

THOMAS HAMPSON 'OF WREXHAM' - HIS CHESTER PHASE

Steve and Darlah Thomas*

Thomas Hampson (1690s?–1755) is known as a prolific clockmaker based in Wrexham, North Wales during the second quarter of the eighteenth century. Before that, he worked for an unknown number of years during the 1720s in nearby Chester across the English border. This Chester phase has escaped the focus of horologists, as few examples of his work during this brief period survive.

Since 2000, three longcase clocks from his Chester phase have come to light. One of these was discovered only very recently and has an interesting provenance. It is a fine example of provincial clockmaking, but possesses features more usually seen on London clocks.

THOMAS HAMPSON – HIS HOROLOGICAL RECORD

Thomas Hampson is known as one of Wales' most prolific clockmakers, who lived and worked in the Denbighshire market town of Wrexham from at least 1728 until his death in 1755. He is of special interest to horologists because he numbered most, though not all of his clocks, using a sequence which is not fully understood. He is respected as one of the very few Welsh clockmakers to have a lantern clock to his name.¹

He was included in the books on Welsh makers by Peate² and Linnard³ and in an article by the latter,⁴ and is also listed in Loomes' *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World*.⁵ Details of his (only) apprentice can be found

in Moore's book on apprentice records.⁶ His working life is also covered briefly in an article on Wrexham's clockmakers.⁷ The purpose of the present article is to shed some light on an earlier phase of Thomas Hampson's life as a clockmaker, which he spent in Chester. His Chester phase is unrecorded in books on horology, including Keith Appleby's *Clockmakers of Cheshire* which listed all makers known at the time of writing, who worked in the city and county.⁸

THOMAS HAMPSON'S CHESTER PHASE

It is not known when or where Thomas Hampson was born, although Linnard suggests a date during the 1690s.⁹ What is known is that he married Mary Mercer at St Mary's

**Steve and Darlah Thomas have lived in Chester for almost forty years. They are amateur horologists who are currently researching the Gloverstone Clockmakers of Chester. Please send any comments, information or queries to: darlah@talktalk.net*

1. A winged lantern clock signed 'Hampson Wrexham' dated to about 1740 is in St Fagans: National History Museum, Cardiff. Accession number 89.117. It was thought that this was the only lantern clock signed by a Welsh clockmaker, however a second is known to the authors, made by another of Wrexham's clockmakers.
2. Iorwerth Peate, *Clock and Watch Makers in Wales* (National Museum of Wales 1960 edition).
3. William Linnard, *Wales: Clocks and Clockmakers* (Mayfield Books 2003), pp. 120-121, 170.
4. William Linnard, 'Richard Joynson and Thomas Hampson of Wrexham, Clockmakers', *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions* Vol. 57 (2009), 56-63.
5. Brian Loomes, *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World* (NAG Press 2006), p. 342. Loomes lists Thomas Hampson working on St Giles Church clock, Wrexham, in 1718 and at High Street from 1728. He also lists a HAMPSON --- Chester mid-late 18c? Page 342. This may refer to a clock he had seen, signed 'Hampson Chester', but at the date quoted, Thomas Hampson was long established in Wrexham.
6. Dennis Moore, *British Clockmakers and Watchmakers Apprentice Records 1710–1810* (Mayfield Books 2003), p. 149.
7. Beryl M Jones, 'The clockmakers and watchmakers of Wrexham 1650-1900', *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions* Vol. 56 (2008), 101-120.
8. Keith Appleby, *Clockmakers of Cheshire* (published by Farmhouse Antiques 1999). Two of Thomas Hampson's sons (Joseph and Robert) are included in the book, but not Thomas, their father.
9. Linnard, 'Richard Joynson and Thomas Hampson of Wrexham, Clockmakers', 58.

Church in Chester, by licence, on 7 February 1720. The parish register records his residence as Gloverstone, Chester and his occupation as 'watchmaker'. His wife was from the adjacent parish of Holy Trinity, Chester. It has not been established from whom Thomas Hampson learned his craft, nor where he was located at the time. His apprenticeship indenture has not survived in the Chester records,¹⁰ Moore does not list it in his book of apprentice records¹¹ and he was not listed on the Freeman Rolls of Chester. It was essential for a clockmaker to be a freeman if he wished to trade in the city or if he desired to join the guild of Goldsmiths and Watchmakers. However, Gloverstone, despite being within the Saxon city walls, was outside the jurisdiction of the city. Workers could legally trade there without being freemen. Many clockmakers chose to live and work there, whether or not they were freemen.

A son, Thomas, was baptised at St Marys on 9 July 1721. On this occasion, the family was again recorded in Gloverstone and the father's occupation as 'clockmaker'. It is not known how long Thomas Hampson had been in Chester prior to his marriage. It could be that he was apprenticed to a Gloverstone clockmaker. If so, this would have been an informal arrangement as the usual apprenticeship indentures were not applicable there and records were not required to be kept. Alternatively, Thomas Hampson could have been apprenticed elsewhere and the records subsequently lost. He could then have arrived in Gloverstone either as a journeyman or as a fully fledged craftsman ready to commence business in his own right. We know he worked there independently for some time as he signed clocks of this phase: '*Thomas Hampson, Chester*' or '*Hampson Chester*'.

Linnard estimated that as many as 1600 clocks were made in the Hampson workshop during his thirty-five year working life, but of



Fig. 1. The 12¾ inch dial is finely matted, has ringed winding holes and well balanced engraving around the date aperture. It is bordered with leaf motifs rather than the more usual wheatear engraving. The chapter ring is beautifully engraved with ebullient half hour markers and only two starburst half quarters, (owing to the length of the signature).

these, the vast majority have not survived.¹² Clocks made during the Wrexham phase do however appear regularly in auctioneers' catalogues. Those made in Chester, during a period of maybe between five and ten years, are so rare as to have remained unnoticed by horological researchers. Only three longcases are currently known. One was illustrated in Miller's Antiques Price Guide of 2001.¹³ It was described as an oak and mahogany crossbanded eight day longcase with an eleven inch square dial, signed '*Hampson Chester*'. Another was sold at Sotheby's in March 2003.¹⁴ This one was in an oak case with a starburst on the trunk door and had a 12.5 inch square dial with an eight day movement and was rack striking. The third longcase has only recently come to light, see Figs 1-4.

10. The most highly skilled master in Chester at the time was John Wrench(1). However, he was a freeman, an official in the Goldsmiths' and Watchmakers' Company and a councilman, so all of his apprentices were correctly indentured and recorded and he had moved from Gloverstone to a city centre address by 1710. His son William Wrench, who had learned the trade from his father, returned from London after three years' additional training there, around 1716-17, but his apprentices were also well recorded.

11. Moore, *British Clockmakers and Watchmakers Apprentice Records 1710-1800*.

12. Linnard, 'Richard Joyson and Thomas Hampson of Wrexham, Clockmakers', 62.

13. *Miller's Antiques Price Guide 2001* Vol XXII (Octopus Publishing, 2000), p. 388.

14. Sotheby's London, 19 March 2003, lot 239..



Fig. 2 (left). The 'Coy Man' clock. Oak longcase clock by Thomas Hampson, circa 1720. The short oak case (79 inches) is not thought to be original as the 12 inch mask struggles to display the 12¾ inch dial. In other respects, the case is contemporary.



Fig. 3. The signature on the chapter ring reads: 'Coy Man of the Leach Tho Hampson fecit'.

THE 'COY MAN' CLOCK

This third clock is signed '*Tho Hampson fecit*'. There is no obvious place of manufacture, but a clue to this is on the chapter ring, preceding the signature: '*Coy Man of the Leach*' (Fig. 3). The early eighteenth-century registers of St Mary's church recorded the residence of parishioners, as Gloverstone, Handbridge, Upton, etc. Occasionally the township 'Marlston cum Leach' was mentioned. The name for this part of St Mary's parish, to the south west of the city, adjacent to the Welsh border, has survived almost intact as Marlston cum Lache. The land there belonged to the Benedictine Nunnery of St Mary until the dissolution when it passed to the Brereton family of Handforth, Cheshire. By the 1620s, it was in the hands of Sir William Brereton (1604-1661) and he constructed what is thought to be the first duck decoy in the country at Lache, Chester in 1634. Its purpose was to attract wildfowl down onto a lake using tame ducks, who led their 'friends' into pipes leading to nets where the 'coy man' then collected the wildfowl. William Brereton wrote about this coy and others he saw on his travels in a journal.¹⁵

After William Brereton's death, the land passed to the Mainwaring family of Peover, Cheshire. At the time the clock bearing its

15. Sir William Brereton, *Travels in Holland, the United Provinces, England, Scotland and Ireland, 1634 and 1635* (ed. Edward Hawkins, Chetham Society, 1844), various pages. A digitized version is available on-line through Google books. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has several references to the word 'coy' taken from Brereton's *Travels*.



Fig. 4. Looking toward the Wrexham–Chester railway line which is obscured by the area of pale, tall reeds. Only half of the decoy has been visible from this direction since the construction of the line. The low lying area extends further to the left and right of this shot and the land slopes away gently from the camera. The outline of the decoy is visible from the air. We visited the site during a prolonged dry spell of weather; this land frequently floods after heavy rainfall.

unusual location description was made, the decoy was owned by James Mainwaring. A decoy could be a significant business,¹⁶ and perhaps he commissioned Thomas Hampson to make the clock for the coy man's house?

An inspection of the decoy was recorded in 1910, quoting a local resident who remembered the decoy before the coming of the railway. The pond there 'was deep and the margin marshy. It was surrounded by large trees, and the sodden trunks of these still lie in the ditches which surround the site'.¹⁷ The Dodleston History Society inspected the decoy in 1998 and was able to find its outline, still part of Decoy Farm, Lache Lane, Chester.¹⁸ We visited the farm in 2011 (Fig 4).

The clock was made around 1720 and bears features more often associated with London clocks of the period, particularly its rack striking and strike/silent pump action (Figs 5-7). Additionally, the movement plates are connected by pillars screwed into the backplate – a very unusual feature (Fig. 8). Joseph Smith, son of Gabriel Smith (of Barthomley and Nantwich), both of whom are noted for screwing their pillars, did not arrive in Chester until 1725. Thus, he is unlikely to have influenced Hampson in this regard. Further work is required to find Hampson's possible connections to Gabriel Smith, or to others, maybe London makers, who screwed and or bolted their pillars to the backplate.¹⁹

16. Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey, Bart., *The Book of Duck Decoys. Their Construction, Management and History* (1886; available on-line: www.decoymans.co.uk) shows that duck decoys could return a good profit. For example, the income from a decoy in Essex between 1714-1726 averaged £102 per annum (p. 83), which is around £10,000 in current value.

17. T.A. Coward, *The Vertebrate Fauna of Cheshire and Liverpool Bay* (London: Whiteby & Co, 1910), p. 325. This book has also been digitized as an eBook: <http://www.archive.org/details/vertebratefauna01cowa>.

18. Dr Derek Nuttall, 'Cheshire Duck Decoys', *Cheshire History* Vol. 38 (1998-9), 35-39.

19. Although the hood resembles those made in Chester around 1720, the case is not thought to be original.

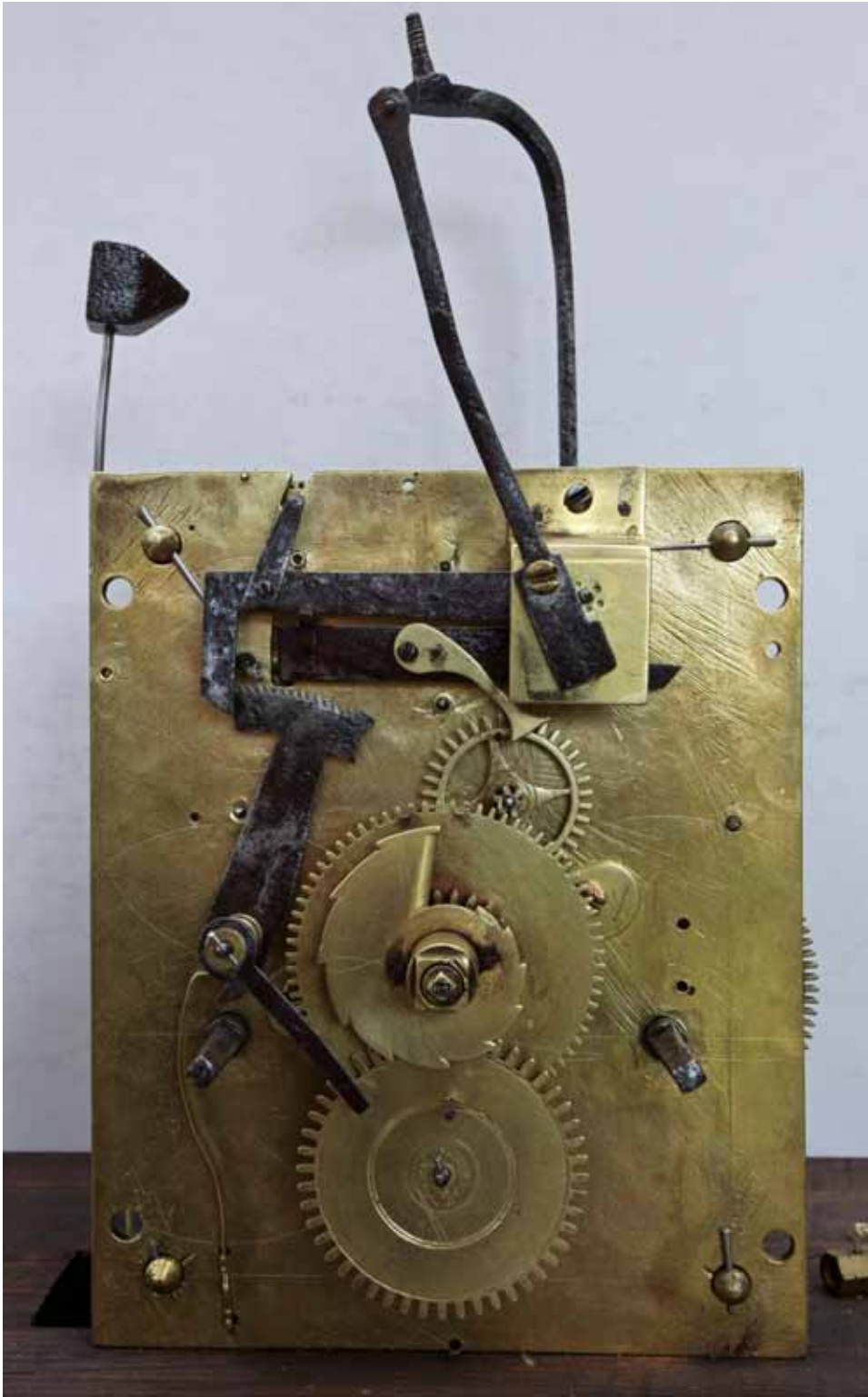


Fig. 5. Detail of the front of the movement showing the motion work, pump action strike/silent and the early style rack. Setting out detail is clearly visible.



Fig. 6. The movement from the strike side showing the strike/silent lever reaching up to the top of the dial.

Unlike the majority of his clocks made whilst he was in Wrexham, this clock was not numbered by Thomas Hampson. It is not known whether Chester-made longcase clocks like the one illustrated in the Miller's Guide, or the one auctioned at Sotheby's, were numbered. In neither case was numbering mentioned in the items' descriptions. Linnard has listed the numbers which have been traced; the lowest, and presumably the earliest, is number nine; it was made in Wrexham.²⁰ If the Chester-made clocks were included in the numbering system



Fig. 7. The movement from the going side showing the cartwheel style of dial.

(although numbers may not be marked on the clocks), then a maximum of eight could have been made in Chester. A survival rate of three out of eight is much higher than for the Wrexham-made clocks. This suggests to us that the Chester phase clocks were probably not included in the numbering system.

WHEN DID THE CHESTER PHASE END?

Some earlier writers have linked Thomas Hampson with Wrexham from 1718 or 1720.²¹ However, after very thorough searches it has been found that this was not the case. Beryl M Jones wrote that Hampson worked on the

20. Linnard, Richard Joynson and Thomas Hampson of Wrexham, *Clockmakers*, p.62 The numbers of thirty clocks are listed, the highest number being 1567.

21. Linnard, 'Richard Joynson and Thomas Hampson of Wrexham, *Clockmakers*', 59, gives a location of 'the Sign of the Clock' from 1718. Jones, *The clockmakers and watchmakers of Wrexham 1650-1900*, p. 115, states that Hampson received money for working on the parish church clock in 1720. Peate, *Clock and Watch Makers in Wales*, only mentions 1728 as Hampson's start date in Wrexham.



Fig. 8. The four finely fluted pillars with ringed knobs are screwed into the backplate – the pillar extensions on view from the back, are also ringed.

clock in St Giles Church, Wrexham in 1720. The churchwardens' account book indicates that this clock was in fact wound and maintained by William Joyce from at least 1717.²² Joyce was paid for work on the clock in 1717 and again for cleaning the clock and chimes and winding the clock in 1718 (£2 8s 0d). In 1721 Joyce was made a church warden and carefully wrote in the accounts that he was paid his 'salary for looking after the clock and chimes £2 1s 0d'. He subsequently left Wrexham for his birthplace: Cockshutt, Shropshire.²³ His place as clock winder and repairer was then taken on by Humphrey Maysmore, who had relocated to Town Hill, Wrexham from London during 1717.²⁴ He held the post until he handed over to Thomas Hampson in 1728. In that year Maysmore was paid a small salary (£0 12s 0d) for his work on the clock, but Thomas Hampson received a larger sum (£2 2s 0d). In the account book the warden recorded that

Thomas Hampson had taken over the house of the late Widow Meeson in the High Street.²⁵

The first child of Thomas and Mary Hampson, who was baptised at St Mary's Chester, was born in 1721. A few years went by before the next child was born. This was Robert, born 1 April 1725 and baptised three days later at St Giles, Wrexham.²⁶ The section where the parish clerk usually recorded the family's abode was left blank on this occasion; this could have been an error or could indicate that the family was not yet resident in the town. Thus, Thomas Hampson may have worked on in Chester until at least 1725 and we believe, possibly until he took on the lease on the property in High Street, Wrexham, in 1728.

By the time the third son, Joseph, was baptised in St Giles Church in September 1729, the family residence was recorded as 'Wrexham Regis'.²⁷ The old town history states that Thomas Hampson occupied one of a terrace

22. Denbighshire Archives Service St Giles Church Wardens' Accounts ref PD/101/1/136 1714-1722.

23. Douglas J Elliott, *Shropshire Clock and Watchmakers* (Phillimore, 1979) p. 87. William Joyce took over the Wrexham business of his master John William Joyce who died in 1717.

24. The Maysmore family was originally from Maesmore Hall, Maerdy, Denbighshire, some fifteen miles from Wrexham. Humphrey Maysmore(1), born around 1663 at Maesmore Hall, relocated to London where he trained to be a clockmaker. His two sons, Humphrey(2) and William both also became clockmakers. At some time after Humphrey(1) died in 1707, the brothers relocated to Wrexham. There is a stunning longcase by Humphrey Maysmore(2) in Wrexham Museum. Both Maysmore brothers left Wrexham before the parish rate was collected in 1732, when the clerk recorded the dwelling as 'Humphrey Maysmore's late house.' They returned to their family's roots near to Maesmoor Hall, becoming farmers at Bottegir.

25. Denbighshire Archives Service St Giles Church Wardens' Accounts ref PD/101/1/137 1724-1733.

26. Loomes, *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World*, p.342. Loomes lists a son John born 1721, but son Thomas was born in Chester in July 1721 and baptised there soon afterwards so the date could be an error. No baptism of a John Hampson has been found in either Chester or Wrexham.

27. Wrexham Regis was a township within the ancient parish of Wrexham. Its name and boundaries date back to the early thirteenth century.

of three half-timbered houses in High Street which formerly stood on the site of the present Butchers' Market: 'The third of the houses was occupied between 1728 and 1748 by Mr Thomas Hampson, clockmaker, and known as 'The Clock'.²⁸ He worked in Charles Street from 1748 until his death in April 1755.²⁹

HAMPSON'S LEGACY

Thomas Hampson's record as a clockmaker has been played down by horological researchers, who, though interested (and puzzled) by his numbering system, regarded his output of clocks as cheaper pieces for the lower end of the market.

All Hampson's other clocks [*apart from his lantern clock*] are quite conventional in most respects. He was not particularly innovative, and as far as we know he did not produce any clocks of really outstanding quality.³⁰

Of his clocks which are recorded, it is true that the majority are humble thirty hour clocks or 'snobs',³¹ built for an unsophisticated market. This could be the result of a shrewd business plan. Selling a greater number of cheaper clocks, which were less expensive to construct, could have earned bigger profits than selling just a few, more expensive clocks. The 'Coy Man' clock and other eight days clocks now

known, demonstrate that Hampson was a clockmaker of some considerable skill and innovation, contrary to the commonly held view. Furthermore, he was selected at a time when there was competition from at least four other highly skilled clockmakers in Chester: John Wrench(1), William Wrench, John Melling and Robert Cawley(1).

Thomas Hampson has left a considerable legacy of clocks made during the longer, Wrexham phase of his career. Whilst there, he also trained his four sons as clockmakers³² and registered an apprentice: William Prytherch of nearby Ruabon, on 29 September 1729, for a seven year period, for the sum of twelve guineas.³³ Of the sons, Robert, whose clocks feature regularly in auctioneers' catalogues, was the most prolific.

It is hoped that future discoveries of clocks made by Thomas Hampson whilst in Chester will increase our knowledge of his early career.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful for the help of Stephen Clarke, who has offered his advice and encouragement throughout this project and kindly proof read the script. The staff at Cheshire Archives, Wrexham Archives and Denbighshire Archives Services were all most helpful, and we would also like to thank Penny Samuel and Paul Kembery.

28. Alfred Neobard Palmer, *History of the Town of Wrexham* (Wrexham, 1893).

29. Thomas Hampson was buried at St Giles, Wrexham, on 12 April 1755.

30. Linnard, 'Richard Joynson and Thomas Hampson of Wrexham, Clockmakers', 60.

31. This was the local name for thirty hour clocks with dummy winding holes.

32. John Hampson born 1721 (Loomes' date; we have found no trace of this.) Based in Wrexham. Numbered some of his clocks. / Joseph Hampson born 1729. Moved to Warrington. / Robert Hampson born 1731. Worked in Warrington 1758 to c. 1790; Wigan from at least 1791, then moved to Manchester. / Thomas Hampson. Listed by Loomes as possibly a son of Thomas Hampson. If this was the Thomas born in Chester in 1721, then Loomes' suggestion that a Thomas Hampson working in Wrexham 1778–80 fits well. However the suggestion that he may also be the Thomas Hampson who worked in Liverpool 1780 to 1803 means that he would have made the career move at age sixty and continued until he was about eighty years of age. Not impossible, but unlikely. More likely the latter was a third generation member of the family. All details of the sons of Thomas Hampson are taken from Loomes, *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World*, p. 342.

33. Moore, *British Clockmakers and Watchmakers Apprentice Records 1710–1810*, p. 149.