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Acknowledging Scottish Clockmaker John Bower (1761–ca. 1830)

by Randy Jaye (FL)

I recently purchased an antique tallcase clock (Figure 1) from fellow NAWCC member Eddie Epp, who resides in Flagler Beach, FL. He had purchased the clock in 1971 from an estate in Bronxville, NY. The clock's dial is signed "Jon Bower, Kirrymuir." The case measures 87-1/2" tall; the base, 9" x 17"; and the trunk, 7" x 12-3/4". The clock is in exceptionally good cosmetic and mechanical condition for its age and runs well and keeps excellent time. I became interested in dating the clock and researched its origin and maker.

Dating the John Bower Clock

Many factors need to be considered to date an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century tallcase clock. The following tells how the estimated date of manufacture for this particular clock was determined. The metal dial (Figure 2) is an all-white dial[1] with little color, and the four corners have simple gold-painted decorations resembling the spandrels[2] of a brass dial clock. The minute markers are indicated by black dots (not by a continuous minute track, which is typically found on clock dials later than 1800). Arabic numerals indicate the minutes in intervals of five. The hours are marked by Roman numerals. The arch includes a rotating moonphase disc with four separate hand-painted views: two moon faces, a ruined building, and a clipper ship (Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6). All these details point to the white-dial style that was introduced in the early 1770s, became popular in the 1780s, and extended into the early 1800s.

Figure 1, far left. John Bower, Kirrymuir, tallcase clock.

Figure 2, left. Dial.

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Figures 3-6, top to bottom, left to right. Moonphase disc: first moon face; unidentified building in ruins; second moon face; unidentified clipper ship.

No markings or engravings are evident on the 8-day brass movement or its cast-iron bell (Figure 7), but the mechanical design is common to clocks from the late 1700s to well into the 1800s.

The dial fits snuggly into the case with no gaps, and all markings are centered and visible, which indicate the case is original to the clock.

The case is made from solid mahogany wood with veneer work around the hood and trunk. The case door is long and slender (8-1/2" x 35-1/2") with an arch-shaped top. The swan neck pediments, brass hardware column capitals, scrolls, and brass eagle center finial are typical of early case work of the period from 1770 to 1800.

The pendulum (Figure 8) is made of a wire rod attached to the bob, which is made of lead with a brass front (a common practice in the late 1700s to the early 1800s).

The cast-iron false plate[3] is marked "Walker & Finnemore." Walker and Finnemore were in business together from 1808 to 1811. They branched off independently after 1811, and both became major Birmingham false plate and dial makers.[4] This was made possible because two firms, Wilson and Osbourne, who dominated the Birmingham false plate- and dial-making market from 1778, halted operations (James Wilson died in 1809 and the Osbourne firm went out of business in 1813).

After reviewing all my information, I knew my clock was made sometime in the late 1790s to the early 1800s. Considering the information about the manufacture date of this clock's false plate, it was possible to determine that this clock was made circa 1808–1811.

Origin of the John Bower Clock (Kirriemuir, Angus, Scotland)

I had some difficulty locating the town on the dial "Kirrymuir," but eventually discovered it to be Kirriemuir, Angus, Scotland. Luck was on my side when I contacted two gentlemen in Kirriemuir, Dave Orr and Andrew Lendrum, who have an interest in preserving history and clocks. Both men are associated with the local Friends of Kirriemuir Gateway to the Glens Museum[5] and were happy to share pictures and information with me about the history of Kirriemuir and the clockmaker John Bower.

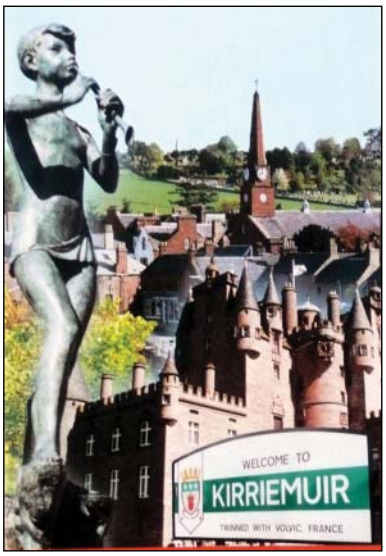

Figure 9. Kirriemuir town montage of pictures from David Orr.

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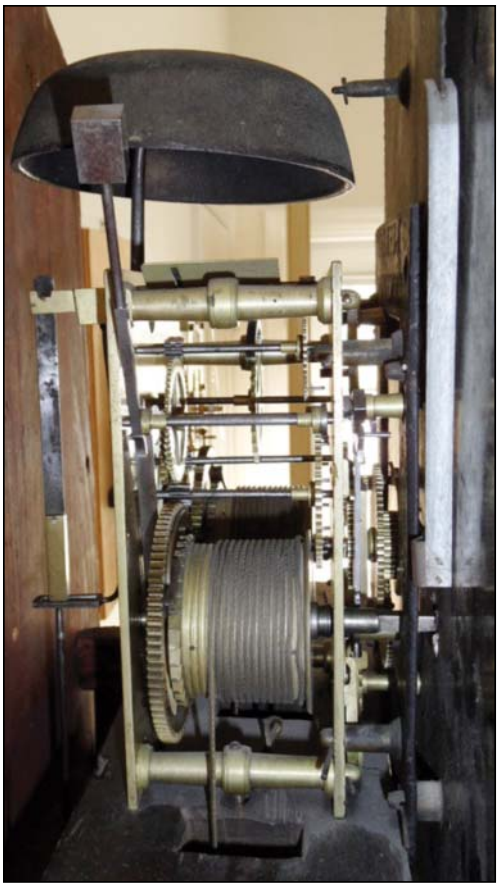

Figure 7, left. Left-side view of the John Bower clock movement.
Figure 8, right. Weights and pendulum.

Kirriemuir (pronounced kër̈e"mer), often called Kirrie (pronounced kër̈e), is a picturesque town with winding streets and fascinating architecture located in Angus, Scotland. The 2001 census recorded its population at 5,963. The beginnings of the town stretch far back in human history, as documented in several important Bronze and Iron Age archaeological sites in close vicinity. The town had its name first recorded in writing in 1201. Over the last 800 years there have been more than 30 different spellings of the name (which are recorded in volumes of the Register of the Great Seal of Scotland[6]) and include Keirmure, Kelimur, Kerymure, and Kerymore. (Interestingly, the Kirrymuir spelling is not included.) Kirriemuir was a thriving textile center, known for its local weavers, for more than 150 years (from the 1760s to the World War I era). Kirriemuir is also the birthplace of the internationally known author and playwright, Sir James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937), famous for creating Peter Pan. The town's square proudly displays a statue of the Peter Pan character (Figure 9, previous page).

Clockmaker John Bower

John Bower was born in Lintrathen, Angus, Scotland (a tiny village eight miles west of Kirriemuir), on April 24, 1761, to Andrew Bower (his mother's name is unclear) and died circa 1830. It is believed he was married twice and had several children from both women, but some of the names of the children and other family details are unclear.

He was a clockmaker known to be in business in Kirriemuir, Angus, Scotland, from 1790 to around 1825. He specialized in tall-case (grandfather) clocks. Scottish publications cataloging antique clocks and clockmakers offer little information about him other than he was known to have been in business in Kirriemuir in 1802 and that he operated a business on High Street in Kirriemuir in 1825.

It is known that Bower made the entire tall-case clock (movement and case),[7] unlike most of his contemporaries who usually ordered the case from a local cabinetmaker. However, it is likely that he purchased the dials and had his signature hand-painted on them. The weights, pendulums, and assorted iron parts that Bower used in his clocks are likely to have been made in a nearby blacksmith shop in Kinnordy, Scotland. It is also known that he manufactured clocks in kit form that he sold to be self-assembled by his customers.

One known child of his, John Thomas Bower (born in Kirriemuir, Scotland, around 1795 and died in Clerkenwell, London, England, on August 25, 1849), was a noted tool and lathe maker. The clockmaker John Bower is often mistaken for his son John Thomas Bower.

It is known that John Thomas Bower moved to 13 King Street, Clerkenwell,[8] in London around 1827 when his first trade registration appeared. He was registered from 1827 through 1832 as an engine and lathe maker, which was noted the year of his death (1849) in the London Trade Directory. The 1839 Pigot's Directory of London[9] lists him, as follows: "BOWER, John: engine lathe and tool maker and engine turner on metals and steel, 13 King St, Clerkenwell."

A rare and complete original rose engine lathe[10] (Figure 10) built by John Thomas Bower in the late 1820s is on display at the Bob Lynn Historical Woodworking Trust, Inc., Museum in Ashburton, New Zealand. The head stock is engraved "J Bower."

After his death in 1849 John Thomas Bower's will was proved in the Prerogative Court in Canterbury, England, and his personal estate was determined to be valued at 5,788 pounds, 12 shillings (a substantial amount for the time). His apprentice, William Millis, took over the business after his death.

LINDSAY HOLLAND, ARCHIVIST FOR THE LYNN MUSEUM.

Figure 10. Rose engine lathe built by son John Thomas Bower, ca. 1820s.

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Other Clocks Attributed to John Bower

Several other tallcase clocks built by Bower are known to exist. One of the earliest known Bower clocks (Figures 11 and 12) was donated to the Kirriemuir Gateway of the Glens Museum in June 2007 by John Drummond, whose family possessed it for several generations.

There are two known Bower tallcase clocks with brass dials. One features a beautiful mahogany case with a brass dial that has no moonphase disc (Figures 13 and 14).

The Peter Pan House and Museum (birthplace of James Matthew Barrie) in Kirriemuir houses a John Bower tallcase clock (Figure 15) with an intricately designed mahogany case featuring a refinished and very colorful dial. The dial is believed to have been refinished by another clockmaker local to Kirriemuir, John Watson, because it resembles his typical style and choice of colors.

A fine example of a Bower tallcase clock made from pinewood (Figures 16 and 17) stands 86" tall and features a swan's neck pediment, arched style feet, and a central finial.

Another Bower tallcase clock (Figure 18) is a typical early nineteenth-century design with an oak case, three finials, and a painted white dial.

Notes

1. White dials became popular in the 1780s. They are painted iron dials (decorative paint hardened by heat processing) that were less expensive and easier to produce than brass dials.

2. A spandrel is the space between the inner round-dial edge and the rectangular enclosure, located at the four corners of the dial.

3. False plates were originally made of cast iron. About 1820 they began to be made of sheet iron. They allowed the clockmaker to attach the dial to the movement's front plate in a position relative to the moving and working parts without damaging the dial. False plates are mainly used on 8-day movements.

4. Brian Loomes notes in his book, *The White Dial Clock*, that he has seen a rare false plate marked "Walker & Finnemore, Birmingham," circa 1810, which he assumes was most likely before these men set up shops independently.

5. The Friends of Kirriemuir Gateway to the Glens Museum is located in Kirriemuir, Angus, Scotland, and houses Scottish artifacts. Its stated goals are to educate the public, encourage local involvement in the work of the museum, and to provide support to ensure optimum community access to the museum and its artifacts.

6. The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland allowed monarchs to authorize official documents without having to sign each document individually.

7. Information about John Bower's clockmaking techniques is noted in documents housed in the Kirriemuir Gateway to the Glens Museum.

ANDREW LENDRUM (4).

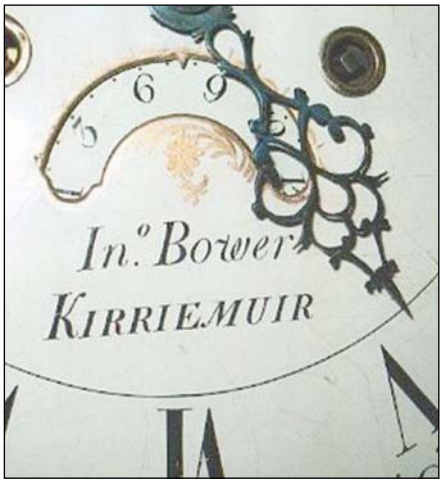

Figure 11, above. An oak tallcase clock by John Bower, ca. 1800.

Figure 12, center top. closeup of dial signature.

Figure 13, above right. John Bower tallcase clock, mahogany wood case with a brass dial, ca. 1800.

Figure 14, center bottom. closeup of signautre on dial boss.

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Figure 15. John Bower tallcase clock, mahogany wood case, refinished dial signed "J. Bower, Kerrymuir." The colors and style of this dial are typical of clock dials after the time that Bower was an active clockmaker.

ABERDEEN ANTIQUE CENTRE, SCOTLAND (2).

Figure 16, left. John Bower tallcase clock, pinewood case measuring 86" x 20" x 11", ca. 1820.

Figure 17, above. Tallcase clock dial of Figure 16 clock has hand-painted semicircular flower spandrels and is signed "Jn. Bower, Kirriemuir," in gold leafing.

Figure 18, right. John Bower tallcase clock, oakwood case featuring three turned finials and signed "Jn. Bower, Kirriemuir," ca. 1810.

ANDREW LENDRUM.

8. In the 1800s Clerkenwell was part of London's watchmaking district.

9. Pigot's Directories started in 1814 and covered the period before official Civil Registration began and are a valuable source of information about all major professions, nobility, gentry, clergy, trades, and occupations including taverns and public houses and much more are listed. The Directory also lists timetables of the coaches and carriers that served a town.

10. A rose engine lathe is a specialized kind of geometric lathe. The headstock rocks back and forth with a rocking motion or along the spindle axis in a pumping motion, controlled by a rubber section moving against a rosette or cam-like pattern mounted on the spindle, while the lathe spindle rotates. Rose engine work can make flower patterns, as well as convoluted, symmetrical, multilobed organic patterns. The patterns it produces are similar to that of a spirograph, in metal. No other type of ornamental lathe can produce "rose" patterns.

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Acknowledgments

I thank Dave Orr and Andrew Lendrum, associates of the Friends of Kirriemuir Gateway to the Glens Museum in Kirriemuir, Angus, Scotland, for information and pictures that they provided in support of this article. I also thank Lindsay Holland, archivist for the Lynn Museum in New Zealand, for information she provided about John Bower and John Thomas Bower. All photos are courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.

About the Author

Randy Jaye is actively involved in collecting and restoring clocks, wristwatches, and pocket watches. He is also continuing research and writing on various horological topics. He has served as president of Chapter 154 in Daytona Beach, FL, and co-chair of the 2011 NAWCC Florida Mid-Winter Regional. He can be contacted at: randyjaye@gmail.com.