

1664 and All That

The Story of a Spinet by Edward Blunt

And the Solution to a Mystery

Anderson & Garland of Newcastle has been a leading firm of auctioneers since 1840. Lot 964 in their Fine art and Antiques sale in March 2014 was of particular interest:

"An early 18th century walnut cased spinet, the ebony keys with pressed floral decoration to fronts and ivory sharp and flat keys, the name board inscribed 'Edwardus Blunt, Londini, Fecit', with inlaid panel to centre decorated with two birds amongst scrolls, later date etched below '1664' inlaid stringing throughout (the sound board cracked in various places, lid also cracked, missing stand.)"

To those of us who love English Spinets, everything sounded 'right', and pictures supplied by the auctioneer confirmed that this was a rare item, in remarkably original condition.

There was inevitably considerable international interest, but we were determined, and were the successful bidders, at well above estimate - the lady former owner was delighted!



After the auction, with the spinet safely at home, the history slowly emerged. This is the story of a remarkable and famous little spinet.

Edward Blunt, The Maker

Edward Blunt's father (also called Edward) had a sister Sarah, who married the famous spinet maker Stephen Keene. Edward Blunt was therefore Stephen Keene's nephew. He was apprenticed under the Joiners' Company to Stephen Keene for seven years from 5th September 1693, so he was presumably born about 1678. He became a freeman of the company in December 1700. The earliest known dated instrument to carry his name on the front is a 1702 spinet signed jointly with Stephen Keene, which implies that they worked together for a while after Edward's freedom.

A spinet sold at Sotheby's in 2004 carries Edward Blunt's name alone. It is dated 1703 on a jack.

Edward Blunt married Anne Beezley at St James' Westminster on June 13th 1702; the couple had a daughter Anne in 1703, and a son Edward in 1704. A second daughter, Mary, was christened in 1708. She sadly died in 1709, but there must have been another daughter Mary, because Stephen Keene's will of 1720 refers to a juvenile daughter of Edward Blunt named Mary. As neither of the other children is mentioned in the will, it is possible that only Mary II survived infancy.

Nicholas Mitchell was bound to him as an apprentice under the Joiners' Company in 1704, Abraham Saintcleer in 1707, and John Bancks 1709.

By 1707 or 1708, Blunt had moved to John Player's former premises in the parish of St Martin Outwich, Player having died in June 1707. The use of an established workshop has obvious advantages - the premises had probably been occupied by Gabriel Townsend before John Player.

As Edward Blunt was Stephen Keene's nephew by marriage, it is likely that Keene intended to leave his business to Blunt, but if so, the plan was upset by Blunt's early death. In 1711 the premises were empty, and by 1712 were occupied by a James Anselm. Since no further records have been found, it seems likely that Edward Blunt died in 1711 or shortly after, at the tragically early age of only about 33.

As well as two by Stephen Keene and Edward Blunt, there are four known surviving spinets carrying Edward Blunt's name alone on the nameboard. Three of these, dated 1703, 1704, and 1705, are signed internally by Thomas Hitchcock. The fourth, probably the latest, has no internal inscriptions at all, except that it was restored by Arnold Dolmetsch.

The Spinets

1) - 1703, seen at Sotheby's November 2004.



The uppermost jack is inscribed *Thomas Hitchcock 1703* and according to the catalogue, the uppermost key lever is inscribed *T.H.1703*. The design of the nameboard of this one is rather different, but the structure is very similar to the others.



It is evident that Thomas Hitchcock played a substantial part in the in the making of this spinet, and this interesting point will be discussed later.

2) - 1704, the subject of this note, Property of Albert Bil and David Hackett.



The lowest key carries the inscription *1664 / Thomas Hitchcock / His Make in 1664* and the uppermost key *54 / TH / 1704*.



3) - 1705, formerly the property of Mrs Jean Maurer.



This one carries on top and bottom keys *Thomas Hitchcock his make in 1705*



4) – c 1706, private owner UK



This one has the inscription on the back of the nameboard that it was restored by Arnold Dolmetsch. Its appearance suggests that it might be the latest of the four.

The 1704 Spinet

The first known public appearance of this instrument was at the International Inventions Exhibition at the Royal Albert Hall in 1885, where it was entered by a Mr W Vinnicombe.

Page 16 of the catalogue gives details:

VINNICOMBE, Mr. W.—*Spinet*, by Edward Blount. 1664.

Has the autograph of Thomas Hitchcock, as maker, on a key and on the jacks. Double sharps in the bass. There is a similar autograph of this maker on a Blount spinet recently in the possession of Mr. Taphouse, of Oxford, dated 1703.

By analogy with other entries, the catalogue clearly implies that 1664 is the date of manufacture of this spinet. Note also that it refers to another 'Blount' (sic) spinet with Thomas Hitchcock's name on the top jack, and the date '1703'. This surely refers to the instrument sold at Sotheby's in November 2004.



Underneath the stylish marquetry of the two birds is scratched the number 1664. This is not in the same hand as the maker's name, but it has clearly been there for a long time, and repeats the number on the key. It is not a date, and is unrealistically high for any kind of serial number. But it has led to a number of what we must now see as misunderstandings.

The earliest record of this spinet that we know about at the time of writing is the catalogue entry above, and we know that Hipkins was closely involved with the collection of instruments in the Exhibition. Therefore this is very likely to have been the source for the reference in A J Hipkins' 1896 book, where on page 71 (talking about spinets) he asserts: "*Thomas Hitchcock's written dates found within instruments made by him cover the long period between 1664 and 1703.*" The reference to 1703 is presumably taken from the 1703 Blount spinet, included in the introduction above. It is, however, worth mentioning that Hipkins had already realized that the numbers on the front of Hitchcock's spinets were not dates.

These notes were very probably the inspiration for the entries in Philip James' 1930 book, where on page 65 he gives the earliest and latest known dates for Edward Blunt as 1664 - 1703, and in a footnote states: "*On the first key of one of his Spinets is written: 'Thos. (sic) Hitchcock his make in 1664' and on the first jack of another, formerly in the Taphouse Collection, is inscribed: 'Thos. Hitchcock No 54 - 1703'.*"

We may note, as we saw earlier, that the wording on the jack actually says '54', not 'No 54'; this surely refers to the jack number, as on our '1664'. Also we note that the name Thomas is spelled out in full on the jack, not abbreviated.

The legend continues into the famous 'Boalch' series, where in the 1974 Second Edition (and presumably the 1956 First Edition as well) James is quoted more-or-less verbatim under the entry for Blunt. In the Hitchcock entry, our '1664' is credited to 'Thomas the Elder', and the 1703 one to Thomas the Younger. However, we know that Thomas the Elder was a chair-maker; there is no evidence that he ever made a spinet. Furthermore, he was dead by 1700, and so could not possibly be the maker, in whole or in part, of the 1703 or 1704 spinets carrying Edward Blunt's name.

The Third Edition of Boalch (1995, edited by Charles Mould) still has these two spinets listed under Hitchcock, but the entry has realized that something is not quite right, and although still giving '1664' as the date, it offers the possibility that it had been misread. He expresses the hope: "*If it were possible to locate and re-examine with care [this spinet]... it would be possible to be more precise about the identity and dates of the members of the Hitchcock family in the early years of their workshops.*" So this wish has now come true. We have that spinet to examine with as much care as we will. However, the '1664' was clearly not misread - and the mystery survives.

1664 - What does it mean?

I would now like to offer the following observations, which I believe to be correct beyond all reasonable doubt:

- Edward Blunt (free 1700) was a competent maker, having been apprenticed to Stephen Keene.
- This spinet is virtually identical to contemporary Stephen Keene spinets, two of which are known signed jointly by Keene & Blunt.
- 'Thomas Hitchcock' had considerable hand in the construction of this one, and probably made the keyboard and jacks at least.
- Inscriptions on keys and jacks were quite usual, and should be trusted unless there is good reason to doubt them.
- This spinet was made in 1704, as recorded on the topmost key.
- All the keys are original, and cut from the same panel.
- The 1705 Blunt carries the inscription *'Thomas Hitchcock / His make in 1705'* (twice)

I now ask you to look again at the picture below.



My proposition is that the inscription originally said *'Thomas Hitchcock / His make in 1704'*. We see that the date would have run off the edge of the key, and I suggest that it was written before the panel was separated into individual keys. This operation would certainly have taken out the descending tail of the 4, and I can convince myself that the second digit was originally a 7. Even the 0 can be imagined in what is now a smudge. The final 4 as it now is, is clearly displaced, and almost certainly does not belong to the original script. I therefore propose that over time, the rest of the inscription had faded or worn (as has that on the 1705) and that - with the exception of the words 'His make in' - it was re-written in a different hand some time later - possibly in the nineteenth century. Whoever did this must have failed to notice the significance of the inscription on the top key. If he intended to mislead, he would not have allowed it to remain; if he was doing his best to be accurate, he would have followed it. The '1664' on the nameboard was probably scratched on later, as the style is not consistent with the ink alteration.

With the benefit of today's knowledge, we can say that 1664 was not a good guess, but we remember that even in the later part of the twentieth century the experts of the time - and even ourselves when we were younger - didn't always get things right.

The oddity remains that, during the first years of the eighteenth century, when this spinet was made, Thomas Hitchcock was bound to the spinet-maker Benjamin Slade. We have assumed that this would have meant that the apprentice was confined to the workshop of his master, but we really know very little about life in these days. These spinet-makers in London knew each other for sure. There must have been rivalry, but was there also co-operation and sharing of resources? Is it even possible that apprentices, although nominally bound to one master, did in fact move around? Could Benjamin Slade have been ill, and unable personally to supervise his apprentice? Perhaps we'll never know, but we have at least cleared up the mystery of the '1664' Thomas Hitchcock spinet.