



# WHAT'S IT WORTH?

Price Guide to Clocks  
2014

Clocks Magazine Horology Guides N° 4

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# INTRODUCTION

## CLOCKS MAGAZINE HOROLOGY GUIDES

- No 1. Clock Repair, A Beginner's Guide
- No 2. A Beginner's Guide to Pocket Watches
- No 3. American Clocks, An Introduction
- No 4. What's it Worth? Price Guide to Clocks 2014

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.*

# VALUING CLOCKS

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.

Prices paid for clocks vary widely depending on a number of factors, such as condition, maker, date of manufacture, type of clock and rarity. The state of the market at any given time is also important.

Condition, for most clocks, is all-important. Clocks in good condition will generally fetch higher prices than clocks in poor condition. That said, some buyers prefer their clocks in ‘barn-fresh’ condition, complete with all the dust and cobwebs that will have accumulated after years of storage. The idea is that these clocks will be less likely to have fallen into the hands of bodgers, and once cleaned and restored will be in more or less the condition they were in when first made.

Age is also important, but with a few caveats. For example, an older clock is not by itself more valuable than a more recent clock, even if the clocks are by the same maker. The more recent clock may be more complex than the earlier and may therefore be worth more. Much will also depend on the type of clock. A modern Atmos clock, for example, may command a much higher price than 250-year-old grandfather clock.

Rarity does not necessarily give a clock greater value. You may discover a clock by a maker who was previously unknown, no other examples of whose work have been recorded. But a clock by a well-known maker, by whom many examples appear in the literature, may be more valuable because the clocks by that maker are collectable.

The state of the market perhaps affects the value of clocks in general more than any other factor. In the past year, the horological market at the lower end has been depressed, with clocks that a few years ago might have commanded a four-figure sum fetching a few hundreds. That said, clocks at the top end are still commanding high prices.

Like other antiques and collectables, clocks will rise and fall in value depending on the vagaries of the market and the economy. The only way of knowing how much any particular clock is likely to be worth is by looking at how much similar clocks have achieved in recent sales, and that is where a book like this is invaluable.

**Note.** Prices quoted in this book represent hammer price plus buyer’s premium.

# 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.



*Late seventeenth century walnut marquetry longcase clock by William Prevost of Newcastle, with anchor escapement and inside countwheel strike, 201cm (79in) high. £6250. Picture courtesy of Bonhams.*



*Late seventeenth century oak eight-day longcase clock by John Barrow of London, the 28cm (11in) square brass dial with silvered Roman chapter ring, subsidiary seconds and date aperture, signed 'John Barrow, Londini, Fecit', in adapted later case, 213cm (7ft) high. £836. Picture courtesy of Gorrings.*



*Oak longcase clock, with a 30-hour movement striking on a bell, the 28cm (11in) square brass dial with a brass chapter ring signed 'Jno. Whithurst, Congleton', with a matt centre and pierced date aperture, the trunk door with a glass lenticle, 119.5cm (78.5in) high. £671. Picture courtesy of Woolley & Wallis.*



*Early eighteenth century eight-day walnut longcase clock by Thomas Lumpkin of London, the dial 28cm (11in) square, four pillar movement with anchor escapement, 198cm (78in). £11,950. Picture courtesy of Gorrings.*