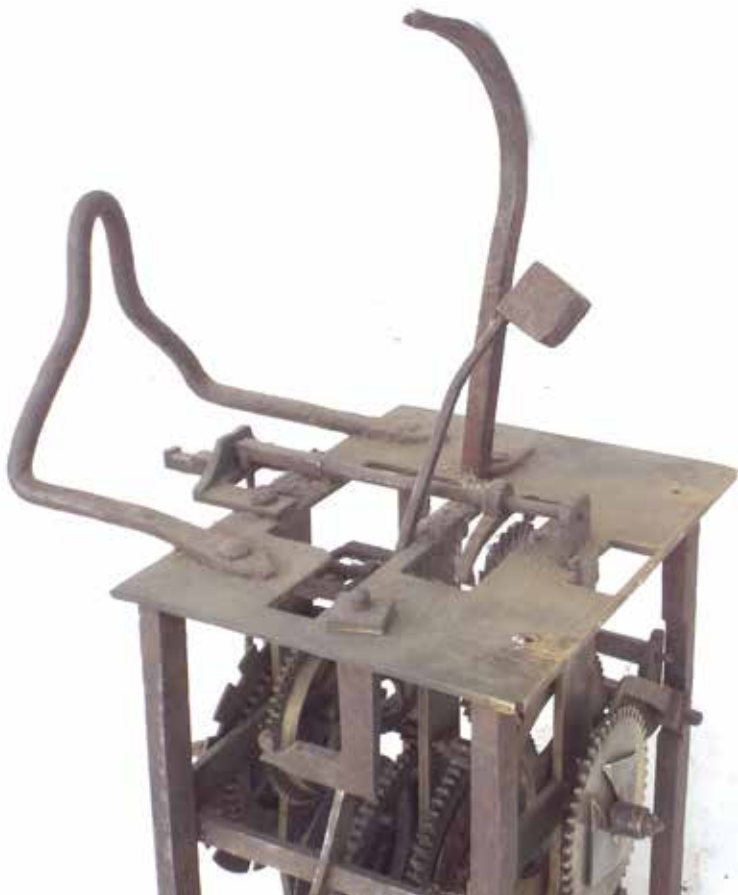


Figure 10. The hanging hoop with its distinctive shape.

Figure 11. Wall clock by Richard Savage with a round brass dial. Photograph by Lee Borrett.

was born at Much Wenlock in 1663 and worked there until about 1696 when he moved to Shrewsbury, where he died in 1728. He initially made lantern clocks, but after his move to Shrewsbury his output was mainly longcase and hoop-and-spike wall clocks.

Brian Loomes tells me that he has seen a small number of English clocks with iron dials, but he regarded them as being made up from old parts; unfortunately there are no photographs or other details. Likewise, a friend has reported seeing a clock with a hybrid iron and brass dial many years ago, but with no details apart from the lack of a signature. So, is the clock discussed here simply a mish-mash of old parts?

Other dealers, who did not specialise in clocks, had given similar opinions to the owner, so this was my focus when examining the clock. I could find no evidence whatsoever that the dial was not original to the movement. If there had been any doubt this article would not have been written. When examining an antique artefact, with experience you get a feeling that it is either right or wrong. Everything seemed exactly as it should have been with, no discernible signs of any alterations. Even the hand

arbor does not pivot between the front movement bar and the dial, as usual on English 30-hour clocks with brass dials. Instead it is a hollow pipe that rotates on a post riveted to the front movement bar.

This was a method used on clocks with iron dials, both made on the Continent and on much later English painted-dial clocks. It could be argued that the post is a later addition, but again there is no evidence for this and it just 'feels' right. Doubters will have to prove that it is wrong. Where would a later bodger find a painted iron dial to fit the movement, especially one without any trace of an alternative method of fixing it to the movement? It could also be argued that a new dial was cut from a sheet of wrought iron, and a new chapter ring (or one from an old clock) was added later. But how does this differ from one that was fitted when the clock was originally made?

We now come to the final question: why was this dial made? Was it an early attempt in the 1730s or 1740s to make a brighter and more colourful type of dial, anticipating the new dials made 'in imitation of enamel' by Osborne and Wilson of Birmingham several decades later? Much development of special

varnishes and paints was needed to produce the smooth surfaces to take the high quality paintwork applied to Birmingham dials. But here there was no such care in the preparation of the surface, with just a thin base coat before applying the colours. Alternatively, was it simply an attempt to make a cheaper dial, while at the same time being more colourful? This might also be the reason for a round dial being used on Richard Savage's wall clock. With less brass and no cast-brass spandrels in the corners it would appeal to those with a limited budget to spend on a clock. My guess is that it was an attempt to make a low-cost clock, rather than pre-empting the Birmingham painted dial.

Clearly there are other examples out there and I would be grateful for any information of examples of early painted dials, with or without a brass chapter ring, as well as posted-frame movements with similar hoops and/or movement bars. Please contact me at john@mayfieldbooks.co.uk 📧

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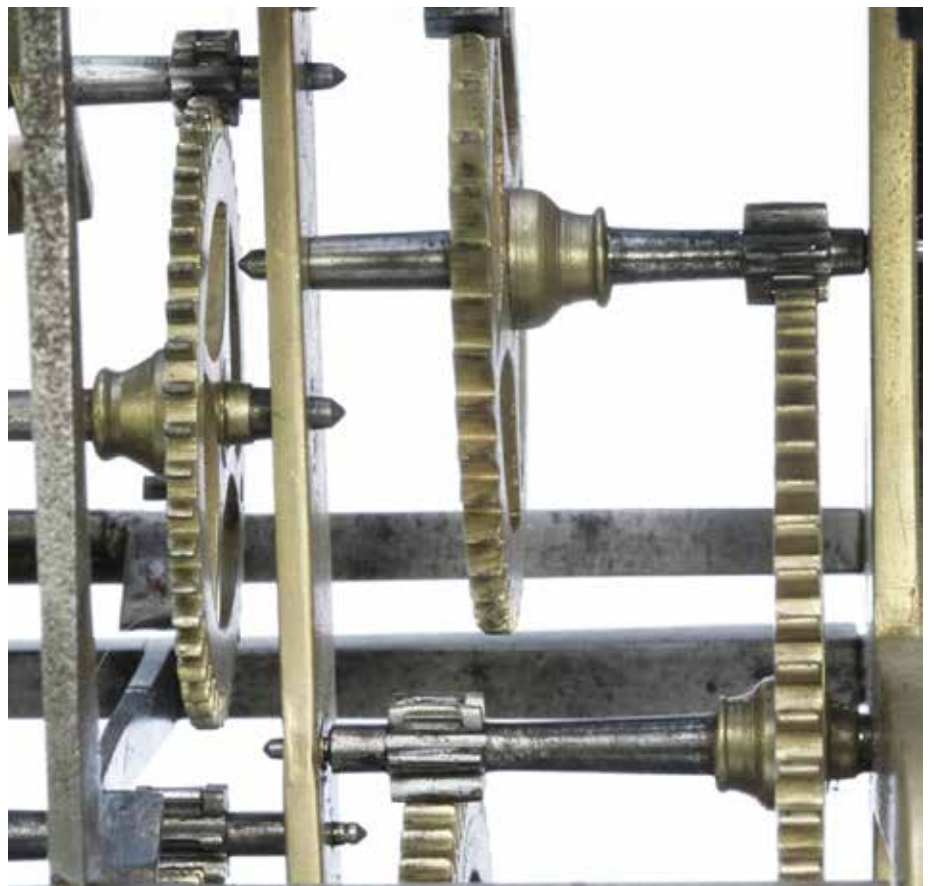
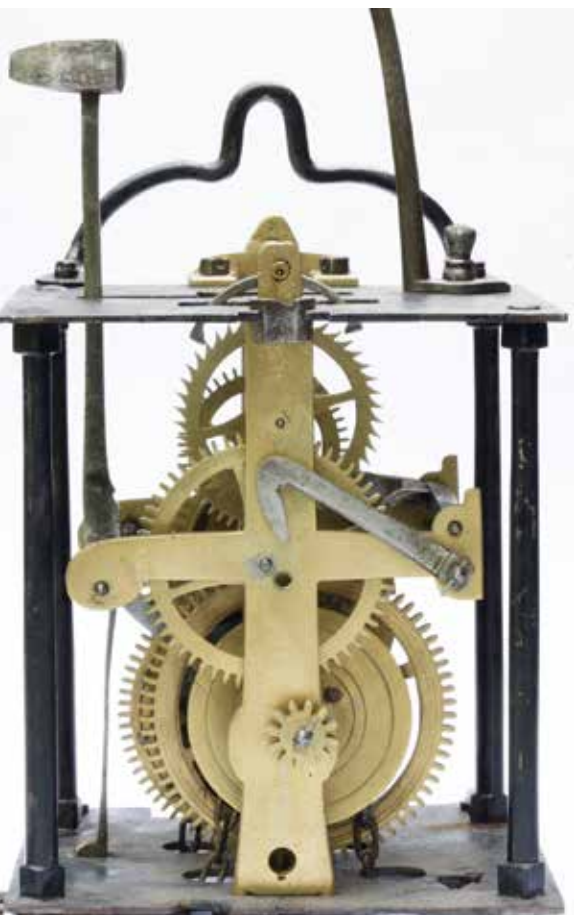


Figure 12. The Savage movement. Photograph by Lee Borrett.

Figure 14. Savage's distinctive wheel collets. Photograph by Lee Borrett.



Figure 13. Savage's distinctive hanging hoop. Photograph by Lee Borrett.