

Book reviews

DENNIS RADAGE, WARNER MEINEN AND LAILA RADAGE, *Charles Gretton – Clock & Watchmaking Through the Golden Age* Three O'clock Publishing, Vancouver 2016. 660 pages. Published in three limited editions, £135, £175 (with slipcase) and £375 (leather bound). ISBN 978-0-9940460-0-0 (bound) ISBN 978-0-9940460-1-7 (leather bound).

To order <http://www.grettonbook.com/home>

Charles Gretton – Clock & Watchmaking Through the Golden Age is a substantial book, measuring some ten inches by twelve, two inches in thickness and weighing in at a little less than five pounds. No wonder it took the authors some eight years to compile. The book was beautifully designed and set out by Fiona Raven and is divided into nine distinct sections. The first section is devoted to Charles Gretton and his family. It begins with an assessment of the man, his life and his genealogy. The story begins at Claypole, the village in Lincolnshire where Charles Gretton first drew breath. It describes his parents, his siblings and their circumstances and then follows Gretton to London, where he became apprenticed through the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, to Humphrey Downing. The growth of Gretton's own business at 'The Ship' in Fleet Street and later at Crane Court is described with maps and contemporary illustrations. His marriages and his descendants are researched in considerable depth, this section ending with Gretton's public roles as churchwarden, Common Councilman, Governor of both Christ's Hospital and Bridewell Royal Hospital and his work as a Tax Commissioner.

The second section lists the many longcase clocks bearing Gretton's signature that the authors painstakingly traced throughout the world. It offers observations on their construction and decoration and ends with a beautifully illustrated 'review' of thirty examples. The third section repeats this format in relation to Gretton's spring clocks, twenty-three examples being illustrated and reviewed. The fourth section describes lantern clocks with Gretton signatures and reviews the two found by the authors. Watches signed by

Gretton then come under scrutiny, with eighteen examples beautifully illustrated and described. The final sections consider Gretton's apprentices and their working periods, his workshop staff and their estimated production, published notices of lost and stolen watches and at last, a comprehensive list of recipients of grants from the Clockmakers' Company charity that Gretton endowed. The book ends with an index and lengthy bibliography.

It is entirely understandable that authors who have spent so long concentrating on the life of a single individual, should, in the end, fall a little in love with him. This is something the authors are aware of, explaining that they do not propose to comment on the originality of any of the clocks or watches shown, because the purpose of the book is to be 'a celebration of Gretton's life'. Herein lies a problem. How is the reader to know which clocks and which watches illustrated are as Charles Gretton knew them, and which are not? How is the reader to know which movements are in their original cases and which are not?

Certainly in the longcase section, the photographs are cropped in such a way that the reader never quite sees whether the seat-boards are convincing, whether the cheeks they sit on are cut down or built up, or whether any marks remain on the backboards which might give some clue as to originality of the clock as a whole.

Just occasionally a modern seat-board can be detected. In one case what may be a pine backboard can be seen. In another a pendulum fails to line up with the lenticle in the trunk door, suggesting that perhaps, just perhaps, a number of the clocks shown are not as they left Gretton's shop. Similar problems may or may not exist in the spring clock and watch sections. None of this would matter if Charles Gretton's business had adopted a recognisable house style for its products, as say Thomas Tompion or Joseph Knibb did at the same period. That way anomalies and oddities would stand out. But although the authors of this book take great pains to point out stylistic features, which they have identified as favoured by Gretton's workshop, these are in fact features common to many other makers of the same date.

While the authors do at one point suggest that Gretton may have bought in some of the

movements that he sold, it is a pity that this theme is not developed. The excellent quality of the photographs allows the reader to examine some parts of the objects illustrated in detail. As a result it can be seen for instance, that different dials seem to have been made with different matting tools. While the ringing around winding holes and date-work is often very similar, some examples are clearly made with quite different cutters. No sets of hands on one clock ever seem to resemble another, few case mouldings seem to match and where two spring clocks are shown whose construction and appearance are remarkably similar, one is signed by Charles Gretton, the other by a different maker altogether, James Hassenius.

Thus it is that the reader quite quickly begins to wonder whether Gretton's obviously successful business in Fleet Street was in fact a manufactory of clocks and watches at all. Might it not have been a major retail outlet instead, purchasing its stock from a host of other makers? It is possible that Gretton himself hints at this, because of the twenty-nine variations of signatures used by Gretton and listed by the authors, only one ends with the word 'fecit'. Again, a contemporary document quoted, declares that Gretton 'hath kept a publick Watchmakers Shop for above 20 yrs and sold great quantities of clocks both at home and abroad'. The word 'made' is again interestingly absent.

It would be churlish of a reviewer to nit-pick and list the numerous small matters of history with which he takes issue. There are however a few which do leap out of the page. An example might be the illustration of the Rotunda of the Bank of England, which although Gretton attended the Bank, could not possibly have been known to him. The Bank in his day was based at the Grocers' Company in Princes Street. The building shown was not constructed in Threadneedle Street until at least thirty years after his death. Another is perhaps a genuine misunderstanding resulting from a kindly desire to embellish the charitable side of Gretton's character. Becoming Patron of All Saints Church, Springfield, Essex, was not the act of generosity it may seem. What Gretton acquired through purchase was in fact the right to nominate the rector of the parish, thus securing jobs for life for a number of his descendants. Among the more glaring errors

though, is the interpretation of a photograph showing a clockmaker's graffiti on the back of a lantern clock dial. The inscription reads 'Cleand./May 8th 1837/To Mr. Hopkins/ from the Ship / Bridgend / 1828'. The caption beneath the photograph declares the section reading 'Mr. Hopkins from the Ship' to be 'of significant interest'. Despite the fact that the handwriting is the same throughout the scratched inscription, the authors conclude that 'the Ship' section must refer to Gretton's shop of the same name in Fleet Street and that Hopkins must therefore be a previously unrecorded Gretton journeyman. In fact 'The Ship' was an inn in Bridgend, Glamorgan, built in 1793 and demolished to build a shopping centre in 1981. Its landlord in the mid-19th century was Mr. William Hopkins.

All this said, *Charles Gretton – Clock & Watchmaking Through the Golden Age* Charles Gretton is a beautiful, well-researched and well-illustrated volume. It will, with luck, encourage others to look into the wider subject of which seventeenth-century 'makers' actually manufactured clocks and which were major retailers. Because of his lack of 'house style', Charles Gretton was a very difficult subject to tackle. This must have been all the more so since two of the authors live in Canada, the third lives in Holland and the greater part of the research required had to take place in England. A remarkable amount of globetrotting was thus undertaken. There is no doubt that the result of all those air miles is that much very useful information has been gathered together, allowing a vast amount more to be known about the fascinating life of Charles Gretton than a decade ago.

George White