

# Early Personalized Watch by Francis Gregg

by Dr. E. Allen Richardson (PA)

**W**atches with personalized dials were popular in the late eighteenth century and in different periods throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When a personalized watch made by Francis Gregg in 1700 was offered for sale by a London dealer, it piqued my interest.<sup>1</sup> The watch is one of the earliest examples of personalization in which the letters of the owner's name were inscribed on the dial.

The Gregg watch also contained a few surprises, becoming a time capsule of information about the risks of business in the early eighteenth century. Gregg and the watch's first owner, Henry Hawkins, whose name appears on the dial, went bankrupt. This article uses the watch as a window into what watchmakers and small businesses experienced in the early eighteenth century when they entered the narrow market of luxury goods where the risk of falling into debt was great.

Gregg was a well-known watchmaker and clockmaker of the period who produced exquisite high-end clocks and watches.<sup>2</sup> Gregg worked between 1691 and 1747, producing bracket and tallcase clocks as well as watches. The watch featured in this article carries the serial number 224 on the case and the movement, which, in conjunction with Gregg's other work, suggests a date of manufacture around 1700. This date is also consistent with the style of the case, the champlévé dial, and the movement.

Typical of the period, the outer case contains neither hallmarks nor a casemaker's identification. However, the inner box carries the initials of casemaker William Bartram, "WB," while the outer case is unmarked. Bartram became free of the Clockmakers' Company in 1684 and was well known throughout this period. He manufactured cases for several prominent watchmakers, including John Wise, who made these timepieces from 1646 until his death in 1694.<sup>3</sup>

Personalized dials on watches probably originated with John Colston who became free of the Clockmakers' Company on July 3, 1682.<sup>4</sup> A few examples of Colston's watches with personalized dials have survived. However, no earlier examples of personalized dials are extant, indicating that Colston may have been the first to market this innovation followed by Francis Gregg. Curious-



Figure 1. Francis Gregg watch.

ly, no other example of a personalized dial on a Gregg watch has been identified.

While Gregg is not hard to find because enough of his clocks and watches have survived, identifying Henry Hawkins, whose name appears on the dial, proved more challenging. As the owner of a watch he clearly was a person of some means. However, because the watch is silver, rather than gold, I believe that he probably was not a member of the English aristocracy. Several people with the same name surfaced during my research but only one fits the time frame. The death of a Henry Hawkins in 1750 was mentioned in a 1756 publication, making him a good candidate.<sup>5</sup>

What follows is a likely scenario for the identity of Hawkins. However, because the watch does not have a provenance, the identification of Henry Hawkins cannot be confirmed. In either case, shedding some light on this Hawkins in conjunction with watchmaker Gregg reveals a common scenario about the plights of London



**Figure 2.** Francis Gregg watch movement.

businessmen who produced luxury goods during the early eighteenth century.

It is also unlikely that Hawkins was anyone else but the owner of the timepiece. Watches were not used for mortuary purposes like swords, which were ritual objects. It would have been unlikely, in this regard, for Hawkins to inscribe a family name on his watch. Rather, as has been the case with other personalized dials in later periods, the dial became an instrument for emphasizing and embellishing ownership.

In the early eighteenth century Gregg worked on Russell Street in London, a high-end neighborhood suitable for the sale of the kind of quality pieces he produced. By contrast, Hawkins lived on Princes Street in a section of London called Spitalfields where he was listed as a colorman and an oilman.<sup>6</sup>

In the early eighteenth century Spitalfields was a thriving part of the London economy. Populated with an influx of French Huguenots, the area was known for its production of quality textiles. During the reign of Louis XIV, 40,000-50,000 Protestant Huguenots sought refuge in England, escaping the persecution they had experienced in France.<sup>7</sup> Many of them gravitated to Spitalfields, which was the center of the English silk industry. One-fifth of the English labor force was employed in the silk industry, which made Spitalfields an area under rapid transformation, undergoing substan-

tial economic development. In addition, one-quarter of the national expenditures were related to dress, magnifying the opportunities in the textile industry. Connected to this burgeoning industry, the colorman provided the necessary dyes for producing silks and other quality textiles. In Spitalfields one could find all aspects of this growing economy. Wealthy merchants plied for the silk trade, while workers in the garrets on the upper floors of row houses produced the cloth that would later be sold to the aristocracy as the demand for silk increased.

It was in this environment that Henry Hawkins sold dyes and also lamp oil. Because both were commodities that were necessary for a growing industrial life, it is reasonable to assume that Hawkins made a good living at his combined trades. If the Gregg watch was indeed his, it suited a trades person who was of some means.

Under these rapidly changing conditions, economic opportunities were created, but the chance for bankruptcy was also quite real. However, unprecedented changes in the English bankruptcy laws in 1706 and 1707 gave debtors rights for the first time.<sup>8</sup> The legislation created various new conditions. When an individual declared bankruptcy, the creditors could not seize wearing apparel. While this seems trivial, it suggests that the harsh conditions before the new bankruptcy laws could mean the loss of everything you had. Fur-



**Figure 3.** Francis Gregg watch pillars.

thermore, the new laws allowed debtors to retain an allowance of 5 percent of the net value of their estate, or up to 200 pounds. Of course, there were conditions. Creditors must have received a portion of their debts and the debts could not be incurred by gambling. And then, the law provided the ultimate penalty for fraud—death by hanging.

However, the greatest right that the new laws granted was the right of discharge. Debtors were to be freed from their debts. For the first time in English law, bankruptcy was transformed into a viable business option, allowing tradesmen to be freed of their debts, to retain some personal possessions, and possibly to restart their businesses.

This is exactly what Gregg did. After three bankruptcies, he managed to reestablish his business each time and continued to produce quality timepieces until the mid-eighteenth century. However, after he declared bankruptcy, it is not known what happened to Henry Hawkins based on available information. But both men lived during a time when producing luxury items for the rich became a little less risky because of the changes in English law.

The personalized dial on Gregg's watch, proudly bearing the names of the watchmaker and its first owner, speaks of this time when, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, merchants could recover from bankruptcy. While debtors' prisons and public humiliation remained part of the risk of debt, Gregg showed that recovery was possible. As the growing English aristocracy demanded finer silks, clocks, and watches, Haw-

kins and Gregg supplied their needs. Whether their failures in business were entirely their own doing or were complicated by lack of payment from their aristocratic customers is something that we will never know. But Gregg's and Hawkins's experiences demonstrate how economic life in the heart of London was changing.

### About the Author

Dr. E. Allen Richardson is professor of religious studies at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, PA, where he has taught for 25 years. He earned his doctorate from the University of Arizona in 1979 in Oriental studies and is the author of four books on religious diversity and transplanted forms of Hinduism in the United States. He has been a member of the NAWCC for more than 30 years and specializes in English watches. Richardson is past president of Chapter 1 in Philadelphia and co-vice president of the Chapter.

### References and Notes

1. Ian Beilby, "Named Pocket Watch Dials," *Antique Collecting* (April 2014): 24-26. Beilby described the watch featured in this article as one of the earliest examples of a watch with a personalized dial.
2. G. H. Baillie, *Watchmakers & Clockmakers of the World*, Vol. 1 (London: N. A. G. Press, 1982), 132.
3. Philip Priestley, *Early Watch Case Makers of England 1631-1720* (Columbia, PA: National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc., 2000).
4. Baillie, *Watchmakers & Clockmakers of the World*, 132.
5. *Gentleman's and London Magazine: and Monthly Chronologer* (1741-1794): 265. This information was found in the 1756 issue at <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008696354>. I am indebted to NAWCC member Richard Newman who discovered this information.
6. Princes Street later became known as Princelet Street. "Records of Princes [later Princelet] Street Synagogue, Spitalfields, 1883-1973," The National Archives, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/rd/861b13e7-a180-4e32-a88a-7bab360d1380>.
7. "The Silk Weavers of Spitalfields," *Exodus: Movement of the People*, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.exodus2013.co.uk/the-silk-weavers-of-spitalfields/>.
8. Julian Hoppit, *Risk and Failure in English Business 1700-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, "The Risk of Bankruptcy among German Merchants in Eighteenth-Century England" (presentation, XIV International Economic History Congress, Helsinki 2006). Ann M. Carlos and Jennifer Lamping, "Conformity and the Certificate of Discharge: Bankruptcy in Early Eighteenth Century England" (draft presentation, Economic History Association Hearings, 2010).