

# WILLIAM JACKSON

## Mysterious maker of Leicester and Loughborough

by Brian Loomes, UK

Some months ago I did a little research into the life of clockmaker John Lee of Loughborough in the county of Leicestershire, a man known more by his name than his work. The results were published in *CLOCKS* in the edition of May 2018. His life at Loughborough led me to another clockmaker there around the same

*Figure 1. This lantern clock is signed by William Jackson at Loughborough. Only two others are recorded signed by him there and one at Lutterworth, the latter now in Leicester Museum.*

time named William Jackson, yet one more clockmaker about whom little or nothing was known. These men were the earliest two clockmakers to have worked in what was the second largest town in the county yet they were barely known.

All we had to go on were one or two



William Jackson clocks supposedly dating from about 1710-1720, but of the three or four generations of William Jacksons I discovered there we were not even sure which one was the clockmaker.

There was also recorded at a roughly similar period a clockmaker named William Jackson of Lutterworth, a smaller town some ten miles south of Leicester and 20 miles or so to the south of Loughborough and at that time about half its size. But we were uncertain whether this was the same man or a quite different clockmaker with the same name. I have now seen a few examples of William Jackson clocks from Loughborough and Lutterworth and I feel sure they are the work of the same man.

My latest findings also pin down which of the several William Jacksons it was who made these clocks as well as his vital dates. From this it is obvious that William Jackson worked at Loughborough some 25 years before John Lee arrived. Jackson was born there in 1673; Lee arrived there in 1718 or slightly before.


Jackson is by 



Figure 2. This left view of the lantern clock shows the original verge escapement and the decorative filing to the hammer spring and hammer stop. Pictured before cleaning.

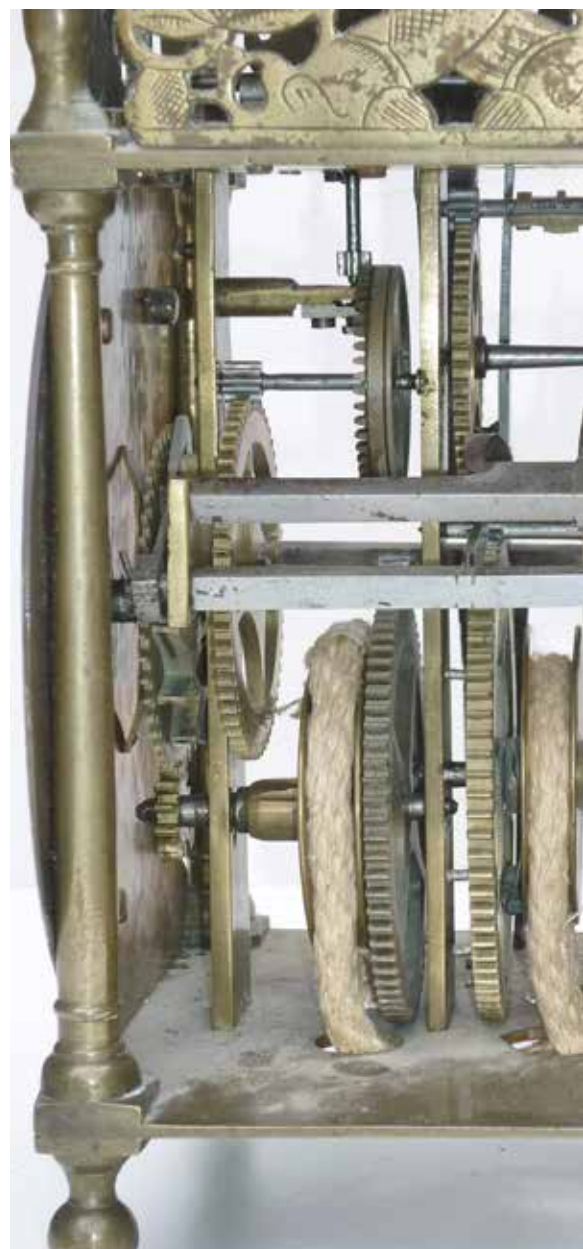


Figure 3. The lantern clock from the right before cleaning. Note the decorative scoring on the verge wheel, characteristic of original work and seldom seen in a replacement.

no means the rarest name in England and it is not always easy to discern which member of the family was which. My deduction is that William Jackson the clockmaker must have been the one born in 1673 at Loughborough, the only son of a same-name 'yeoman' father, and we would normally assume he was working by about 1694. This was when he reached 21, which was when he ceased to be a minor and the age at which any apprenticeship a young man went through would usually have ended. But William senior died in November 1690, which would have changed everything. They say a man only matures when his father dies, as

then he must stand on his own feet. So my guess is that William the clockmaker had to be the family breadwinner from 1690.

We assume he lived at Loughborough as his children were baptised there, those being William in 1716, John in 1722, and Matthew in 1724. So far as I can establish he did not at any time live at Lutterworth. He would hardly have lived at Lutterworth and attended church 20 miles north at Loughborough. Strangely enough there were virtually no Jacksons in the Lutterworth registers in this period. So how did William Jackson come to be making clocks signed at Lutterworth? Well, it is not unusual for

a clockmaker to have sold clocks from more than one location.

We know that clockmakers in rural areas would usually sell and service clocks over a wide area. For the convenience of all it was not uncommon for them to have a weekly 'surgery' in some second or even third location in a tavern or meeting room at villages some distance away from their home location. This is how I think William Jackson came to sign some of his clocks at Lutterworth. It was his secondary location. Normally he would sign his clocks at Loughborough. But when he sold one to a customer living at or near to Lutterworth, that person would surely





Figure 4. Top plate of the lantern clock. Two vacant holes show where the verge cock was attached before it was re-positioned, probably during some past restoration.

want the clock personalised by having it lettered with his own local town name. I have seen a number of examples of this kind of thing.

Leicester city was by far the largest centre of population in the county. Clockmaking in that city, and no doubt for several miles around too, was monopolised by the talented and versatile Wilkins family, followed by the Lee brothers, John and Roger, and later by their successors. The clockmaking field in Leicester city must have been crowded, but William Jackson junior, the clockmaker, would have cornered his local market at Loughborough, which was the second largest town

in the county, lying about ten miles to the north. His father, William Jackson senior, was described as a 'yeoman', a rather vague term but one which usually suggested a man who owned his own house and farmed his own land. The word 'yeoman' was more often used to define class than actual occupation. It did not necessarily refer to a full-time trade, and it is possible he was also a metalworker of some kind. There is no record of young William's being apprenticed and it could well be he was trained by his father.

Despite the near-monopoly in Leicester clockmaking of the Wilkins and Lee families, the oldest dated clock yet

known is a centre-verge lantern clock bearing the year of making as 1688 and signed by an unknown maker, John Spence. I sold this clock to Leicester Museum nearly 40 years ago, and today we still know no more about its maker than we did then. It looks as if Mr. Spence could not survive the competition. Therefore when William the clockmaker chose a secondary location at Lutterworth, about ten miles south of Leicester, he was doing so to surround and curtail the Wilkins / Lee empire in Leicester.

With Leicester and the two closest locations already more than amply catered for, where could a restless



Figure 5. The Jackson dial dismantled and the original iron hand.

young John Lee junior hope to ply his trade when looking to part company with his father, Roger, round about 1718? As Roger's eldest son he had a future livelihood mapped out for him in Leicester. We know he moved to Loughborough and my guess is he went to work for William Jackson, who was already long established there as a maker of fine clocks, probably even finer than those the Lees were making in Leicester. For example I don't think we know any clocks by the Lees as 'grand' as the marquetry example pictured here by Jackson.

The first we hear of John Lee at Loughborough is when he was married there in 1718 to Elizabeth Abbington. The couple had several children baptised there between 1719 and 1723. We will never know the reason John Lee set up his clockmaking business at Loughborough. It may have been through a family fallout or perhaps just that young John wanted to branch out on his own. Two years later, in 1720, his father, Roger, died and left John a fair portion as well as £30 each to his two grandchildren, 'John and William, sons of my son, John'. This all suggests that any animosity was healed by this time at least.

However recklessly impassioned he might have been to go off and marry Elizabeth, I cannot imagine young John Lee even thinking of setting up independently in Loughborough in opposition to a clockmaker so long established as William Jackson, who by now had been trading there for about 25 years. My train of thought is that John

Lee worked for Jackson. The existence of just a single known lantern clock by Lee and a 30-hour longcase implies he did not make many under his own name.

Even though his working life at Loughborough was only for about six years (till his death in October 1724 at the age of only about 35) we would expect more than one clock to survive from John Lee if he was working independently. Recently I was researching the work of London clockmaker Richard Beck, who died in 1659 after working single-handed for exactly the same length as John Lee (six years) and yet I know of nine lantern clocks by him.

We know a self-employed clockmaker working alone could make 25 clocks a year, provided, of course, that he could sell so many. The absence of 148 of John Lee's potential 150 suggests he did not work in his own name, or, if he did, then not for long. Perhaps Lee parted from Jackson in his latter year or two to try going it alone. Or it is possible that William Jackson allowed Lee to take on an occasional job for himself, as we know some masters did.

It is even possible that Lee worked as a journeyman clockmaker for Jackson all the time and may have made this one clock for his own personal use. Examples of this situation are

Figure 6. An exceptionally fine clock by William Jackson, the marquetry case almost certainly made in London. Photograph courtesy of Mellors & Kirk, auctioneers, Nottingham.







Figure 7. The hood detail shows the intricate work, far too specialised to have been carried out locally. Photograph courtesy of Mellors & Kirk, auctioneers, Nottingham.

known, and we can hardly imagine a professional clockmaker, even if only a journeyman, *not* having a clock of his own.

William Jackson's recorded clocks are not numerous. I know a total of three lantern clocks by him signed at Loughborough and one signed at Lutterworth, all made with verge escapement. Several longcase clocks by him are known signed at each town, mostly 30-hour examples but two good eight-day examples, pictured here, were sold at auction in recent years.

By far the most outstanding was an eight-day clock in a marquetry case, formerly the property of Frank Gibbs Rye, one time Member of Parliament for Loughborough, who died in 1948. This was sold by auctioneers Mellor and Kirk in 2017 for £12,000, an amazingly

high price at a time of deep recession in the clock market. The clock was signed enigmatically 'William Jackson' with no placename. Because it belonged to the former Loughborough MP it seems to have been assumed (rightly) that the maker was William Jackson of Loughborough, or Lutterworth, for we now know the two were the same person.

Marquetry cases were a specialist product, made almost exclusively in London. There may be exceptions but we know of no example of such a case having been made in Leicestershire and Jackson probably bought the case for this clock in London. The same could even apply to the dial, which shows strong London influence. A similar clock, perhaps by a lesser-known London maker, could have been bought at


an auction in 2017 for £3000 to £4000, which was in fact the estimate for this clock. So this clock brought three or four times more than might have been expected.

Fine though it is, this marquetry clock is not exceptional for London work. As it happens there was no clockmaker in London at this time called William Jackson, or anywhere else as far as we can establish. But it is certainly exceptional for its quality and rarity for the locality of Loughborough or Lutterworth or even for the whole county of Leicestershire. I know of no other marquetry clock made in this county.

Why Jackson signed this particular

I was competing against a distant 'rogue' cousin who took it beyond all reason.

clock, the finest one known by him, without a placename remains a mystery. Was it because certain elements were from London? Was it that he knew he would be recognised as *the* William Jackson without any placename? There is no question in my mind that this was the Leicestershire William Jackson, nor it seems in the mind of its present and past owners. It appears to be the maker and known locality that pushed up the price. This serves as testimony that Frank Gibbs Rye knew what he was doing when he bought it, or followed good advice in selecting a clock by this maker. This is surprising given how long ago that was, at a time when our knowledge of local clockmaking was far less advanced than today. Yet it was recognised that this was the work of the Loughborough man.

There is always the possibility that two family members were battling it out, each determined to own it, and so took it beyond the price of its natural worth. That situation is uncommon but I have come across it more than once. | 



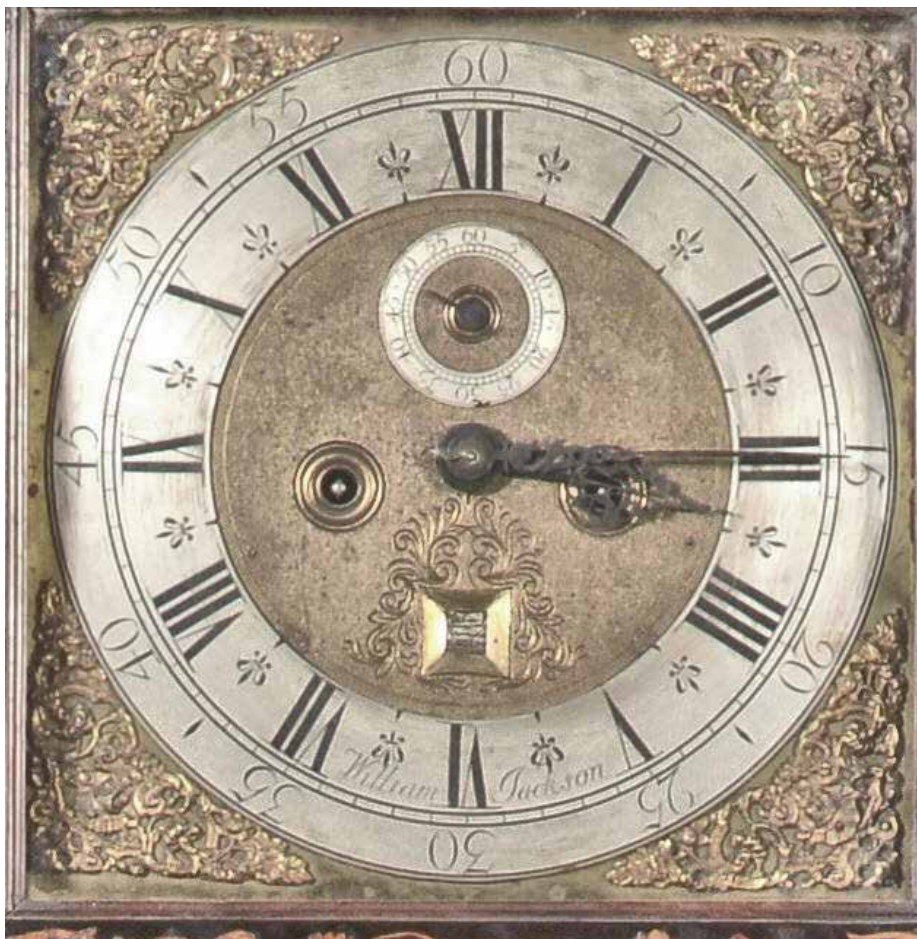


Figure 8 (above). The dial of the eight-day marquetry clock is signed simply 'William Jackson'. Does the omission of a place name have a significance. (Photograph courtesy of Mellors & Kirk, auctioneers, Nottingham).



recall one case where I was bidding for a client for a family clock and we only found out later that I was competing against a distant 'rogue' cousin who took it beyond all reason.

I have known for many years that my own ancestors lived at one period at Lutterworth but only recently did it occur to me that they were there at the same time as William Jackson was selling clocks there. Thomas Loomes, my fifth great grandfather was born in 1696 at Misterton, adjacent to Lutterworth. He first married at Lutterworth in 1722, had seven children born there in the 1720s and 1730s, and lived there till his death in 1773, outliving William Jackson by several years. The latter appears to have died in 1768 at the amazing age of 95.

In a tiny town like Lutterworth with less than 1000 inhabitants at that time Thomas Loomes must have known, or known of, William Jackson from his childhood till the day of the latter's death. He may have seen him holding his regular surgeries at some local tavern, such as the Hind, an ancient former coaching inn on the High Street, just recently converted into offices I am told. A visiting clockmaker in those times would be called on to fix all kind of other metal objects, from spectacles to farming implements, from kettles, to cooking pots. Thomas Loomes could not have been unaware of those occasions when the celebrated Loughborough clockmaker, maker of marquetry clocks for gentlemen and mender of pots for farmhands, was coming to hold court there.

Thomas must have known the Hind tavern as well, probably, as every other local hostelry, maybe shared a pot of ale there with William Jackson, may even have seen this particular clock. He may even have bought it, though as a grazier (one who reared and fattened livestock for market) I doubt he was sufficiently well off to have bought a clock. And if he had he would surely have wanted it to have Lutterworth on the dial.

I stayed at the Hind myself more than once when tracing my family tree but was at that time unaware that my ancestor probably drank ale in that same bar about 200 years earlier! And perhaps the strangest thing of all is that here I am today holding that very clock in my hand that links all these things together! 🍷

Figure 9. Dial of an eight day clock signed by William Jackson at Lutterworth. The sophisticated styling suggests he had knowledge of London work. Photograph courtesy of Adam Partridge auctioneers, Macclesfield).