

RESTORATION OF A JAPANNED LONGCASE CLOCK Circa 1705

By Eva-Louise and Noel Pepperall

Last spring presented an interesting challenge when we were asked to restore this clock. Its maker was David Wyche of London who was a freeman of The Worshipful Company of Clockmakers from 1694 to 1717.

The case had been badly neglected in recent years, so much so that the trunk had been sawn off below the door and was free standing on a travesty of a base. The original hood was missing and had been replaced by a crude copy of the appropriate style painted chocolate brown. (See the photographs below).



Independent expert advice confirmed that the movement was original to what remained of the case, which was London made of good quality.

Members will need little description of hood and base construction. The first consideration was to search our stock of breakers and neighbouring scrap yards for early oak to match the original. The back was extended by V splicing to give depth to the base. Suitable proportions and contours of period mouldings were taken from reference books.

On completion of the base and hood all new surfaces were overlaid with gesso in the traditional manner. The restoration of the original surfaces then began with the removal of a thick layer of discoloured varnish. This was a crucial phase in preserving the existing decoration, and gentle abrasion rather than the use of solvents was the method chosen.

Initial cleaning was achieved by using fine wire wool backed by a pad, working in small circles with a little white spirit as lubricant. Following this, fine wet and dry paper, again with white spirit, was used for final removal.



The right side had suffered badly in the past from damp (shown left), but the removal of varnish revealed that the decoration on the left side and door remained largely intact. The sides and base coats on the front and door had a decorative interpretation of tortoiseshell in lamp black and vermilion. (Photograph 3). Figures and designs were well composed and had been expertly executed in gold leaf.

The next stage was to recreate the tortoiseshell foundation over all new and damaged surfaces, using appropriate pigments in home prepared seed lac applied in some 8 to 10 layers. This was followed by two ageing coats tinted with dragon blood. Damaged areas of the decoration were repaired with gold leaf. Elements of the original design were used to decorate the hood and base with the exception of the Chinese figure on the latter. Whiting and pigments in PVA was used for raised features. After several coats of shellac, the final finish was achieved with micro-crystalline wax. (Ref: Photograph 4)

Some readers may reasonably be wondering whether or not we have exceeded the acceptable limits of restoration. Often this limit is held to be around one third of the original object whereas our work must have amounted to nearer a half. In this case we had no qualms as the clock had been in the owner's family since the 1820s (as a note on the door attested) and was to remain so. We added our own record of restoration to the door.

However what ought our response to have been had a dealer asked us to carry out the restoration? Choices would seem to be:

- 1 Do as we did knowing that, however straightforward the dealer, further down the chain the value might be enhanced by failure to disclose the extent of restoration.
- 1 Agree to work up to a set limit – hardly a practical proposition.
- 1 Reject the commission, in which case the dealer might decide to employ someone else or discard an historic case of quality and match the movement to another.

This type of ethical dilemma is presumably one reason why our code of ethics does not attempt to be over prescriptive.



