

# GEORGE WILLSON

Common name, unknown maker



by Brian Loomes, UK

A friend popped in recently clutching his latest treasure. He was delighted with his new purchase and wanted me to share his pleasure and see if I could cast any light on the maker, or what it was or where it was made. He already had his own thoughts on all these aspects, but wanted a 'second opinion' and a chance to discuss his newest boys'

toy. And why not? It is a very interesting item.

Briefly it is 10in single-handed 30-hour longcase dial with movement, which has lost its case—as so many have. He was disappointed that I was not quite as enthusiastic as he was. The reason was that we see a lot of caseless clocks, many of them with equally interesting movements. There are many reasons clocks survive and cases don't. One is just sheer wear and tear. Some

*Figure 1. The 10in dial of this single-handed movement is signed 'George Willson' and shows several interesting stylistic features.*

types of cases, such as lacquer ones, can become very shabby with time, sometimes to the point where they were thrown out. Woodworm caused some to disintegrate or led their owners to destroy them. Cases in pine or fruitwood or even walnut were very subject to attack by



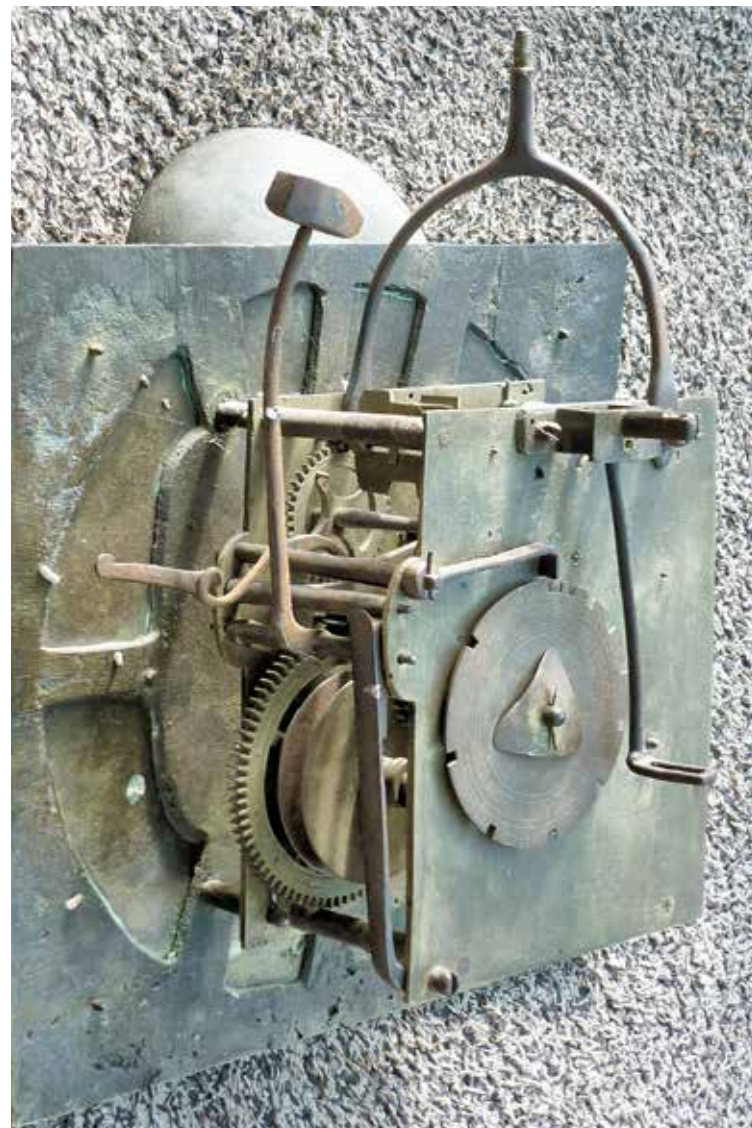
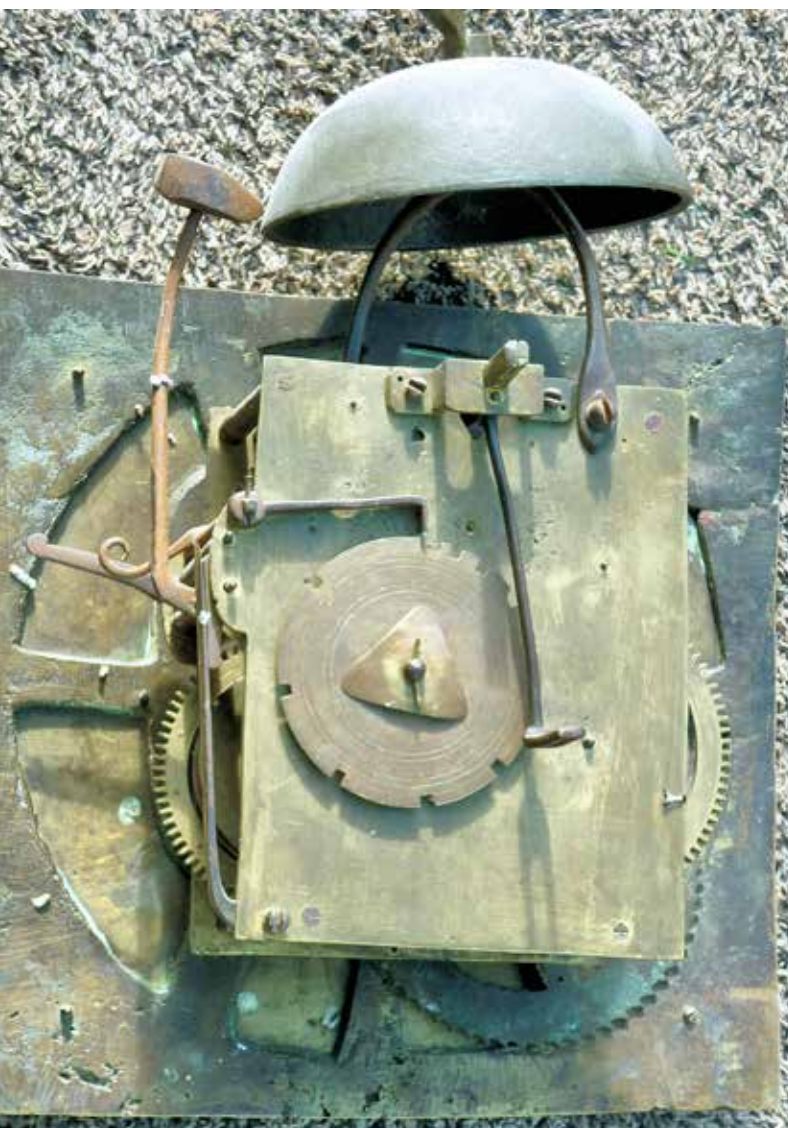


Figure 2. This back view shows the cartwheel dial, the countwheel reset finger trip, the offset 'Westmorland' calendar wheel and part of the two-legged stirrup-shaped bellstand.

Figure 3. This view with the bell removed shows more clearly the stirrup shape of the two-stemmed bellstand. A very sensible idea, perhaps unique to this maker.

furniture beetle. Just last week I spoke with a lady who had a treasured lantern clock of about 1700, that her grandfather rescued from an old farm 50 years ago. At the same time he threw the 300-year-old case on to a bonfire.

I have come across clocks that survived bombing in World War II, but whose cases didn't. We see clocks at auction now and then (without the case) that have survived a house fire. The smell and soot gives this away. On one occasion only about 10 years ago I bought a clock and case at auction that had been put in an air-raid shelter for safety in the 1940s and had been forgotten till rediscovered by the new house owner. Surprisingly it survived very well, including the case, apart from rust, which we could deal with.

So caseless longcase movements

are plentiful and, in today's ridiculously depressed market, sell for very modest prices. This particular one my friend bought for £300. Just about what it costs to fill his car with fuel three times, or to take a family out to a good restaurant for a special treat.

The dial was signed 'George Willson' with no placename. Some 15 clockmakers of this name are recorded in the latest (2006) edition of my book, *WATCHMAKERS & CLOCKMAKERS OF THE WORLD* as follows.

WILSON, George (I). Bridge Street, Appleby (Westmorland) 1804-77. Also silversmith, jeweller and ironmonger. Dated some of his clocks.

WILSON, George (II) b1826 Appleby (Westmorland) son of George Wilson

(I) of Appleby, qv, mar1851 Barnard Castle (Co Durham), working at Penrith (Cumberland) from c1849-1897.

WILSON, George V. London 1828-32. Sometimes Willson.

WILSON, George. a1760 to Robert Clidesdale of Edinburgh, qv.

WILSON, George. Huyton, Prescott (Lancs) 1851.

WILSON, George. Lincoln 1861, Sometimes Willson.

WILSON, George. London (Strand) a1721, CC1730, d1774.

WILSON, George. London 1863.

WILSON, George. London a1681 to Thomas Grimes, qv, CC1696-1720.

WILSON, George. Penrith (Cumberland)





Figure 4. The countwheel trigger close up.

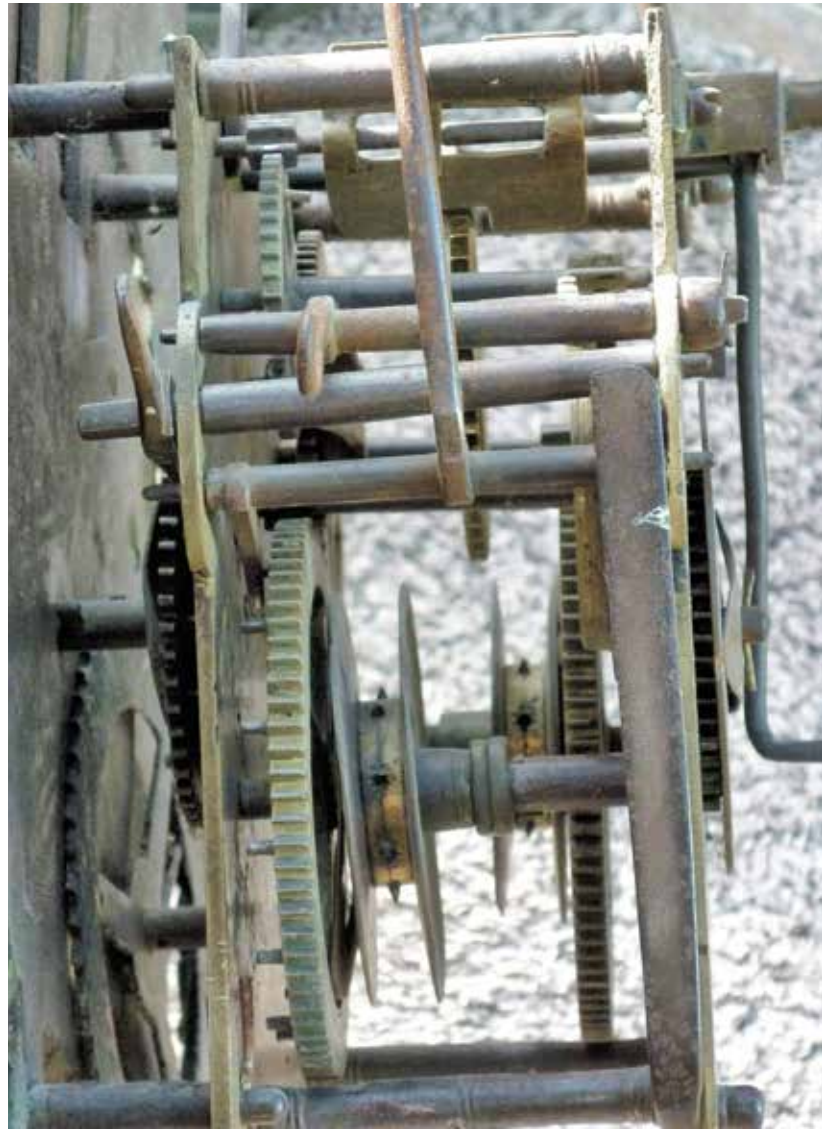


Figure 5. The simple round rod pillars and the offset 'Westmorland' calendar wheel.

1869-79. Also jeweller.

WILSON, George. Peterborough (Northants) 1830-54.

WILSON, George. Prescot (Lancs) 1851.

WILSON, George. Saxelby (Lincs) 1861. Sometimes Willson.

WILSON, George. Sculcoates near Hull (Yorks) 1810.

WILSON, George. Son of John Wilson, qv of ?London, a1843 to (Joseph) Anthony Berrollas of Clerkenwell, London, qv—?London later?

Unfortunately none of these seems likely to be our George. Only the earliest London entry is old enough and this clock shows absolutely no signs of London work. On the contrary the early rustic

nature is a large part of its appeal. So what clues, if any, can we get from a close look at the clock?

The dial is what I call a cartwheel casting. A glance behind the dial shows that it has gaps between spokes. Dials made in London and the southern counties in general were solid-sheet castings. Cartwheel dials were limited to the northern counties and perhaps north-Midlands, the divide falling in undefined territory somewhere around that famous line we love to draw from Bristol to the Wash.

Nobody knows why the cartwheel method was chosen, but it was, and it is a great help for us today in tracing the origin of clocks. Two possible reasons cross my mind. The gaps may have allowed the dial to 'stretch' more easily and without distortion during surface

work such as matting, engraving or hammering. Secondly there would be a considerable saving in the brass used. I can see how both these factors would appeal to a northern mind.

The casting has a few faults, blow-holes and imperfections we would be less inclined to expect from London, again suggesting provincial work. So already we know it is northern provincial and we have not yet even looked at the dial front.

The boys-and-crown spandrels suggest 1720ish. The crosses usually protrude at the corners, but notice how the maker has in this case taken the trouble to file the lower two smaller, probably to avoid them fouling the case hood. Other features on the dial suggest a northern origin, such as the ringing around the calendar box and where two winding holes would sit on an eight-day clock. I

always call this 'cup-and-ring' decorating, and it was probably done with a drill. These 'ringing' markers are used in many regions but this type of cup-and-ring decoration is pretty well restricted to north-west England. In this instance we have four more clusters of three turnings for a bonus, suggesting this area even more.

The half-hour markers tell us nothing about location but other decoration in the form of dots for quarters and a further circle of dots around the dial centre, all done with a drill, again suggests country work. The iron hand appears to be original, carefully cut to the exact length, which we might expect but not all are! In the North a single hand implies a very early period. Not necessarily so elsewhere. Northern clockmakers did not stay long with single-handers. They moved into two-handers as soon as they felt their clientele could understand them.

The central 'starburst' vaguely resembles the alarm disc on a lantern clock (and a very few longcases) and is there along with the other dial centre decoration just to avoid that bland look

The signature is a bit amateurish, which I always like to see.

that a plain centre can give—and does in clocks from some southern areas. Northern clockmakers could not bear a plain dial. As the late Felix Hudson used to say in his inimitable Scots accent, 'they couldnae thoil a poor thing!'

The signature is a bit amateurish, which I always like to see. An expert engraver might scoff at this, but here is the work of a man who could engrave patterns very well but found freehand engraving much more difficult. A

'signature' almost imitates handwriting and even some of the best London engravers struggled with that. In this case a provincial clockmaker (or maybe engraver) was doing his best, and, even though he struggled a bit, it shows the stamp of individual hand craftsmanship.

That is all the dial tells us. Northern, but the North is a large place. The cup-and-ring markings are found in the old counties of Cumberland, Westmorland and parts of Yorkshire, and my guess is this clock originates from one of those areas.

Can we learn anything more from the movement? Well several things and all of them indicative of a man who thought for himself. Lovely touches, and probably unique to him. Look at the amazing bellstand, which has two uprights instead of the usual one, almost like a stirrup. I have never seen that before. Every clockmaker and collector knows what a poor idea a single-stem bellstand was, constantly getting bent out of position or working loose from vibrations, yet they all carried on doing the same thing one generation after another. George Willson did it his way. A simple idea, more time-consuming so more costly but brilliantly effective. It is the same reason we stand on two legs rather than one.

From the back we can also see that the calendar is of the type that has an offset, 12-hour, 'knock-on' drive wheel. I noticed this type many years ago. I don't think it had ever been commented on previously. I gave it the name of a 'Westmorland' calendar as it was popular on 30-hour clocks in that region—Westmorland, as well as Cumberland and North Yorkshire. Strangely this reminds me of a client who told me he farms all three counties—because his land lapped into all three boundaries.

Lots of 30-hour clocks have 12-hourly knock-on calendars, but most are mouth calendars. This one shows through a box, as on many eight-day clocks, and gives the impression from the front that it has a separate (more costly) 24-hour drive wheel usual on eight-day clocks. In fact it is easier and much cheaper to make than the 24-hour wheel version. Full marks for economy, George!

His locking-wheel detent has a curled finger trip piece, there to save you poking your fingers up into oily wheelwork when you need to re-set the strike count. A very simple idea, not rocket science, yet most clocks don't have it. George's does!

Look at his pillars. Just simple round rod with a couple of ring turns for decoration. No special castings here. These were simple and cheap to make and did the job equally well. They remind me of the way Will Snow of Padside, then

in West Yorkshire, sometimes made his. But another feature we sometimes find in Will Snow clocks and sometimes those of other clocksmiths is that they are made of iron, not brass. Why? Because iron was ten times cheaper than brass.

All in all I reckon George Willson showed great individual thought and care in his clock, the combination of whose features is probably unique to him. It still testifies to his workmanship 300 years later. Would you rather own a clock like

I made a quick search and found a dozen of that name around Kendal.

this or fill your car up three times with fuel?

I guessed if I searched parish registers in the region I would find a George Wilson in many of them. But trades are rarely mentioned at that time so the chances are I could not recognise which was the right one. I made a quick search and found about a dozen of that name around the Kendal area, a couple being blacksmiths but mostly without mention of a trade and none I could pin down sufficiently to help. Unless of course one of our readers knows him already. If so, we look forward to hearing. The George Willsons listed at Appleby are far too modern to have made this clock, but if they had same-name metalworking ancestors, I would plump for them.

There is just one problem remaining. I now need to add another entry to my revisions to the George Wilson entries in my book:

'WILSON, George. Place not stated, probably North-west England c1720-c1730.' 📄