

## The Old Clock Makers, Were They Better Craftsmen Than We Are Today ?

To make a longcase clock that was constructed in the style and looked like the antique clocks I had seen in the antique shops and fairs, I would have to acquire the skills and techniques the old clock makers had. So started the long and arduous road of making my longcase clock or as it is fondly known as a grandfather clock from the same name as the popular song, written by Henry Clay Work in 1876.

In the early period of this project, I like many other antique collectors and enthusiasts, thought naively that the "clock makers" meaning the man that made the movement, did all this work. This is true in some isolated cases possibly in rural areas, but most movement makers bought in the dials and cases from men that specialized in that particular trade.

I had this picture in my mind of a far off time long ago where the pace of life was slower and morals and work standards came before material gain and wealth, where craftsmen were craftsmen and worked away methodically in their badly lit cold workshops.

Now I understand this to be totally wrong, tradesmen in the late 17th century and early 18th century had the same problems we have today, they had to make a living, so the same business principles of cutting costs i.e. materials and labour still applied.

This we can see in the construction of the cases, its very rare you find elaborate jointing in longcases clocks at the most you might find a double tenon joint in the cross rails of the trunk front, or a mortise and tenon joint in hood doors. But on the whole cases were jointed with half-lap or even butt joints, backboards were put together using any wide boards they had in the workshop, more often than not it would be pine. Don't get me wrong the clock builders of yesteryear were craftsmen but no more than the craftsmen of today, the difference is tooling, techniques and materials.

Our furniture craftsmen of today are truly skilled, it takes knowledge and understanding to set up and run the likes of a CNC router (computer numeric control) and know the correct tooth angle on a circular saw blade when cutting MDF (medium density fibre board) to get the best cut without damaging the blade or saw. This all became very clear to me when studying for a City and Guilds advanced furniture qualification.

Studying early furniture makers especially Chippendale as we came into the mahogany period of 1735, this man Chippendale was a businessman, an entrepreneur of his time.

He brought furniture to the middle classes, mass-producing and importing mahogany from South America and Cuba. It's said that he instructed Captains of the ships bringing the timber into England, to go through Jamaica as Jamaica was a country in the commonwealth and therefore no tax was due on the timber. This timber was made up in France by some of the best chair makers of the time and then shipped to England and finished in Chippendale's workshops in London.

The one thing Chippendale did do that significantly influenced the style of furniture and therefore the clock cases of the period was to publish a catalogue of the patterns and styles of his work. His new style was an infusion of three styles, the architectural Gothic style, and the much fashionable style of the day Rococo, and the new imported style which was creating much excitement at the time the Chinese Style.

All three came together in one style and in one publication; this meant that for the first time in history furniture makers could offer a modern and fashionable style of uniformity across England and Europe.

Other furniture makers influenced style of the late 1700s, men like Hepplewhite, although much in the style of Chippendale, Sheraton with his inlays and stringing, fluted columns and Corinthian caps (Egyptian style), and the Adam Brothers. All influencing the style of the period and so attributing to the way furniture makers made and finished the clock cases of their time.

I believe Chippendale was a craftsman, but if he was here today I'm sure he would be using overhead routers, chipboard, and be spraying with synthetic finishes. There are some clock patterns in Chippendale's publications if they were ever made I don't know. I've never seen anything like them as they are very elaborate but saying that I bet somebody has had a go.

I mention this because trying to make a clock case in the traditional way using traditional methods and construction gave me my first big problem, this is the same problem furniture makers and clock case makers fight with today. That is the problem with timber stability when using wide boards of hard wood.

Source: <http://www.articlecircle.com>

### About the Author

Barry Share is the proprietor of Riversdale Clocks. <http://riverdaleclocks.com> Were he and his son Matthew have been making bespoke cases for longcase clocks since 1986 and are both holders of advanced furniture qualifications. Barry and Matt are co-authors in the new case making manual

â€œMaking A Case For A Longcase Clockâ€• a must read for any one making a case to house an antique movement and dial.:  
<http://www.casemaking.riversdaleclocks.com>