WHAT'S IT WORTH?

Price Guide to Clocks 2014

Clocks Magazine Horology Guides № 4
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There are two big differences between clocks and most other types of antique. First, clocks are machines. They sit in the corner or on the mantelshelf or on the wall, doing something. Indicating the time. The hands move, if imperceptibly.

Second, most clocks carry the name of their maker, often with a place name, a detail which gives the clock owner a starting point for discovering more about when the clock was made and by whom.

The first mechanical clocks appeared in Europe in the Middle Ages. They were installed in monasteries, allowing monks to regulate their days, which were divided into seven ‘canonical hours’.

These clocks, crude by today’s standards but absolutely revolutionary at the time, quickly spread throughout the continent. They are thought to have appeared in England in the fourteenth century.

It took over two centuries before the first domestic clocks began to appear in British homes. These are the clocks now

_Charles II brass lantern clock by Thomas Wheeler, London, c1685, 40cm (15.75in) high, £5400._ Picture courtesy of Dreweatts.
known as ‘lantern clocks’, because of a fancied resemblance to medieval lanterns, though they were probably simply known as ‘clocks’ at the time. They were mounted on the wall and powered by the fall of weights. The earliest of these clocks, like the turret clocks of the monasteries, were made by blacksmiths, but the craft of the clockmaker was officially recognised in England in 1631 when Charles I granted a Charter of Incorporation to a group of London clockmakers who had petitioned for the setting up of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.

The first grandfather, or ‘longcase’, clocks appeared shortly after the Restoration of Charles II to the throne and bracket or ‘table’ clocks appeared shortly thereafter. Over the following two centuries these two styles developed, the grandfather clock with its brass dial giving way to clocks with painted dials in the 1770s, the bracket clock gradually evolving into the familiar mantel clock we all know today. The earliest English wall clock (after the lantern clock) is generally agreed to be the Act of Parliament clock, so-called because its popularity is thought to have increased when the British Parliament levied a tax on all clocks and on gold watches.

One of the most important developments in timekeeping came about because of the need for mariners to know their longitude while at sea. Latitude was easily measured by reference to the sun, moon and stars, but to determine longitude you needed to be able to tell the time accurately. This led to the English clockmaker John Harrison building a series of ‘sea clocks’, which were the progenitors of the later marine chronometer.

Over the years, a bewildering variety of clock styles has been produced, which now fetch widely varying prices on the horological market. By looking at the actual prices achieved by clocks at actual auctions over the past year, this book will give the reader an indication of what the clocks in his or her home are likely to be worth now.
GRANDFATHER CLOCKS

Though grandfather or ‘longcase’ clocks were made in other countries—notably France, Germany, the Netherlands, the USA—it is somehow the clock type which is most quintessentially British. It’s massive presence, its slow majestic tick-tock, its robust beauty, take us back to a time when life was lived at a slower pace than it is now, when craftsmanship was at a premium, when clocks—like other items of furniture—were built to last.

The first grandfather clock appeared in England shortly after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. These early clocks were slender, relatively short and austere, in sharp contrast to the bigger, brasher, more exuberant grandfather clocks which came later. The mechanisms of these early clocks were fashioned by individual craftsmen working, often alone, in small workshops, in towns and villages throughout Britain. Each of these wonderful clocks is unique. They were made in the days before mass-production and standardisation. They are individual and we think of them almost as members of the family. They have faces, hands, feet.

The faces of early grandfather clocks were made out of brass and silvered steel, but in the 1770s a new type of clock dial appeared, this being the ‘white’ or ‘painted’ dial. These were mainly white, but had scenes painted in the corners, in the arch and sometimes in the centre. The name of the clockmaker would normally appear in the centre of the face.

As the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries progressed, many more tasks were taken out of the hands of individual craftsmen. Parts were bought in, jobs were contracted out, until eventually the ‘clockmaker’ was assembling a movement he had purchased from an outside supplier, a face he had ordered from a dialmaker, into a case he had bought from a local cabinetmaker.

But even then each clock was unique. Though the mechanism might be more or less identical to that in another clock, the face would have been hand painted and the case made to order.