

A Painted Dilemma

by Mike Berry FBHI

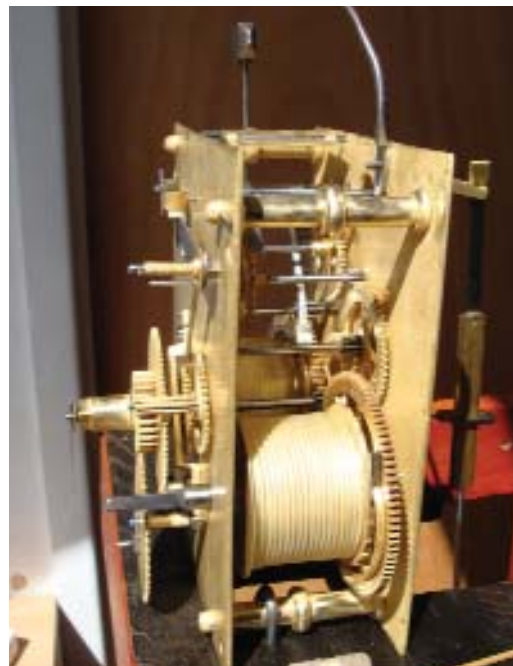


As a restorer you sometimes get a clock into the workshop that represents a dilemma in good conservation practice. This brief story concerns a longcase clock that had stood in the hall of a Victorian house in Manchester for over 50 years in a complete state of slumber, the only life being the spiders that had often made it their home. The couple who owned it had often discussed having it restored, but it was only one of three 18th century Manchester made longcase clocks in their home. The other two were in slightly better condition and with some DIY clock making on the part of Mr Smith, he had managed to keep Peter Clare and Samuel Whalley going for many years. This small painted clock had luckily escaped attention. After the death of Mr Smith, Mrs Smith had decided to have all three clocks repaired and fully restored in his memory. I was commissioned to do this work.

The clock in question has a 12 inch square painted dial and is fitted in a nice small well proportioned oak cottage style case with the usual Northern attributes. However, the dial had been

painted, and over a chapter ring, so it had once been a brass dial clock of an earlier period. As we stood next to the clock Mrs Smith asked me to put it back to its original brass dial format, or as near as it was made. Her husband had often talked of doing this when the funds were available. My first response was to agree with her wishes; the painted dial was in a poor and flaking condition and it all looked very tired indeed. After discussion we both agreed that the clock and its value would greatly benefit from some restoration work.

Back at my workshop, where I had time to view the clock in much better light than the dimly lit hallway, it was apparent that the dial had been painted by somebody who was both skilled and experienced with clock dial painting. The style and the palette of colours used is typical of the 1820s. I made a number of photographs of the clock for my records before starting work and decided to e-mail some of these around to a few friends in the business to get their opinions; all agreed that this clock dial was now something quite rare. It seems likely that a past owner of the clock, back in the 1820s, had asked a Manchester dial painter to update his old brass dial clock to one of these popular white painted dials, including the fitting of matching brass hands. We do know that this was sometimes done, and while I appreciate this clock is not a transitional form of the 1770s, to find a brass dial still in this painted condition in the 21st century is a rare thing. Painting directly onto brass in those days was not easy; we often see brass moon phase dials where the paint is flaking and very loose. This whole dial was in that condition and it would represent a very difficult and expensive job to stabilise it and preserve it. I was also concerned at what damage had been done by the



painter to the dial under this layer of paint in an attempt to key onto the brass work?

After discussion of these issues with Mrs Smith, it was agreed that I should press on with a full dial restoration and to take it back to the mid 18th century and record the work as I went. On close inspection you could just read the original maker's name, James Sandiford, Manchester, just in outline under the layers of paint at the bottom of the chapter ring.

The clock movement is of 8 day duration with an internal count wheel strike, so favoured with the city's makers of that period, the only point of comment is the very thin plates, a sign of good northern carefulness, I suspect. The restoration of the

movement was reasonably straightforward; it required much cleaning of course, several badly damaged pivots needed replacing with some bushing and a few detail repairs.

The dial and engraving were found to be in very fine condition under the paint. Being protected for nearly 200 years, it was all very crisp, and the original holes that had held the missing spandrels and seconds ring had been filled with lead bungs which were easily removed. The old black wax was in poor condition, possibly because of a reaction with the paint, I decided it was best to remove it all and replace it with a fresh black shellac wax that I make myself. I made a new seconds ring to the style of Mr Sandiford's work and a full set of hands in blued steel to replace the brass ones. Mrs Smith produced a set of spandrels of the correct size and period from her late husband's effects and after some silvering and lacquer work all was complete. I was not easy in my mind when it came time to strip off this nearly 200 year old paint, but I am pleased that the work has been recorded here in the Journal as a reference for the future. The owner is very pleased with her clock and it won't be long now before the three Mancunians are all ticking nicely together again.

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