

# WILLIAM CASLON'S FOUNDRY CLOCK



by Clive N Ponsford

**A**CT of Parliament clocks, as they were often called, are nowadays generally described as mural or tavern timepieces. One signed 'Orpheus Sumart ClerkenWell' (c. 1740) was superbly illustrated in colour and in great detail in *Antiquarian Horology* (September 2007, pp 376-9). An historic, galleried London inn has a clock of this type, and others have been noted from time to time in Nonconformist churches and meeting rooms; in 18th century halls, hospitals and infirmaries; and in other public buildings, although by no means common.

Early examples include a fine clock by Cuthbert Lee, of London, who was apprenticed in 1668 and can be traced as a working clockmaker to about 1720, and another by the great George Graham (died 1751), Thomas Tompion's

successor, the latter clock numbered 575. 'Tavern clock' is a relatively modern description for this type of timekeeper, known originally perhaps as a 'large dial', as indicated by the following extract from an early Exeter newspaper, *Brice's Weekly Journal* dated 1 April 1726:

On Saturday the 26th of March last the Meeting House in Taunton was broke open, and a large Dyal was stolen from thence, made by Collyer, in Leaden hall-street. If any person can tell who did the Fact, so that they or he be brought to Justice, shall have Three Guineas Reward.

The reward offer of three guineas is substantial and indicates that it was a costly clock.

## WILLIAM CASLON

An 18th century owner of a large dial clock was the eminent London typesetter William Caslon of 'Caslon Old Face' fame, whose business survived from the 18th century until 1937, when it was acquired by Stephenson, Blake & Co. Ltd. His premises were in Chiswell Street and his portrait by Francis Kyte, showing a substantial, bewigged figure holding a sheaf of specimen type sheets, formerly hung there.

Caslon (Fig. 1) was born at Cradley, Worcestershire in the year 1692, the son of a shoemaker, and, on going up to London as a young man, became a typesetter almost by accident. Having served an apprenticeship with a loriner (metalworker), he became an engraver of ornamental gunlocks and barrels and in the course of his work found additional employment in silver-chasing and providing tools and punches for bookbinders, presumably to place the lettering on the spines and front covers, and he thus came into contact with printers. William Bowyer, who printed Parliamentary reports before Hansard, and also numerous learned and literary works, induced Caslon to set up a foundry and his type, Caslon, was an

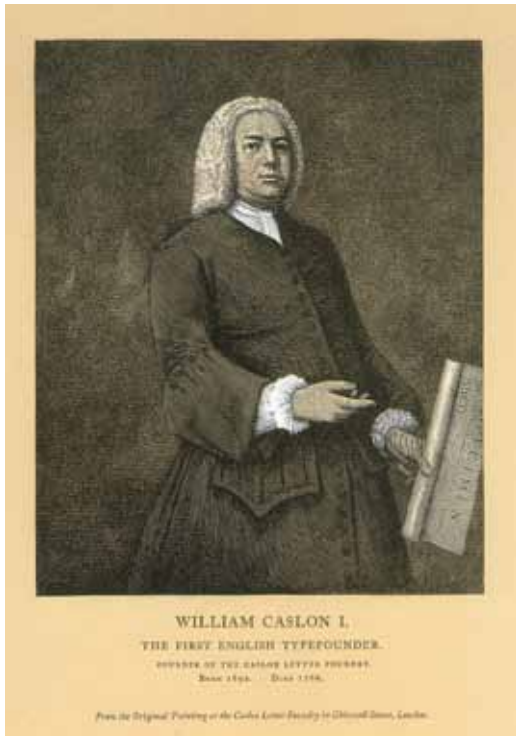


Fig 1. William Caslon (1692-1766) holds a scroll of type specimen sheets in this printed portrait – 'from the original painting at the Caslon Letter Foundry'.

immediate success. William Caslon died in January 1766 and was buried in St Luke's Churchyard, Old Street, London, his name and those of other members of his family being recorded there on a monument.

### CLOCK DEPICTED IN 1750 ENGRAVING

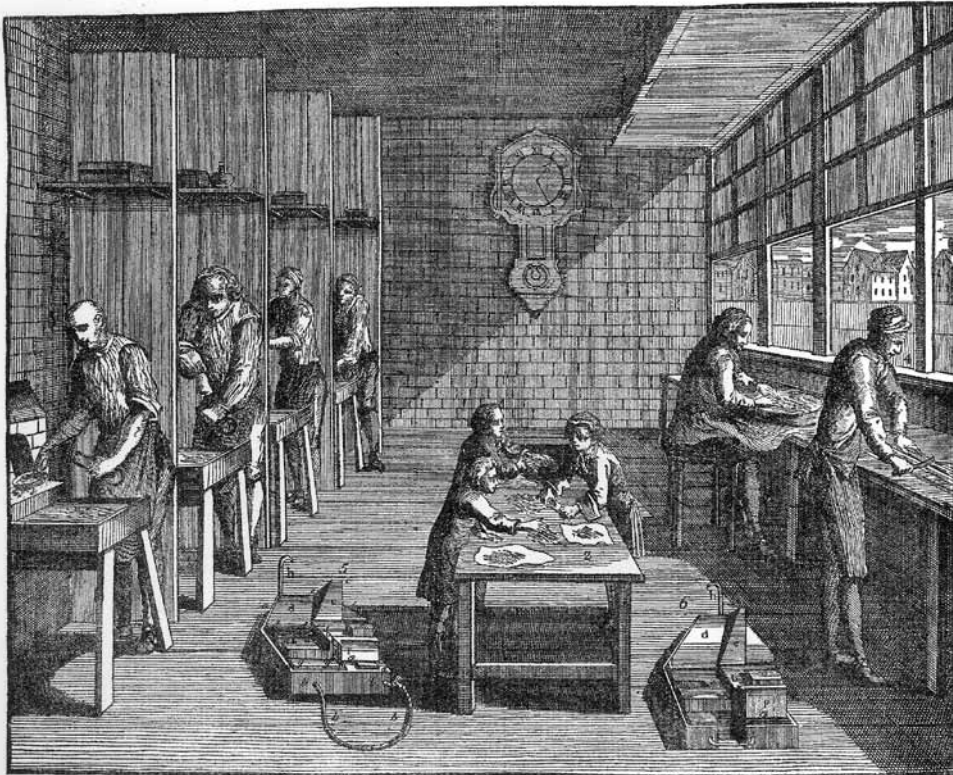
An account of Caslon's life, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (available on-line), states that the *Universal Magazine* for June 1750 contains a folding-plate headed 'A True and Exact representation of the Art of Cutting and Preparing Letters for Printing', which according to Caslon's 18th century biographer John Nichols, represents the interior of his foundry and some of his workmen.

The folding-plate (engraving) mentioned

above was reprinted around the year 1924 on superior hand-made paper and was issued as part of a lavish publication, illustrating various specimen typefaces, and entitled *Caslon Old Face*, the firm at this period trading as H W Caslon & Co Ltd, 82 & 83 Chiswell Street, London EC1. (Fig. 4).

The engraved print (Fig. 2) depicts a neat, uncluttered workshop and is of considerable interest to the horologist as it includes, in pride of place on the far, unplastered wall a large 'Act of Parliament' clock.

It is daytime and everyone is hard at work, the position of the hour and minute hands on the clock indicating that it is one twenty-five in the afternoon. The clock is almost certainly weight driven; and a pendulum bob can be glimpsed through a lenticle near the bulbous base, a sign of early 18th century manufacture rather than later.



Interior of the Caslon Letter-Foundry, 1750.  
[The seated figure is that of Joseph Jackson, 1733-1792.]

Fig. 2. Print first published in 1750, showing the large dial clock in the Caslon Letter Foundry in Chiswell Street, London. Prominently placed on the far wall, it would have been a reliable and accurate timekeeper and very useful, as few if any of the individual workers would have had a watch.

The clock is depicted in outline and it is not possible to tell from the print whether it has the usual black (or perhaps blue) lacquer case, with gilt Chinoiserie decorations and enrichments

Four casters are seen at work along with three children, one of whom may be a girl, and there are two figures whose work requires that they take advantage of the long window to gain maximum light. Similar windows were installed in weavers' lofts and watchmakers' workshops. According to information published in *Caslon Old Face*, the two men on the right are Joseph Jackson (seated) and Thomas Cottrell, both of whom became eminent typesetters themselves.

*Caslon Old Face* also contains an undated print showing the two houses that formed the original Caslon letter foundry in Chiswell Street, London (Fig. 3) – 'since pulled down to

be replaced by a more convenient structure.' An extended caption states that a colophon (publisher's inscription) in a 1764 type specimen book includes the information that:

This new Foundry was begun in the year 1720, and finish'd 1763; and will (with God's leave) be carried on, improved, and enlarged, by William Caslon and Son, Letter-Founders in London.

The house on the left in the engraving has a grand Georgian front door with a plainer works entrance alongside. The room with the long window is not shown and was possibly at the back of the premises.

The clock is a rather grand affair for a foundry, as elegant in its way as Caslon's beautiful type faces. The area of London nearby

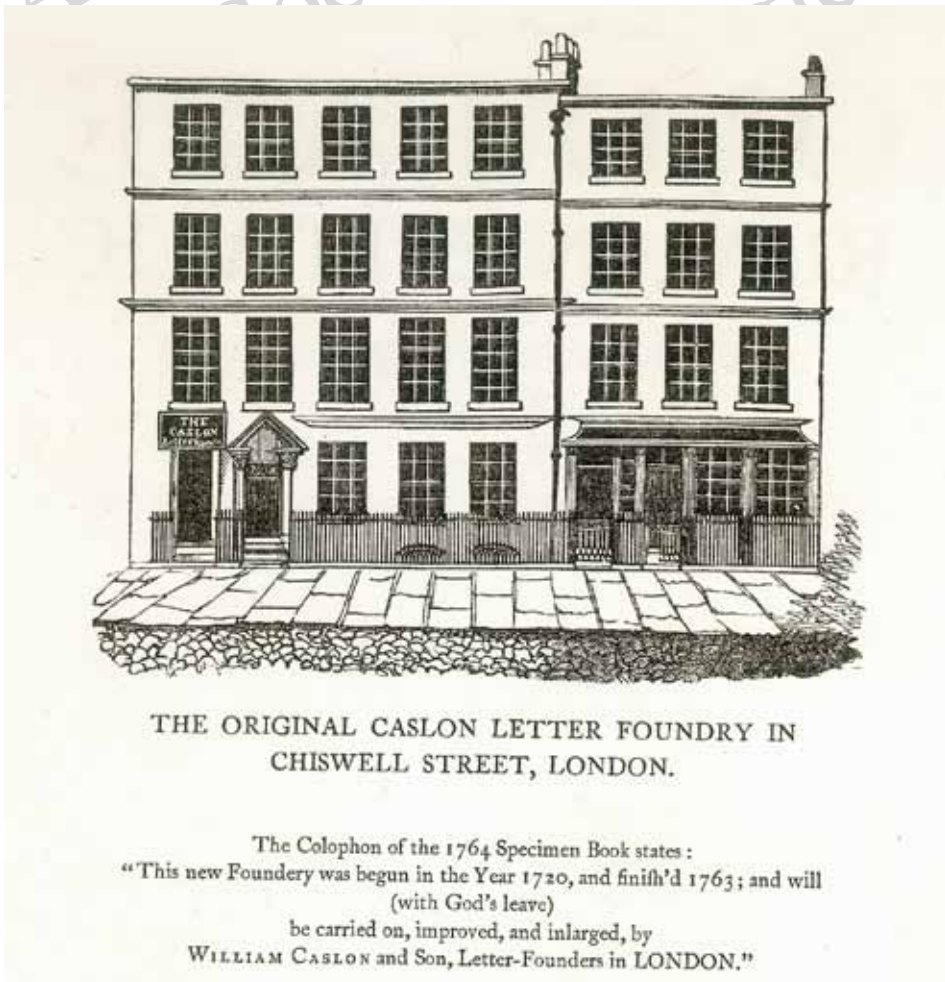


Fig. 3. Caslon's premises in Chiswell Street, London. The entrance to the letter foundry can be seen bottom left.

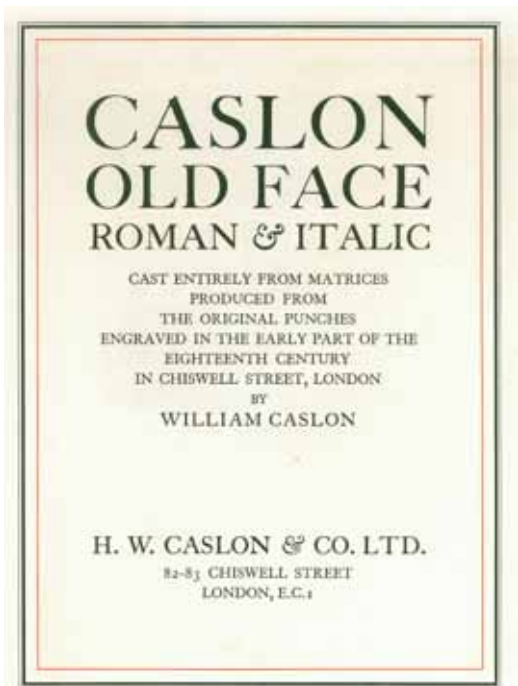


Fig 4. The title page of the Caslon Old Face type specimen book, published in 1924 by H W Caslon & Co Ltd.

was associated with the clock and watchmaking trade and the Clerkenwell shop of Orpheus Smart would not have been far away.

As an employer, William Caslon has been described as a tender master, a kindly cultivated man. His house had a concert room and within it an organ; and there he entertained his friends at monthly concerts of chamber music.

Ronald E Rose's book *English Dial Clocks* published by the Antique Collectors Club includes a reproduction of the 'Act for granting to His Majesty certain Duties on Clocks and Watches,' commencing 5 July 1797. Clocks were to be taxed at five shillings a year, gold watches at ten shillings and silver and metal watches at two shillings and sixpence. However, there



Fig 5. An early 18th century clock with a large, unglazed, octagonal dial and counter-balanced hands, made by John Tickell of Crediton, Devon, for the town's former Unitarian Chapel. A provincial version of William Caslon's foundry clock. The dial measures 1.3m (4ft 4in) across, the trunk over 1.5m (5ft) long.

were exceptions and the charge did not apply to the Royal Family, ambassadors and foreign ministers, hospitals, charities, parish churches, chapels and places of public worship

Taverns are not mentioned, but hospitals, churches and chapels – some of which housed Act of Parliament clocks – are; and it is tempting to suggest that the description Act of Parliament may have come into use as many such clocks, because of their location, were excused payment under the Act.