

# **Report on the Significance of Blackboy Clock and associated Statue, Blackboy House, Castle Street, Stroud.**

## **1. The Horological Significance of the Clock and Associated Statue**

In order to assess the horological significance of the clock and statue, advice was sought from local clock expert, Ben Wright, who in turn consulted with Sir George White, Keeper of the Clockmaker's Company clock collection at the Science Museum in London, and Andrew Nicholls, who carried out the last restoration of the clock in 2004.

The Blackboys clock is an unusual example of a Jacquemart, or Jack clock. The Jack is a moving figure that strikes a bell on the hour; in this case, the Jack is a small Black boy holding a club, with which the hours are struck.

Although common in Europe, Jack clocks are very rare in Britain, with possibly only twenty examples surviving, according to research done by Sir George Wright.<sup>1</sup>

The clock has the date 1774 on its mechanism. The dial is of late 18<sup>th</sup> century style and contemporary with the mechanism and the Jack.

Although it has undergone restoration, the clock mechanism remains largely as originally made; this adds to its rarity value. It is unclear how much of the fabric of the statue is original; this needs further investigation.

## **2. The Clockmaker**

Much of our early information about the clock comes from the book 'Notes and Recollections of Stroud' written by Paul Hawkins Fisher, published in 1871<sup>2</sup>. From Fisher, we learn that the clock, which he describes as 'having a large dial face, and the figure of a negro-boy with a bell before him, on which he sounded the hours with a club...' were made by a clock and watchmaker, John Miles.

Church records<sup>3</sup> indicate that Miles was born in 1754, and lived his life out in Stroud. The Gloucestershire Records Office holds a Marriage licence allegation, dated 8<sup>th</sup> Feb 1794, for John Miles of Stroud, watchmaker, widower, aged 40 and Sarah Tombs of Stroud, spinster, aged 30; a son was born in 1797.

Miles does not seem to have been a particularly notable craftsman, though another example of his work did come up at auction at Christies in 2008.<sup>4</sup> Fisher, rather witheringly, wrote that the clock '... was the greatest noise, actual or metaphorical, the watchmaker ever made in the world...'

## **3. The Statue**

The origins and inspiration for the design of Miles' clock are unknown, indeed there is a possibility that the statue was not actually carved by Miles, but instead was a re-used figure from elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Email to Ben Wright, dated 14<sup>th</sup> December 2020

<sup>2</sup> Paul Hawkins Fisher: Notes and Recollections of Stroud (Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, accessed 21<sup>st</sup> December 2020

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5098484>, accessed 24<sup>th</sup> December 2020

Whilst it is important to include the possible origins and inspiration behind the statue within this report, it must be stated that the possibilities are all speculative and it is therefore not possible to define why Miles chose to use the image of the boy.

It has been mooted that the clock and statue were intended as an advertisement for tobacco<sup>5</sup>; there is no tangible evidence for this, but bearing in mind that the clock was not originally sited on a building that would have sold tobacco goods, it is much more likely that Miles made the clock simply to put on his shop as an advertisement for his own trade.

It has further been mooted that the boy is a depiction of a slave; this cannot be verified. However, the statue was made at a time when the Transatlantic slave trade was at its height. Gloucestershire profited from this trade, both directly and indirectly, and the ownership of slaves is known to have existed in the county in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

It has been suggested that Miles was attempting a decorative motif in clock making that began to appear in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, now known in the clock trade as the 'Noble Savage'<sup>7</sup>; again, this cannot be verified.

Were it to have been carved by Miles, it is unlikely that he took the boy's image from life, although there was a small Black presence in Stroud in the late eighteenth century. Church registers<sup>8</sup> contain records of three Black people. Adam John Parker was buried in St Lawrence in 1786, William Jupiter, or Jubiter, was buried in Rodborough in 1778 and the 12-year-old son of Qualquay Assedew was christened in Stroud as William Ellis (the vicar's name) in 1801.

It is possible that the boy's appearance, instead, derives from images of Black people in the woodcuts and etchings of the time, including tobacco advertisements.

Whatever the inspiration or its origins, it has to be remembered that, without a doubt, the boy's image came directly or indirectly through the influence of slavery and colonialism.

#### **4. The Clock in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

John Miles had a shop in the High Street, where the entrance to Kendrick Street is now, and he set the clock and statue on the front of the building; it would have been a significant and well-known feature in the commercial heart of the town.

#### **5. The Clock in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.**

Following his death in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, John Miles' clock came into the hands of the Thornton Family. It was mentioned in John Thornton's will of

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<sup>5</sup> David Verey & Alan Brooks Gloucestershire 1: The Cotswolds: Cotswolds Pt. 1 (Pevsner Architectural Guides: Buildings of England). (Yale University Press, 1999)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/gloucestershire/content/articles/2007/02/19/slavery\\_gloucs\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/gloucestershire/content/articles/2007/02/19/slavery_gloucs_feature.shtml), accessed 11.6.2021

<sup>7</sup> Email to Ben Wright, dated 14<sup>th</sup> December 2020

<sup>8</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, accessed 21<sup>st</sup> December 2020

1834, in which 'my black boy Clock'<sup>9</sup> was left to his wife, Joyce. The clock was moved to the Duke of York pub in Nelson Street, where it remained for several years

Following Joyce Thornton's death in 1843, the clock went to her son, Henry. A public subscription scheme was set up to acquire the clock from Henry Thornton and in 1844, it was placed, with the statue in a specially designed decorative niche, onto the front of the new National School for Girls in Castle Street.

Fisher noted in his book that, 'There the Boy has stood ever since, doing the duty of turning his head, lifting his club, and striking the hours of day and night as often as they come round; and there, it is hoped, he will for many years continue to perform his useful automatic exercises...'

He went on to say, '...it has thereby come to pass, that the identity, if not the very existence of the school, has well-nigh been lost in that of the Black-boy himself; inasmuch as a little girl being asked "What school do you go to?" replied "Please, ma'am, I go to the Black-boy."; and this is the answer that all children would give to the same question- "Please, ma'am, I go to the Black-boy."'

## **6. The Clock in the 20 and 21st<sup>th</sup> Century.**

The Blackboys School closed in the 1960s, and the building subsequently became a teachers' training centre.

Following the closure of the training centre, the building was taken into private ownership, and was subdivided into flats in the late 1990s.

The clock and statue appear in Stroud News and Journal newspaper articles throughout the mid- latter half of the century, with references to its deteriorating condition and subsequent restorations.<sup>10</sup>

In a Stroud News and Journal article of 1961, Mr. T. R. Robinson of Bristol, technical editor to the "Horological Journal", was quoted,

"Not many towns have the distinction of these little 'jack' figures," he said. "I would love to see the dial restored in blue and gold, the little figure made quite right and painted in bright colours."

The clock was restored between 1974 and 1977, with the restorer, Mr. Michael Maltin, noting the poor condition of the statue. He is quoted in the Stroud News and Journal in 1974, as saying,

"One arm is missing and quite frankly, the head is rotten — it's all made of wood, of course. But I'm sure something can be done with it."

The clock was in bad condition again by the 1990s, and underwent another phase of restoration, completed in 2004.

At this point, it is not known how much replacement work was required to bring the statue back into repair. Nor is it known if the paint scheme was a product of the

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<sup>9</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, accessed 18.6.2021

<sup>10</sup> Stroud News and Journal passim, research by Dan Guthrie

1970s restoration, or whether it was a perpetuation of an existing scheme. Further information with regard to the originality of the fabric and authenticity of the paint scheme may exist from the statue's last restoration in 2004.

## **7. The Special Architectural and Historic Interest of the Building.**

In 1974, the former National School was added, at Grade II, to the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural and Historic Interest. The list description reads:

'1844 Former Black Boy School. Ashlar, Pitched tile roof with coped gables on kneelers. Ashlar chimneys, 2 storeys. Mullion and transom windows and with hoodmoulds and diagonal iron glazing bars Octagonal clock; C18 figure of Black Boy striking bell on corbel table, pointed hood over. Iron railings with fleur-de-lys finials round school yard.'

## **8. Statutory Protection.**

As a listed building, Blackboys House is protected from any works that Could affect its special interest. Any physical alterations to the building would require listed building consent.

Further to that, new measures to protect England's cultural and historic heritage were announced by the Communities Secretary, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, on 17th January 2021.<sup>11</sup>

The new legal protections mean that proposals for the removal of any historic statue, whether listed or not, will now require listed building consent or planning permission, and that Historic England must be notified of any such application.<sup>12</sup>

Under the new regulations, if the local planning authority intends to grant permission for removal of a particular statue and Historic England objects, the Communities Secretary will be notified so he can make the final decision about the application in question.

## **9. Conclusions**

The Blackboys clock and its associated statue is one of the country's few examples of a Jacquemart, or Jack clock. It is of high horological significance in technical and design terms, as well in terms of rarity value.

The clock and statue form part of the original architectural intent of the Grade II listed former National School, now Blackboy House. They are noted in Historic England's list description, and so have been deemed to make a strong contribution to the building's special architectural interest.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-protection-for-england-s-heritage> accessed 18th January 2020

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/arrangements-for-handling-heritage-applications-direction-2021>, accessed 28.6.21

The clock and statue have been in Stroud for approximately 240 years. The clock and associated statue therefore can be considered to have an historic interest as lasting features within the life and fabric of the town.

However, there is, without any doubt, an association, either directly, or indirectly, with the slave trade and colonialism, and this cannot be ignored.

*This report has been prepared by Kate Russell, Specialist Conservation Officer, with additional research by Dan Guthrie, in order to assess the significance of the clock and associated statue at Blackboy House, Castle Street, Stroud.*

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