

The Spinets of the Hitchcock Dynasty: Names, Numbers, and Dates – 2025 Revision

Originally presented by David Hackett at the Friends of Square Pianos Spinet Day April 8, 2017



Spinet N° 1460 (1734) property of the author.

The Hitchcock workshop, operating for a good part of the eighteenth century, was undoubtedly the most successful producer of English spinets. Earlier makers, in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, had included Charles Haward, John Player, and Stephen Keene. Of these, Stephen Keene, who had previously made rectangular virginals, was probably the most important in his time, and the most influential. This short paper will show that there was an important connection between him and the Hitchcocks.

There has been much confusion about the dates of Hitchcock spinets, and many false statements in earlier published works. This was partly due to the serial numbers which appear on the front of many (but not all) of their instruments, and have sometimes been mistaken for dates.



I will now attempt to present the history more clearly, and to explain and correct previous misunderstandings. We can be sure that earlier histories were written in good faith, and on the basis of records available at the time, and we recognise that this essay owes a great deal to those earlier writers. The principal sources on which this analysis is based are listed at the end.

Amongst the apprentices of Stephen Keene was Edward Blunt, who was Keene's nephew by marriage. He completed his apprenticeship in December 1700, and became a freeman of the Joiners' Company. He continued to work with his former master for a short time; two spinets still survive carrying the makers' names 'Keene & Blunt', one of which has the date 1702 on the top key.

We now introduce Thomas Hitchcock (often known as Thomas Hitchcock the Younger) who was christened on 10th October 1684, and apprenticed to Benjamin Slade on 17th February 1699 or 1700, depending on when you prefer to change the year numbers. [In the old tradition the year began on Lady Day, March 25th. In practice, this ambiguity rarely matters.] His father was indeed also called Thomas ('The Elder') but he was a chair-maker, and there is no possibility that any Hitchcock spinets were made in the seventeenth century, as is often claimed in earlier works. It is possible, though, that the family's tradition of chair-making influenced the stands which were provided for many of the spinets. We will see later that it is also significant that Thomas the Elder was a freeman of the Haberdashers' Guild.

The earliest known spinet carrying the name Edward Blunt alone is dated 1703, and it is here that we first meet the name of Thomas Hitchcock, whose name is signed on the top jack with the date. His initials and the date are repeated on the top key. In view of his apprenticeship to Benjamin Slade, it is surprising that his name appears on Blunt spinets, but perhaps Slade was unable to work at the time, and had 'lent' his apprentice to another maker.



The second time that his name appears is on the next known Blunt spinet, made in 1704, and now jointly owned by Dr Albert Bil and the writer, seen below on the occasion of its post-restoration début at Finchcocks in 2015.



Before its re-discovery at auction in 2014, this spinet's last known public appearance was at the International Inventions Exhibition of 1885, where it was shown in Royal Albert Hall. The catalogue states that Thomas Hitchcock's name appears on the top jack and on a key as on the 1703 instrument, which is also mentioned in the catalogue entry.

VINNICOMBE, Mr. W.—*Spinet*, by Edward Blount. 1664.

Has the autograph of Thomas Hitchcock, as maker, on a key and on the jacks. Double sharps in the bass. There is a similar autograph of this maker on a Blount spinet recently in the possession of Mr. Taphouse, of Oxford, dated 1703.

However, this spinet has been the cause of much of the confusion, probably starting because of the above statement that it was made in 1664. The reason for this is clear - the numerals '1664' appear boldly on the front of the instrument.



And the lowest key carries the words 'Thomas Hitchcock His Make in 1664'.



Sadly, the jack which was said also to carry his signature has now been lost (possibly taken as a souvenir?) but the top key carries the inscription '54 / TH / 1704'. (The spinet has 54 keys - 54 is the key number.)



We can be sure that the date 1704 is correct - it is supported by the style and specification of the instrument, which is exactly right for that date. But the '1664' on the front remains a mystery, as does the inscription on the bottom key. It is clear that the numbers on the front are not original and also that the inscription on the bottom key (with the probable exception of the words '*His make in*') has been re-written – the ink and handwriting are different.

Further confirmation for these dates, and the presence of Thomas Hitchcock in Blunt's workshop, are provided by another surviving Blunt's spinet, again carrying the words and signature 'Thomas Hitchcock His Make in 1705'.

So there can be no doubt that the young Thomas Hitchcock, newly apprenticed to Benjamin Slade, was working under Edward Blunt's guidance in the early years of the eighteenth century.

Thomas Hitchcock would have completed his apprenticeship in 1708 or thereabouts, and he married Jane Beauregard in that year. However, he did not take freedom of his master's Company (Joiners) but waited until 1715 to take freedom of the Haberdashers' Company by patrimony - the Hitchcocks belonged to this higher-ranking guild by family tradition.

We do not know what he was doing between about 1705 and 1715, but we may suppose that he was completing his apprenticeship with Benjamin Slade, and then possibly working for him, or another maker, as a Journeyman.

The next time we meet his name is on the earliest known survivor of the spinets to carry the name Thomas Hitchcock on the nameboard, the property of the Botetort County Historical Society in the USA.



All the other known Hitchcock spinets have a full five-octave compass, but this one alone is two notes short of that, ascending only to e^3 . The compass of the spinet was developing rapidly during the early years of the eighteenth century; the GG – d^3 range (with broken octave) as seen on the 1704 Blunt spinet, was usual until some time before 1710. This developed in stages, so that by some time before about 1715, the standard compass was the full five octaves. It is therefore safe to date this first known Hitchcock spinet, in which the broken octave arrangement has been abandoned, to this transitional period 1710 - 1715. Unlike the later Hitchcock spinets, there is no number on the front, but internally the number 471 has been found. Although this is unlikely to be the very first Hitchcock, it is not reasonable to believe that there were 470 spinets before this one. But we do not know why Thomas decided to start his numbering system somewhere in the late 400s. One possibility is that it was a personal numbering system, including all the spinets he had made for Blunt and others, but this is pure speculation. Four other spinets with no front numbers are known; numbers 511 and 616, and two where numbers have not been found. One of those without a number (formerly in the Beurmann Collection) carries a date of 1715 inside. We assume that number 471 was made before this.

1715 was the year in which Thomas Hitchcock took his freedom of the Haberdashers' Guild. Although we know that he had been making instruments for more than ten years by then, and had completed his apprenticeship in 1708, it is perhaps unlikely that he would have been able to offer a spinet for sale under his own name until he was able to operate his own business as a freeman, so we suggest that number 471 was also sold in 1715, even if it was actually made a bit earlier. Unfortunately, we know nothing of Thomas Hitchcock's circumstances in those days, or how and when the workshop was established. Is it possible that he was planning to 'launch' the business in 1715, and was quietly building up some opening stock?

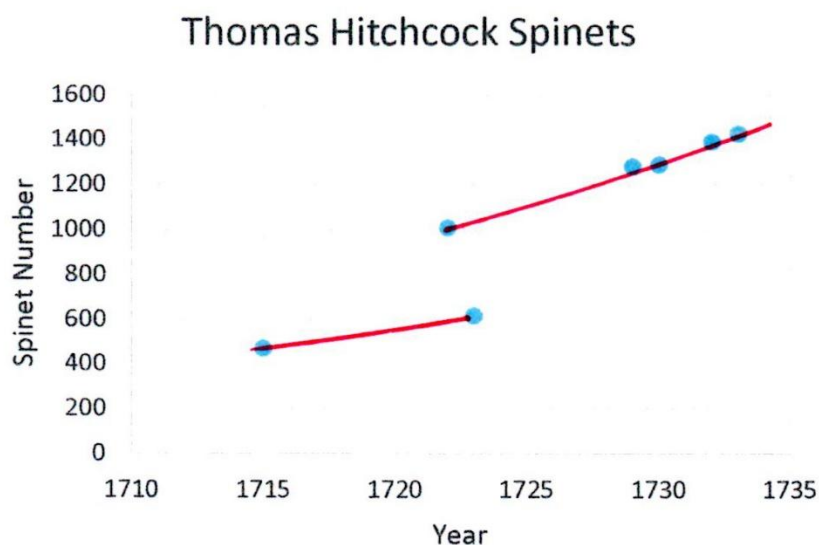
Very fortunately, spinet number 616 carries a date (also internally) of 1723. We may then offer a suggestion for the probable correspondence of numbers and dates for these first Hitchcock spinets.



The shape of the curve connecting these two 'fixed' points can only be conjectural, but it is reasonable to suppose that the rate of production gradually increased as the workshop gained experience and customers.

We now encounter something of a puzzle. Number 616 is dated 1723, but the next known survivor, number 1007 - now numbered on the front - carries a date of 1722 internally, a year earlier. Apart from the small change of adding the number on the front, no other differences are seen. We can, though, be sure that there was a gap in the numbering somewhere between 616 and 1007. We note that Thomas's wife Jane died in October 1722, and that he married Margaret (Hastings) rather soon afterwards in 1723. This observation might or might not be significant, but it is surely likely that Thomas Hitchcock knew Margaret Hastings before Jane's death.

The '1000-series' of spinets continued, and we encounter two very credible dates on numbers 1279 (1729) and 1289 (1730) both now in the Beurmann collection. Then we have number 1390 dated 1732 and 1425, dated 1733. As we see from the graph below, these five points fit very neatly onto a near-straight line, but the discontinuity is obvious.



From now on, there are no more dated examples (as far as we know) and we are into the realms of extrapolation, which any scientist knows is a risky game. We have a few facts though.

Thomas Hitchcock died suddenly in a carriage accident in 1737. His widow Margaret Hitchcock, in accordance with the customs of the time, carried on her husband's business. This is confirmed by a policy record of the Sun insurance company, dated 1740 (Whitehead and Nex; Galpin Society Journal LXVII, 2014)

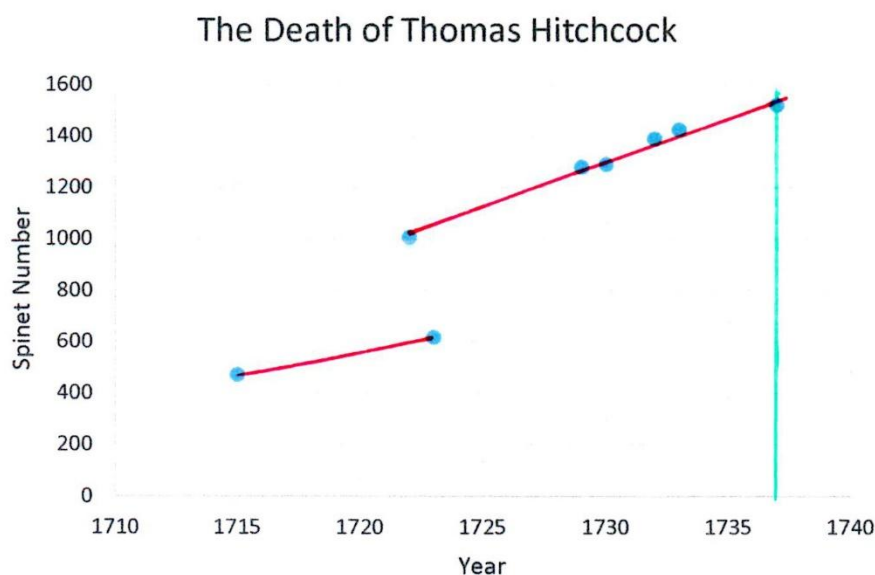
Later spinets carry the name 'Johannes' (John) Hitchcock, whose baptismal record dated 1734 has recently been discovered (Lance Whitehead, *Harpsichord Perspectives VI* [2013] p.26.). The above article in GSJ refers to an endorsement to the policy dated 1746/7, in which Margaret formally takes her son John into partnership, although he would only have been about twelve or thirteen. He took Freedom of the Haberdashers' Guild by patrimony in 1750, and his biography in Boalch-Mould Online (BMO) also has him signing a marriage bond in 1751 when he would only have been sixteen. There might be a conflict here, as we would perhaps expect him to have been 21 for any of this to be legally possible.

After Thomas' death, Margaret had three options for the nameboard: to continue using her husband's name, to sign them 'Margaret Hitchcock', or to use John's name in spite of his tender age.

There are many more recent examples of a firm continuing to trade under the founder's name after his death (e.g. C. Bechstein, John Broadwood & Sons) but I know of no example as early as 1737, and the accident that befell Thomas Hitchcock was well publicised. Nor, until Nannette Streicher and Anne Bland around the turn of the century, can I recall any example of a woman using her own name on a nameboard. So this leaves us with the option (which we know is what happened) of putting John's name on the front. This was the future, after all.

It is not sensible to suggest that the change of name occurred before the sudden death of Thomas in 1737. But the question is, how soon after this tragedy did the name change?

We see from the graph below that the intersection of a vertical line to mark the date of Thomas' death, and a horizontal line for the number of the first 'Johannes Hitchcock' spinet (number 1520) would correspond perfectly to a continuation of the production rate curve. This supports the suggestion of a name-change very soon after Thomas' death.



The suggestion that the name-change occurred later, would require a sudden fall-off in production after number 1425 was made in 1733, and this is very difficult to accept – Hitchcock was the leading maker of spinets in England (and indeed the world) by this time, he was only 52 years old, demand was at its peak, and there is no evidence to suggest a sudden fall-off in output.

We should mention that Peter Mole, in his 2009 thesis, proposes the involvement of a third Thomas Hitchcock ('Thomas Free 1701') in the story. There was such a man, but no connection with Thomas the spinet maker has been proven. This Thomas Free 1701 was apprenticed to Thomas Overbury and took his freedom of the Haberdashers' company, but there is no evidence that either he or his master was a spinet maker. Both Thomas and Hitchcock were quite common names in London in those days; he could quite possibly have been a relative, but there seems to be no case to support the proposition that he had any training in the trade.

One further reference-point remains. We must always be cautious about accepting tales of 'Handel's Harpsichord', but spinet number 1676 (John Hitchcock) survives in the collection of the Royal College of Music, and it has a credible provenance. It was given to the Royal College in 1903 by Edith Hipkins, in memory of her father A J Hipkins; the instrument had been in his collection. It is illustrated in his own book, published in 1896, where he says:

"The spinet in the illustration is numbered 1676, and was given by Handel to a friend named Leamon (perhaps Anglicised from Lehmann) who came with him from Germany, and ultimately settled in Norfolk, and from his descendants it came into my possession"

Other details of Hipkins' narrative are simply wrong. For example he says that "*Thomas Hitchcock's written dates found within instruments made by him cover the long period between 1664 and 1703*" (see the beginning of this essay for his reasoning on this point). He also dates the spinet to "*about 1710*", which is not right.

Lehmann died in 1756, so the spinet must have been made before then, say 1755 at the latest. Spinet number 1677 survived until 1970, when it was lost in a fire, but no later instruments in the 1000-series are recorded. It is unlikely that number 1677 was the very last of the series to be made, but it would also be unlikely that there were very many more. We therefore suggest that the numbering of this series reached no higher than about 1700. It is also possible that as John's other interests occupied more of his time, production slowed down.

If we now extrapolate the line still further, to include number 1676 being made around 1755, then a continuation of the curve is still possible, reaching number 1700 around 1760. We have already said that extrapolation, particularly this far, is a risky game, but this proposition does fit the facts.



If number 1676 were made earlier than about 1755, a smooth curve like this is perfectly possible, but then the decline of production also moves earlier, suggesting little if any additions to the 1000-series after about 1750.

All of the spinets discussed so far were made according to two basic designs: the 'mitre-tail' type as seen in the first picture, or a 'serpentine' style, as in the second picture below, and these two together represent a typical Hitchcock style.



This leaves a group of John Hitchcock spinets unaccounted for. These are numbers 2012 and 2016, and four more similar examples without visible numbers. These spinets show a complete break in style from the traditional Hitchcock instruments. They are larger, deeper, and typical of the mid/late eighteenth-century style. An example is illustrated below.



This one is in the Musikhistorisk Museum, Copenhagen. The name Backus (Backers?) appears internally in number 2012, and Thomas Culliford's name appears in two of the un-numbered examples. At least some of these are said to be made of mahogany rather than walnut, and this supports the suggestion of a later date. John Hitchcock died in 1774. Whether these instruments were made in the Hitchcock workshops, or whether their manufacture was subcontracted, we do not know. But we do know that later in his career, John Hitchcock had other interests, including politics, and it seems that he was depending more on other makers.

Principal Sources

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