

The Keene & Brackley Spinet nameboard.

By David Hackett



The Keene & Brackley spinet made in c. 1710 is probably the most-copied spinet of them all. Following a plan drawn by John Barnes, its owner at the time, it served as the model for the successful Early Music Shop kit, now still available from the Renaissance Workshop Company Limited.

Stephen Keene died in 1712, and this would have been amongst the last instruments to bear his name. It was made in collaboration with his final apprentice and partner, Charles Brackley.



Stephen Keene was born about 1640, and was apprenticed to Gabriel Townsend, a London virginal maker, for seven years from 6th August 1655. He took his freedom of the Joiners Company in November 1662; in 1704/5 he was Master of the Company. A virginal made by him in 1668 is in the Edinburgh Collection. After the change in fashion away from the rectangular virginals, he went on to become perhaps the most successful maker of wing-shaped spinets in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Boalch, in 'Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord 1440 – 1840' (3rd edition 1995) gives his "latest date ascertained" as 1719, but this is an error, as we now know that he had died seven years earlier – his will is dated 1712. The nameboard which is the subject of this essay that is the source of this misunderstanding.



It had been hanging on a wall in the Colt Collection at Bethersden for many years. It was included in the sale when the collection was dispersed in 2018, when I was fortunate enough to be the winning bidder. It is mentioned in Boalch in the biography section for Stephen Keene, where he says: “By 1719, Brackley had been taken into partnership, as is proved by the existence of a spinet-nameboard belonging formerly to A. J. Hipkins, later to Henry Tull, inscribed *Stephanus Keene Carolus Brackley Londini fecerunt*, and believed to have come from an instrument dated 1719.”



The back of the nameboard does indeed have several notes in ink and pencil, and tantalizingly says “Date written on a key 1719”. This implies that at the time the note was written, or shortly before, the instrument was more-or-less complete. There is another note: “Given by Mr Taphouse to A J Hipkins” thus taking the provenance back even further – Taphouse’s of Oxford was founded in 1811. Cecil Colt was a friend of Henry Tull, and it is fair to assume that Tull passed it on to Colt.

I now suggest that the date on the key had been misread, and was in fact 1710. It was usual in the eighteenth century to write in non-ranging numerals, where some of the characters have ascenders and descenders, like normal lower-case letters.

0123456789

It is easy to misread a 0 as a 9, perhaps if there is a scratch or speck of dirt.

Further support for a date of c. 1710 is provided by the complete instrument itself. The early eighteenth century was a time of rapid development in the compass of spinets. At the beginning of the century, and confirmed as late as 1705, the usual keyboard was from GG to d³, with a broken octave in the bass. This meant that the lowest key was apparently BB (tuned to GG), and the sharps for C and D were divided to fill in the missing notes. But by 1715 we have a dated spinet by Thomas Hitchcock with a fully-chromatic five octave keyboard from GG to g³. This remained standard for spinets until nearly the end of the century. The Keene & Brackley spinet with its ‘transitional’ compass of GG to e³, with no broken octave but the bottom and top sharps omitted, along with another few English spinets, almost certainly fits into this gap between 1705 and 1715. The orphan nameboard is the same length as that on the complete instrument, too long for the earlier style, but too short for the later full five octave compass.

The Keene and Brackley spinet has had an adventurous life, including being subjected to flooding at least twice. In 2018 it was acquired by Thomas Strange for the Carolina Music Museum (now the Sigal Music Museum) but it was by then in a poor state. Before it set off on its transatlantic adventure, it was my privilege to carry out what we hope and believe will be a definitive restoration. When the work was complete, I took advantage of what will surely be a unique opportunity to photograph the two ‘Keene & Brackleys’ together.



The detail of the nameboard design is interesting. Both have the characteristic inlay-panel with stepped semicircular ends, but whereas the panel on the complete instrument is the usual marquetry inlay, the nameboard-only motif consists mostly of pen or brush work, guided by incised lines. However, it is clear that the central lighter panel is inlaid, as shown by the mis-match centre top and bottom.



The design itself is traditional, with two confronted birds surrounded by flowers and foliage. It may also be seen on a more recent harpsichord, made by Derek Adlam in 1973, during the time that he worked at the Colt Collection.



This fine Italian-style harpsichord is unique amongst Derek's work. It also featured in the sale, and is now owned by a consortium including Derek and myself. It is currently being restored.

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