

JOHN DENNIS MAIDSTONE

... and a valued possession

by Brian Loomes, UK

The most exciting thing to my mind about old clocks is that there is always something new turning up. New discoveries, clockmakers previously unrecorded, methods previously undocumented. Even after all these years of clock hunting by enthusiasts these undiscovered things are still out there and we all have equal chances of

Figure 1. This lantern clock, signed 'Johannes Dennis de Maidston me Fecit', originally had balance control and alarmwork. It dates from about 1660 and is by far the oldest known domestic clock made in the county of Kent.

finding them. All we have to do is recognise them when we see them. That takes experience, which only comes from constant close observation.

Only a few weeks ago a buyer bought a lantern clock at auction, which was estimated between £2000 and £3000 but for



which he was content to pay £45,500. Those in the room stood open-mouthed with astonishment. But he knew what he was doing—and so did at least one underbidder. Those with their mouths open should have done more reading.

The clock described here by John Dennis of Maidstone is another new discovery. One or two of the Dennis family are documented in *KENT CLOCKS & CLOCKMAKERS* by Michael Pearson, whose sudden death earlier this year leaves the world of clocks much poorer. They are mentioned in records as locksmiths and occasionally as clockmakers, though no actual clocks by any of them have been recorded until the one documented here by John came to light recently.

George Dennis was the father, born about 1606. He was married as a locksmith aged 26 on 24th February 1632 to 19-year-old Elizabeth Greenhill, daughter of the late John Greenhill of Maidstone, who must surely be one of the family of locksmiths and clockmakers of



Figure 2. The dial centre detail shows the hole at XI, which carried the original alarm detent. London style engraving and hand. Four holes round the centre are where the alarm disc was once riveted.



Figure 3. Movement from the right showing the decorated hammer stop. Note the tapered arbors, including that of the escape wheel—an early feature, usually pre-1700.

that name. Families very often socialised with—and married family members of—members of the same trade.

George Dennis senior died in 1667 leaving a son, John, born 1633, and probably a second son, George, born about 1643, and probably a third son, Thomas, born about 1657/58. The records are far from complete at this period and, although the baptisms of George junior and Thomas are not recorded, we can deduce their relationships from other sources. There is no point in setting out their genealogy in detail as no work is known by any of them except this one by John.

John was baptised at Maidstone on 15th December 1633, his father, George, then described as a locksmith. This would have been the family's main profession

as everyone had need of a locksmith whereas the craft of clockmaking was only just beginning in the area at that time. Early provincial clockmaking usually originated from families involved in metalworking—blacksmiths, whitesmiths, locksmiths, pewterers and the like.

At this time, provincial smiths would undertake all manner of metalworking, whatever term they were known by. Most of the work of the first smiths, whose work included 'clockmaking', involved maintaining and repairing objects rather than making new ones.

From its construction and style this clock would appear to date from about 1660. It was made with balance control and was modified very soon after to anchor escapement and long pendulum to improve the inconsistent timekeeping,

for which balance clocks are notorious. But even that modification is an involved story in its own right and we will get to that later.

If John Dennis was born in 1633 we could expect that he was working by 1654, that is by the age of 21. In February 1659 he was described as being from Boxley, a village two miles north of Maidstone, when he was married at Maidstone to Mary Boorman. He was 25.

His son, John, was baptised there on 5th November 1662. John Dennis, described in the parish register burial entry as a 'locksmith' (like his father), seems to have died in 1672, though two burial entries for the same man have conflicting dates—29th August and 16th October.

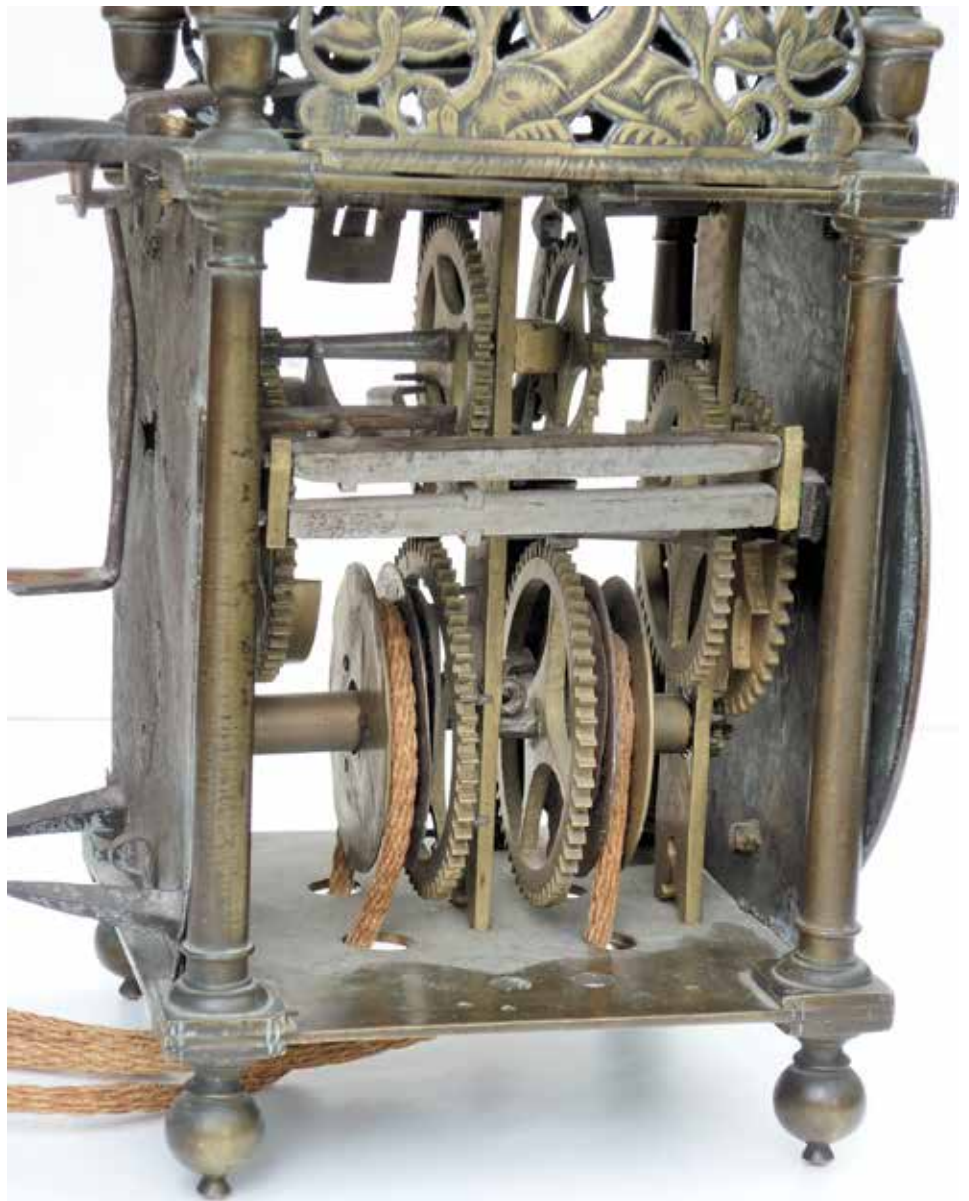
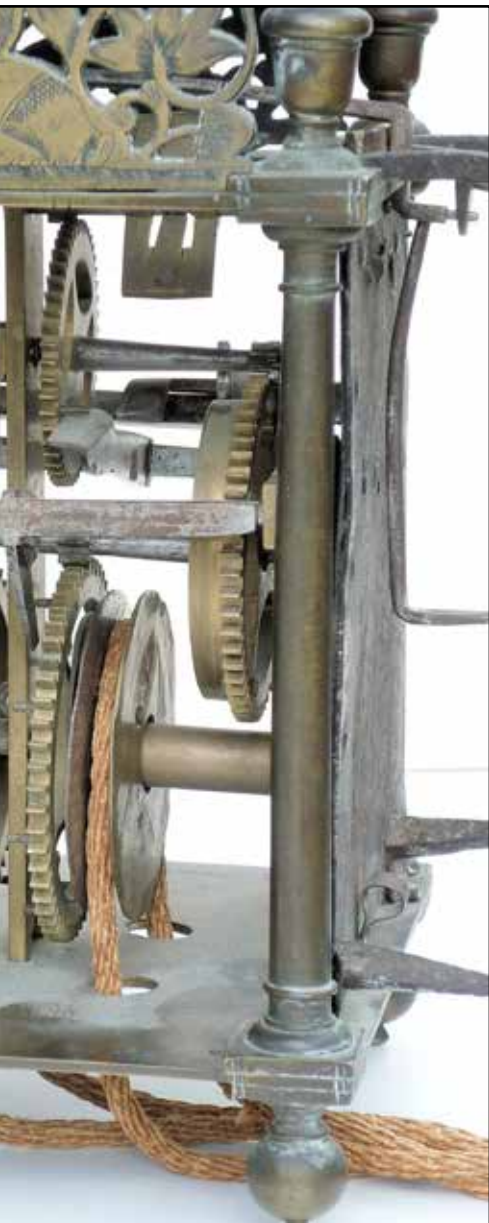


Figure 4. This view shows holes towards the centre left of the base plate, where the alarmwork was sited at one time after being moved from its original position on the back plate.

This pins down his working life very neatly to the years between 1654 and 1672. It tallies very nicely with my estimate of the clock's age as about 1660, always give or take five years. At this age it is not only the oldest domestic clock ever recorded from the town of Maidstone, but the oldest clock known from the entire county of Kent. It is also the only clock known by John Dennis, but for the discovery of which we would never even have known of his existence as a clockmaker.

The pillar castings of this clock seem to be typical London-made (Lothbury) castings of the period having the standard length of 6¹/₄in between plates. So are most other parts of the clock whose style we can pin down. The dial, chapter ring, feet, finials and engraving

styles all say London. Yet the clock dial is engraved 'Johannes Dennis de Maidstone me Fecit'. How do we explain that?

Well it is almost certain that John Dennis bought the clock from a specialist London clockmaker. They were used to supplying others in the metalworking trades. Whether he bought it as unworked castings and forgings or as a completely finished product is open to discussion, but probably the latter.

I think he bought the dial from London too, ready engraved with the wording he chose. The engraving of the design and lettering is certainly of high 'London' quality. It may just be coincidence that an engraver working in London by 1660 was Francis Dennis (sometimes Dinnis). Or perhaps Francis was related. But, whoever engraved it, the words used in

the signature are not typically London.

At this period hardly any London clockmakers would have Latinised their first name. This suggests that 'Johannes' was specifically requested rather than plain old 'John'. A regular London phrasing would have been 'John Dennis in Maidstone Fecit'. The 'me fecit' (meaning 'made me') is not London phrasing but is very provincial.

So too is the use of the word 'de' to mean 'of'. Yet the signature engraving quality is that of London, which suggests to me it was engraved there with his chosen wording. Perhaps he was helped to Latinise the wording by a local schoolmaster or scholar just to put on a bit of pomp.


All this suggests to me that John Dennis was not a regular maker of 



Figure 5. The top plate showing the ancient conversion from balance to anchor. Two empty holes show where the hoop was first attached, moved to make room for the pendulum when converted, and replaced anciently by two individual hoops. A clip behind the front fret and a patch behind the left fret can just be made out.

clocks and that this was a special event for him, maybe even a one-off made for his own personal use. And another feature, his method of holding the dial in place, is one I have never seen before, and strengthens the likelihood that John was handling his first ever, and maybe only, lantern clock.

Lantern clock dials are normally attached by a single lower lug into a locating hole in the base plate, as is this one. The top is held by two pins passing through the top plate behind the front fret.

This clock has no such pins and never had as there are no holes drilled in the top plate. Instead the dial is held in place at the top by the somewhat amateurish but effective method of a brass 'clip' bent over at right angles and simply pressed

down between the dial and chapter ring top.

It seems to me that John Dennis was unaware of the normal pin method and devised his own, perhaps unique, means. If he had made a lantern clock before, he would have known the pin system.

However, the original back plate survives, which once carried the alarmwork, and this is held in the normal way by two top pins. So it seems John Dennis knew how to fix the back plate. Could it be that I am misreading the situation and that he devised his dial holding wedge because he found the protruding pins unsightly? If only we could ask him!

Some lantern clocks have a distinctive feature at the base of each crossbar in



Figure 6 (top). The clip behind the fret fits down between chapter ring and dial plate to hold the dial in place. John Dennis's own device, which is probably unique.

the form of a cut-out, which is roughly keyhole-shaped. It appears to serve no purpose other than for decoration. This feature seems confined to some clocks, by no means all, in the West Country, centred around Bristol. It may have been a feature of some crossbar castings made in Bristol. I have not noticed it on London clocks. John Dennis's clock has these cut-outs, though perhaps a little fancier than some, **figure 10**.

It seems very unlikely Dennis obtained his crossbar castings from Bristol, when those of his other castings that we can recognise clearly came from London. Was he perhaps making these cut-outs himself just for fancy, maybe based on some clock he had seen which had Bristol crossbar castings? It was done



Figure 7 (middle). This view from under the clock shows the normal dial lug hole in the base plate and the fact that the top plate was never drilled for the normal dial top retaining pins.

Figure 8 (bottom). The patch behind the left fret held the alarm hammer shaft in the keyhole-shaped cut-out when it was at one time moved to this position from its original place on the back plate.

to disguise or 'camouflage' the twin projections which he needed to fit each crossbar into the base plate.

This clock was made with alarmwork, which was attached to the outside of the back plate as was normal. The evidence still shows in the form of holes. The alarmwork would have been in the way of a pendulum and a pendulum conversion usually meant that the alarmwork was discarded.

When the conversion to pendulum took place the alarmwork on this clock was preserved by re-positioning it on the left side of the clock. Such a move is



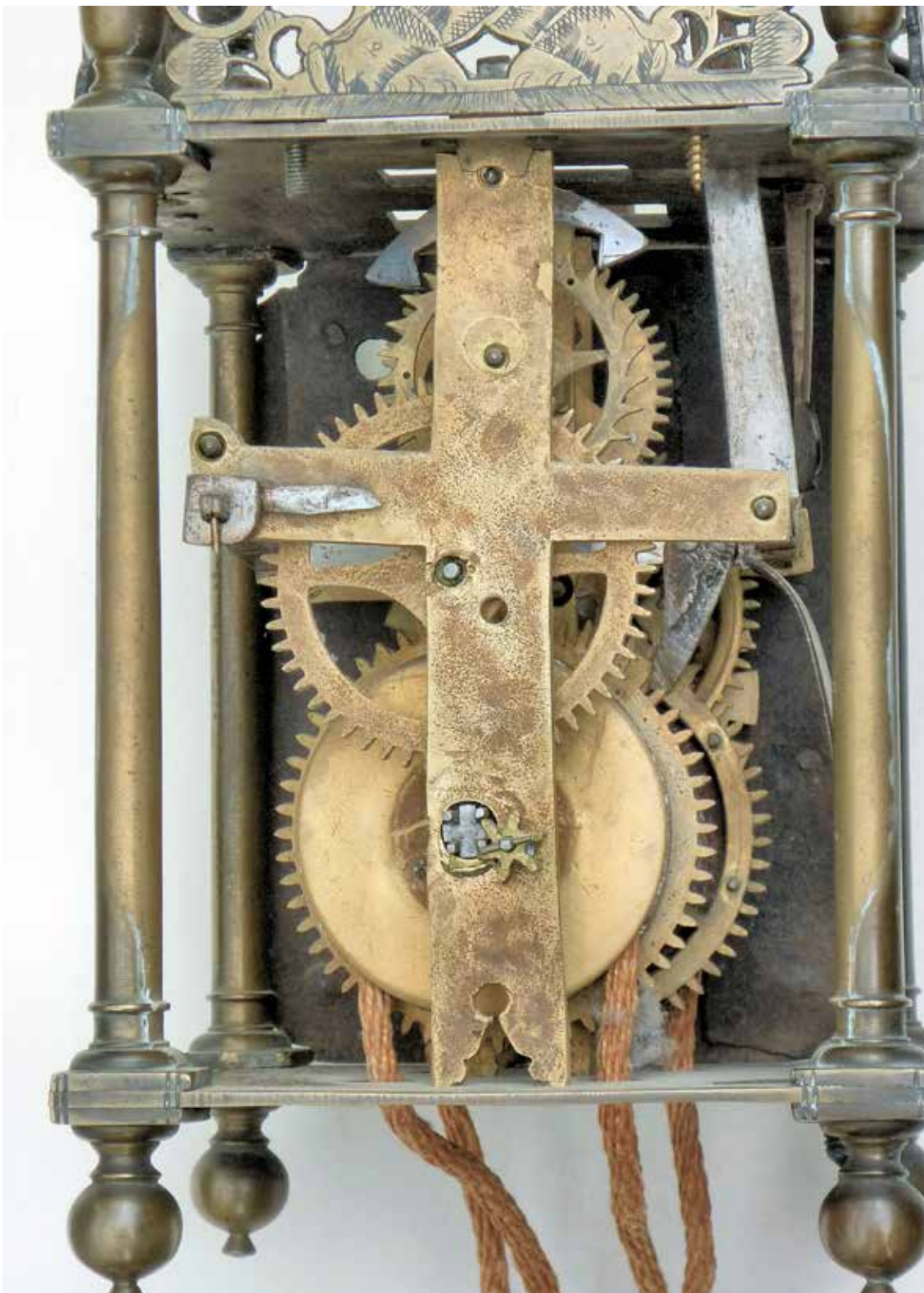
Figure 9. The original iron back plate still carries the spurs. Empty holes show where it once held the original alarmwork and its detent. A small hole by the edge in the centre of the plate is where the detent fitted after the alarm was moved to the left side of the clock.

exceptionally unusual but the evidence of empty holes confirms this, even though the alarmwork was removed altogether at a later date.

There is a brass 'patch' on the top plate there with a tell-tale keyhole-shaped hole. This held the stem of the double-headed alarm hammer. At this time the alarm disc in the dial centre must have been kept to enable the alarm time to be set. At a later stage the alarm disc was riveted in position—four holes show where these rivets held the disc. This must have been done after the alarmwork had finally been disposed of altogether. The alarm disc was often preserved in this way, since its removal left a bare (unengraved) dial centre and spoiled the appearance of the clock.

But then, later still, someone decided to remove the disc itself. Clockmakers were not averse to pinching redundant parts to re-cycle the brass, which was very expensive. I have even seen escape wheels that were cut from redundant alarm discs and still showing remains of the engraving. Instead of leaving a blank centre, someone then had a Tudor Rose beautifully engraved in the dial centre, something that was often done when the alarmwork and disc were removed.

By its style we can tell that the Tudor Rose engraving was done before the end of the seventeenth century. So all these changes (conversion to pendulum, alarm re-positioning, riveting the alarm disc, the later removal of the disc, and the engraving of the Tudor Rose) ●—



took place within 30 or 40 years of the clock's making. The vast majority of balance clocks were 'put to pendulum', which included some, if not all, of these changes. I doubt if more than a dozen or so have been documented that retain their original balance control. Yet very seldom can we pin down the period during which these alterations took place.

This example demonstrates just how rapid was the changeover that lantern clocks underwent with the coming of the pendulum. It reflects too what a valued possession a lantern clock was that it went through such modifications rather than involve the expense of a new pendulum clock. 📌

Figure 10. With the dial removed the construction is more evident. Strange keyhole-shaped cut-outs at the base of each crossbar are probably done just for decorative effect to make the twin projections into the base plate look more like 'legs'. Some Bristol clockmakers did a similar thing, but it was not usually done in London.

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