

LEE, WILKINS, STAFFORD

The first clockmakers in Leicester

by Brian Loomes, UK

Recently I came across a verge lantern clock by John Lee of Loughborough in Leicestershire. The maker was known as working there in the 1720s and a longcase clock was on record by him, but we had no idea of where he came from or whether he was connected with several other clockmakers of this surname in and around Leicester.

The Lee family of clockmakers is well known in Leicester and nearby, perhaps because they have a reputation as being amongst the earliest clockmakers to work in this area. They began by training with the Wilkins family, traditionally thought to be the first clockmakers in that town. But both families were numerous and their exact relationships to each other are not easy to work out. I found bits here and there written in the past about the Lee and Wilkins families, much of it conjectural and sometimes contradictory.

In an attempt to find out who my John Lee was, I began to dig into the other local clockmaking Lees, which led me into the beginnings of the craft in Leicester. This deviation tends to happen with clock research and you are often led into areas you never meant to get involved in. But that is probably a large part of the attraction. Looking up a clockmaker in a reference book can be quick and perhaps satisfying, when we are in a hurry. But what we find there is usually only a part of the story, and there is many a clockmaker not yet 'in the book'.

The earliest Leicester clockmaker of all whose work survives today was completely unknown and undocumented till a couple of years ago, when I came across a lantern clock of the 1650s, made originally with balance control but altered later to long pendulum as most were, signed 'Lawrence Stafford Fecit'. The unusual name combination made it easy to trace his location to Leicester.

He was born about 1625, was twice married before 1666, had eight children and was still living in 1677. I am always amazed that, after more than a century and a half of documentation of such things, 'new' clockmakers still crop up in this way. But they do, and beginners have just as much chance of coming across

toppled from his legendary rank as the first. We know of no link between Wilkins and Stafford, but the fact that they were working in the same town at the same period in the same trade suggest it would have been impossible for them *not* to have known each other. We might guess that John Wilkins trained Lawrence

Stafford. But there is no proof of that, and the work of the two men in the form of lantern clocks, the only way we can compare their work, is as different as chalk and marmalade.

Wilkins is believed to have been born in 1639 and to have been made free in 1660. He was taxed on 15 hearths in 1664. He was married about 1663 to Catherine (Dannett?) and had numerous children—1664 Joan, 1670 Katherine, 1672 John, 1674 Thomas, 1676 Dannett, 1677 John, 1679 Robert, 1680



Figure 1. Lantern clock by Lawrence Stafford dating from the 1650s, the oldest Leicester clock so far discovered and by a previously unrecorded clockmaker. Made with balance control, modified later to long pendulum. Very much a provincial clock in style.

Ann, 1682 Dannett, 1685 James. John Wilkins's eldest son, Thomas, and second son, John, were apprenticed to him and freed in 1698.

Wilkins was classed in local records as a 'slater' and had been apprenticed to Henry Woodland, also a slater. The trade of 'clockmaker' was not introduced into local records this early. In fact Wilkins was a

mechanical genius, an engineer, who undertook major public water supply projects, as well as a builder, plumber, maker of farm machinery, inventor, employer of many workmen—and he also made clocks. He seems to have been living proof of the old saying—'if you want something doing, ask someone who is busy!' It is recorded that he made

them as the most experienced—probably more, in fact, because beginners are more likely to keep a keen eye open whereas the old hands, who think they have seen it all before, just skip past unrecognised names with barely a glance.

So it transpired that John Wilkins was the second clockmaker in Leicester, now



Figure 2 (above). Winged lantern clock with centre swinging verge pendulum and alarmwork made about 1680 by John Wilkins of Leicester. Strong London influence is obvious. Photograph courtesy of Messrs Woolley and Wallis, auctioneers, Salisbury.



Figure 3 (right). Single-handed oak longcase clock by John Wilkins dating from the early eighteenth century. Photograph courtesy of Messrs Gildings auctioneers.

a turret clock for St Martin's, Leicester, in 1668, taking the old one for scrap. He was mayor in 1692. He died in 1721, his trade being continued in the town by his two sons. I know of one longcase clock and two lantern clocks by him but there must be others.

It was John Wilkins who also took as apprentices through no less an agency than the Clockmakers' Company of London the two Lee brothers, John in 1680 and Roger, who was freed in 1691/92. The earliest of the Lee family, whose work we know, appears to be Roger Lee, who was born about 1670. His brother John was born about 1666/67.

The father of Roger and John (II) is

believed to have also been called John (John (I)). Although they are thought to have been clockmakers, no clocks seem to be known by either John Lee the father or John Lee the son. The two Johns may have confined their work to public clocks such as church clocks. So our earliest Lee family clockmaker by whom domestic clocks exist today seems to be Roger. Several lantern and longcase clocks are known signed 'Roger Lee Leicester' and some watches.

Roger described himself as a goldsmith when he signed his will on 2nd November 1720. He was buried at St Martin's Leicester only two weeks later on 18th November 1720. He left four sons and a daughter and two grandchildren by his



Figure 4 (top). A lantern clock of about 1700 by Roger Lee of Leicester, now with anchor escapement. Photograph courtesy of Messrs Bamfords, auctioneers, Derby.



Figure 5 (above). Dial of an eight-day longcase clock of about 1740 by William Lee of Leicester, second son of Roger Lee. Photograph courtesy of Messrs Shouler & Son, auctioneers, Melton Mowbray.

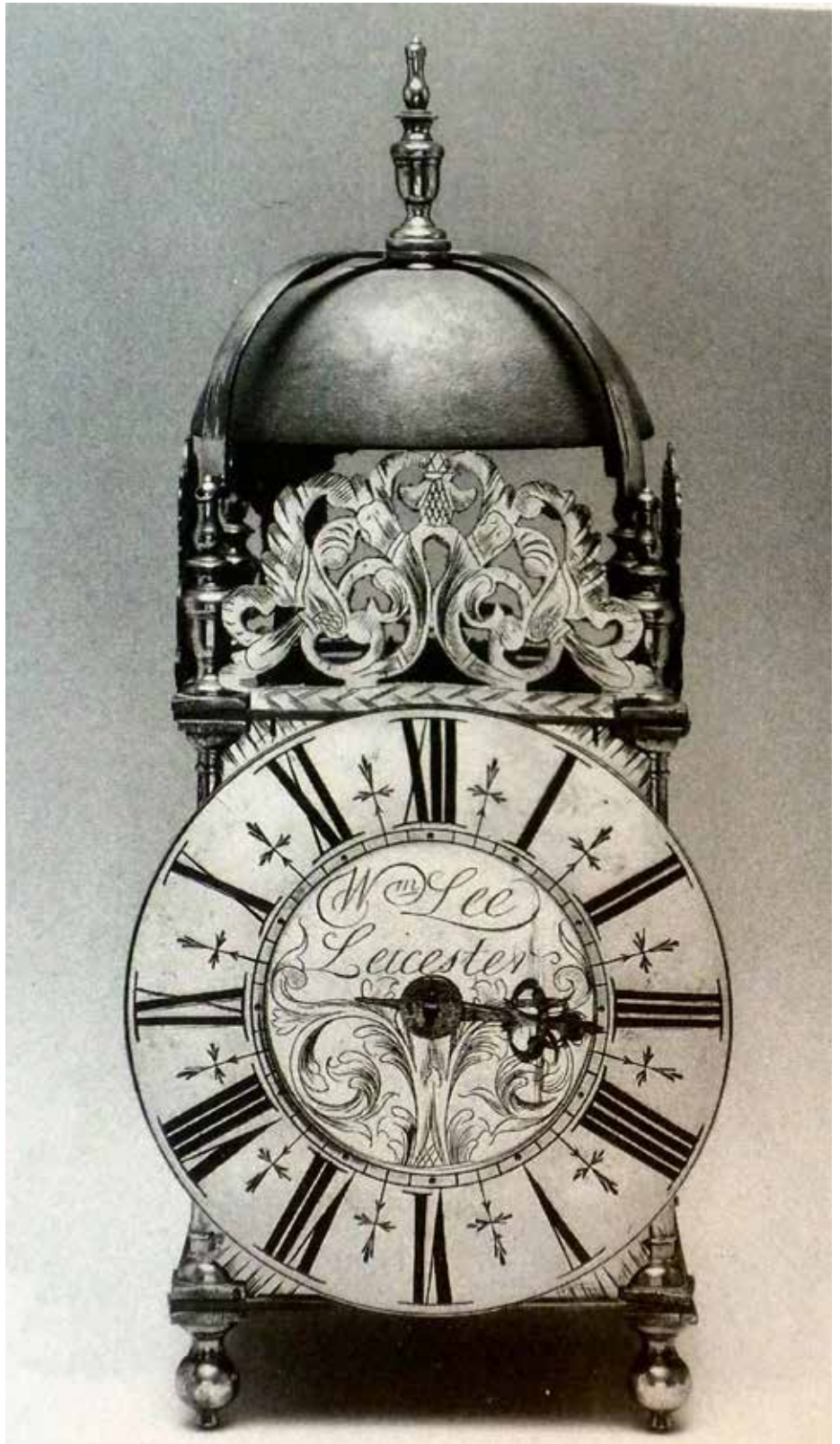


Figure 6. Lantern clock with verge pendulum made about 1730 by William Lee of Leicester, one of three recorded by him so far. Photograph courtesy of Messrs Sothebys, London.

eldest son, yet another John. Roger's children were: John born in 1689, William born 1691, Robert born 1694/96, Thomas born 1706 and Mary born 1701. An earlier son named Thomas, born in 1698, must have died in infancy. It was only when I found Roger's will that I could ascertain that John Lee of Loughborough was his

eldest son.

With most craftsmen, who left sons to succeed them, that business would be continued in the same place by the eldest son. Younger sons would expect to seek their living either in a different trade or a different location. Rarely would there be sufficient trade available in the



Figure 7. Lantern clock with verge pendulum made about 1720 by John Lee of Loughborough, elder son of Roger Lee of Leicester. This is the only lantern clock so far recorded by him.



Figure 8. The dial centre of John Lee's clock is beautifully engraved, but by this date the design has simplified into scrolling fronds rather than the more detailed designs of earlier clocks.

same locality to provide more than one family member with a living—other than when father and son worked together as a team. The tradition of the first son inheriting almost everything in terms of real estate (land) was at one time law, the idea being to prevent splitting up small 'businesses' based on agriculture into units so small as not to be viable. This eventually ceased to be law in England in 1540, but was still common practice even as late as the nineteenth century.

In Roger's case the oldest son, John, moved away, which was unusual. He moved to marry at Loughborough in 1718

to Elizabeth Abbington. Perhaps this was because his father at that time was only about 50 and had no thoughts of retiring, or maybe he just wanted to work independently from his father as he was 29 years old.

Whatever the reason, John Lee set up his clockmaking business at Loughborough, where he and Elizabeth had several children born between 1719 and 1723. They were: 1719 John, (unknown date) William, 1721 Elizabeth, 1722 Roger, 1723 Mary. The fact that I could not trace a baptism for William suggested that maybe he was born

before his parents were married, and was maybe baptised as a bastard in some more distant parish away from nosey neighbours. It is perhaps more likely to be a deficiency in the church registers. But in his will Roger left £30 each to his two grandchildren, 'John and William, sons of my son, John'. Wills were virtually always strict about the seniority of children, largely because of the importance of defining who was the elder in terms of inheritance—primogeniture, as it was known.

John's career was short-lived however as he died there in October 1724, aged



Figure 9. View of the movement of the John Lee lantern clock showing the original verge escapement. Hammer stop end still shaped but in simplified form.

only 35. No doubt it was because he had a working life of only six years that very little work is known by him—just the lantern clock pictured here and a 30-hour longcase clock of about 1720 signed 'Jno. Lee Loughborough'.

It was Roger's second son, William, who carried on the family business in Leicester. William was born in 1691 and was freed from his apprenticeship in 1716.

There is some uncertainty about his death, which was either in 1744 or 1759. However, Roger himself died in November 1720, which left William

running the clock business in Leicester, and several clocks are known by William including a bracket clock repeating the quarters on three bells.

For years we have assumed wrongly that William was Roger's eldest son, but we now know the sequence of Roger's children from his will, which contains an odd remark about his third son, Robert. Roger left his wealth as a more or less even spread amongst his offspring, but with the proviso that if his son, Robert, 'marries without the consent of his brothers, John and William, then his portion was to be limited to one hundred

pounds in all'. Fascinating! What was all that about? Was Robert perhaps paying attention at that time to a young lady who was 'unsuitable'? We will probably never know. But that seems to be the last we hear of Robert, so perhaps he took his £100 and left.

John Lee's life at Loughborough led me to another clockmaker there around the same time named William Jackson. Three lantern clocks have so far been noted by him. But was William Jackson there first, or John Lee? Oh, well, that would mean going off on a whole new research tangent! Better not, for now! 📌