

The Stephen Keene Workshops

Stephen Keene was born about 1640 in Oxfordshire<sup>1</sup>. He was apprenticed to Gabriel Townsend in 1655 and was made a freeman of the Joiners Company in 1662, thus having spent four years working alongside John Player, his fellow apprentice, who had already been bound to Townsend for five years. Also, like Player, he became Master of the Joiners Company in 1704/5.

Keene took a succession of apprentices<sup>2</sup> between 1664 and 1703 being:-

Abraham Richardson	1664 - 71
Robert Smith	1670 -(77)
John Harris	1675 - 85
Leonard Dutton	1682 -(89)
Richard Vesey	1687 -(94)
Edward Blunt	1693 - 1700
Thomas Barton	1699 - 1706
Charles Brackley	1703 - 1711

(The dates in brackets are based on the normal 7 year apprenticeship).

Whether he took any more after 1711 is unknown but it is unlikely since he would already have been in his seventies and died sometime after 1719. The nameboard of a spinet signed "Stephanus Keene and Carolus Brackley" <sup>formerly</sup> owned by Henry Tull was stated as coming from an instrument dated 1719. *Now in the Colt Collection*

The list above reads like a who's who of spinet making, Vesey, Blunt, Barton and Brackley all went on to become known makers in their own right and both Blunt and Brackley spent some years in partnership with Keene before going solo.

It is now pertinent to examine the surviving spinets from the workshops of Stephen Keene and Partners, the earliest dated example being that listed in Boalch as No 2, owned in 1941 by Messrs. Legg of Cirencester. The compass is

GG/BB - d<sup>m</sup>, short octave, It has a marquetry panel of floral design with a bird set in the nameboard, is dated on the Jack rail and has an overall length of 61". Messrs. Legg also had in 1936 an instrument dated 1690 and another bearing the date 1685 was seen by J. Boston near London.<sup>3</sup>

In 1972<sup>4</sup> Sotheby's sold a Keene spinet of walnut with a compass of GG/BB - d<sup>m</sup> broken octave and a marquetry panel depicting a bird amongst scrolling flowers and foliage. It has an overall length of 1575mm (62") and an original frame stand. It is listed in Boalch as No 10 and it is worth noting that the marquetry panel is identical to that on a spinet dated 1700 restored by Morley's in 1953, which is listed as Boalch 4.

Christie's Salerooms sold in 1956<sup>5</sup> "An English Mahogany Harpsichord, by Stephen Keene, the shaped case with hinged top and front disclosing an ivory (sic) keyboard, the panel to the back inlaid with a spray of flowers on ebony ground, and inscribed, 'Stephanus Keene, Londini fecit', on square legs united by stretchers 4'11" wide." This obviously means a spinet and is probably walnut rather than mahogany (it is often hard to tell the difference after years of 'patina' have built up). The keyboard would be ebony with ivory sharps. The interesting point is the "width" or length of only 59" making it the shortest Keene spinet so far. It also suggests a very early date, possibly before 1685. The dated 1685 spinet was 61" long, and the undated (now) spinet in the Royal College of Music Museum<sup>6</sup> is 69" long.

This last instrument described in detail on page was once dated on the Jack rail after the signature, but it has now been scratched off. However, the general style of the instrument would date it around 1685 - 1690. Boalch does not give details of others but this is the only Keene spinet I have seen, so far, with a double bentside.

Any instrument with E.B. on the keys must date from the period of Edward Blunt's apprenticeship 1693 - 1700 and there are at least two from this period. Both are signed "Stephanus Keene Londini fecit" either side of their marquetry panels. The one listed in Boalch under Blunt (No 2) is marginally smaller than the one at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in Virginia,<sup>7</sup> but its scaling is erratic, having a scale of almost eleven inches in the extreme treble. However they both seem to be splendid examples of spinets at this date.

Edward Blunt probably worked as a partner with Keene from 1700 - 1704, the year that Edward Blunt took Nicholas Mitchell as an apprentice<sup>8</sup>, certainly by 1705 the spinets revert to just Keene's signature on the nameboard. From this period we have again at least two spinets, one of which is listed as Boalch 13d. It is slightly longer than the preceeding two being 66" (the earlier two were 64" and 65"). Otherwise both this and the spinet in Lancaster<sup>9</sup> are typical, their only distinguishing features being the addition of Edwardus Blunt to the nameboard.

The next four instruments to be examined closely date from the period between Edward Blunt leaving the firm and 1711. They are Boalch No's 19, 5a, 5b and 7. The first of these is presently in America<sup>10</sup> and is probably the same as Boalch 13. There is little known about it except the arabesque pattern marquetry is unlike any others yet seen. It has the standard compass of GG/BB - d<sup>11</sup> broken octave which, together with the marquetry panel dates it between 1705 and 1711 for reasons that will become obvious when the instruments after that date are dealt with.

From 1705 we have a spinet who's bottom key is signed by Thomas Barton, It is 66" long and has an arabesque pattern marquetry panel including two very angry looking birds. This is Boalch's 5a. No 5b was sold by Philips in 1965 and the catalogue describes it thus:-

"A late 17th century spinet by Stephen Keene in playing order and having a compass of four and a half octaves. The natural notes veneered in ebony with decorated ends and the accidentals in ivory, the keyboard incorporates a short octave ..... walnut case, pierced brass hinges, marquetry panel of birds and foliage. Stephanus Keene Londini fecit. 66" overall on modern stand with inverted cup supports united by stretchers."

It is signed "C.B. 1705/6" on the top key and Jack, not "J.H. 1703" as Sotheby's Catalogue stated in 1959. This is therefore a spinet from the middle of Charles Brackley's apprenticeship.

The last of this group is the "unsigned" spinet dated 1708 on the top key. I am certain that this instrument is by Keene and suspect that it once carried his name on the nameboard, but this has since been removed. There are pale patches in the patina either side of the marquetry panel where the signature would have appeared, and the left hand of these patches has marks which could be part of the decorated S. John Barnes who restored the spinet casts doubt on its being by Keene stating that the interior workmanship is poor.

Around 1710 or so Stephen Keene, who had been making spinets to more or less the same design since the 1680's must have been swayed by the influence of fashion or more properly that of other makers and musicians.<sup>11</sup> After this date his normal GG/BB - d" broken octave compass is extended to GG.AA - d" e" . The first dated example of this compass is the spinet at Westwood Manor<sup>12</sup> which is signed "C.B./1711/18" on the top key. The design of the instrument is unaltered except for the extra length needed to accomodate the extra strings involved. Even this has been kept to a minimum by reducing the scaling to 10 1/2" at its longest so that only half an inch has been added to the case.

Another spinet made soon after, since Charles Brackley had now been made a partner and was included on the name-board, is Boalch's No 22. Recently restored (1984) by John Barnes it has the same large compass but is three inches longer at 69" (a full circle to the length of the Royal College of Music's spinet No 179) in order to accomodate the increased scaling. It is only  $10\frac{3}{8}$ " in the treble but is much more slowly tapered except in the extreme bass.

The Keene spinet in the National Gallery of Victoria<sup>13</sup> probably dates from 1710/11 as it is signed only by Keene but is otherwise exactly like the one signed by Brackley as well, except that is only 67" long.

Finally an instrument which was not made in the Keene workshops is that owned by Colonel N.R. Colville and signed "Carolus Brackley Londini fecit". This has a compass from GG - e<sup>III</sup> chromatic as is found on the Hancock harpsichord of 1720<sup>14</sup> and I would suggest that it is from about that date but certainly after 1719 when Brackley was still working with Keene.

It is quite likely that Stephen Keene died either in 1719 or 1720 and thus brought to a close one of the most productive workshops both of spinets and of fine spinet makers.

The various other surviving Keene spinets listed in Boalch would need considerably more information to slot them into the above pattern of dates.