

The Workshops of Thomas Hitchcock (and Son)

There is a great deal of conflicting evidence concerning Thomas Hitchcock. We know that his father, Thomas the Elder, was a freeman of the Haberdashers Company and died before 1700.¹ We know that Thomas the younger was apprenticed for eight years, from 13th February 1700, to Benjamin Slade and that in 1715 he took up freedom of the Haberdashers Company by patrimony in preference to the Joiners Company. Thus he was probably born around 1685 and, given a life span of seventy years or so (which is not unreasonable - see Keene and Player) he was probably dead by the mid 1750's.

Thomas's son John was made a freeman of the Haberdashers Company by patrimony in 1750 and went into partnership with his father. Both continued to make their own instruments, individually signed but they both shared the same consecutive numbering system. Thus we have No 1518 made by Thomas, No 1520 by John and No 1547 by Thomas. This helps in placing a possible date of 1750 on No 1519.²

Looking at the table of surviving numbers and dates² we see that Thomas Hitchcock's production began at about 60 spinets per year between 1708 and 1722 and was at around 30 spinets a year between 1722 and 1725, by 1729 it had risen to about 45 per year, which by 1733 had dropped to about 40 per year and by 1750 it was right down to about 10 per year. When John came into the firm production rose again but never achieved the level of success enjoyed by Thomas in his heyday. The surviving spinets by John range from 1520 to 2102 and, since he died in 1774,³ this would indicate a production of about 25 per year.

All of the above calculations depend on the use of a consecutive numbering system which is probably a well founded assumption. However a certain number of spinets by both Hitchcocks survive with no number at all.

Where these fit into the system we cannot tell but there

³ where from?

are two possibilities, either the customers did not want numbers on their instruments or the Hitchcocks restrained themselves from numbering them for some reason. If we can assume, when an unnumbered spinet occurs, that it was assigned a number and that the next spinet was numbered accordingly all is well and good, but there is the possibility that the unnumbered ones are in addition to the consecutive numbering system. With a survival rate of 2% for all Hitchcock spinets³, the surviving seven unnumbered spinets could indicate a possible three hundred or so which were not numbered! A fair number of these may date from the period 1722 - 25 when the amount of numbered spinets seems rather small.

Aside from these problems there is the question of Thomas the elder and whether he did in fact produce any spinets. I suggest that it is unlikely, for the evidence is very thin and somewhat suspect. Boalch lists three spinets, supposedly by him, as dated 1660, 1664 and 1700. It is possible that in the first and last case the date is in fact the serial number. This mistake has often been made before as can be seen in the Connoisseur, July-December 1939 p.93 where a spinet by John Hitchcock is quoted as dating from 1630.⁴ Since Thomas probably produced about ten of the twenty five spinets made per year after 1750 it is quite possible that he made two spinets numbered 1660 and 1700 between 1750 and 1755.

The spinet listed in Boalch as No 2 is by Edward Blunt and therefore must have been made after 1705.⁵ The supposed inscription on the first key "Thos. Hitchcock his make in 1664" is thus totally spurious and seems almost worthy of Franciolini's fascination for faking instruments in the nineteenth century.

I think then that we are quite justified in saying that Thomas Hitchcock the elder did not produce any spinets or that if he did, they have not survived. It is interesting to note that the three instruments listed in Boalch have not been seen for some considerable time.

1511?

Would this
have been
allowed by
the guild
system?

The surviving spinets by Thomas Hitchcock the younger begin with No 511 and end at 1547. He presumably went straight into business immediately his apprenticeship finished in 1708 and the production figures above would indicate that No 511 dates from around 1715 - 16 i.e. about the time he entered the Haberdashers Company. The reference in Boalch to Hitchcock's signature and date 1703, on a spinet by Blunt, would indicate that Blunt was producing his own spinets for a time before going into partnership with Keene (or simultaneously) and that Hitchcock was perhaps lent to him by Slade to cover some work during a busy period. In theory Hitchcock should not have been working either for himself or for another maker during the period of his being bound to Benjamin Slade. or key is from another instrument entirely.

The remaining spinets are all remarkably similar. Unlike other makers, the Hitchcocks seem to have had two standard designs, the straight tail and the double bentside, and to have stuck to them as established designs from the very start. The cases may have got progressively larger but the ^{proportions of the} relative shape remained approximately the same.

Hitchcock used the GG - g^{III} compass right from the start, a habit which he probably inherited from Slade. Curiously though he seems to have started with keyboards having white naturals and changed back to keyboards with black naturals towards the end of his career, both No's 1518 and 1547 (described in detail) have this feature as does No 1630 by John Hitchcock. The three octave span seems to vary from 475 to 492mm but not in relation to case number so the only way of dating unnumbered examples seems to be the combination of case size and brasswork used. The unnumbered spinet in the Bate Collection in Oxford,⁶ for example, has a case length of 1803^{mm} and has pierced and chased hinges of the early type as used on No 1007. It may well therefore be roughly contemporary with No 1241.

The Hitchcocks seem to have been ^{known as} ~~well capable of~~ designing instruments with fairly even scaling - the one in the Bate Collection, for example, has a Just scale for four octaves in the treble and tapers suddenly in the bass.

No 1241 is apparently a one off, made to special commission as the decoration of the keywell and interior is of a type not seen on any other Hitchcock spinet I have examined, the usual form being a plain holly/sycamore veneer with double black stringing. N.B. John Hitchcock sold at Sotheby's April '87 had vertgrained walnut.

This standardization by Hitchcock is paving the way for the large spinets that were popular in England in the second half of the 18th century. Customers must have found comfort in the knowledge that a spinet from Hitchcock would be much the same as any other by him.