

The Priors: a successful British watch brand for the Ottoman market

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In the second half of the eighteenth century, George Prior created what is arguably the most successful British brand for the Ottoman market. This article is about the four main actors involved during the 113 years of the brand's existence from 1765 to 1878, namely George Prior (watchmaker, Turkey merchant and esquire of Halse, Somerset and Sydenham, Kent), his son Edward Prior (Turkey merchant and esquire of Halse, Somerset), William Chambers (watchmaker) and his son George Chambers (watch manufacturer).

In 1904, in the second edition of *Old Clocks and Watches and their Makers* by F. J. Britten the following entries appear:

Prior, George, 31, Prescot St., Goodman's Fields, 1765–88; Rosomond's Row, 1794; 5, George Yard, Lombard St., 1798–1810.

Prior, George, son of John, of Otley and Leeds. In 1809 he received from the Society of Arts a silver medal and 25 guineas for a clock escapement, and in 1811, 20 guineas for a remontoire escapement. In 1818 he patented (No. 4214) a remontoire. In the *Yorkshire Directory* for 1822 he is described as of Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, but he afterwards removed to City Rd., London, and became reputed as a maker of watches for the Turkish market.

Prior, Edward, also a maker for the Turkish market contemporaneously with the last-named George, carried on business in Clerkenwell at first alone, and afterwards in partnership with **Wm. Chambers**; a long-case clock by Edward Prior is in the mosque of Ahmet, Constantinople; watch, 'Edward Prior, London' Turkish numerals, about 1800, Hilton Price collection.

In 1909, in the magazine *Notes and Queries*, Robert Pierpoint points out that:

Although Mr. Britten does not say that the earlier George Prior made watches for the Turkish market, it is evident that he did. It appears that the later George Prior made for that market in 1822 at the earliest. No. 1 made Turkish watches in 1785–6 and perhaps earlier; No. 2 in or after 1822.¹

Furthermore J. E. Coleman argues in the *American Horologist and Jeweler* of March 1955 that George Prior No. 2 was part of the Prior watchmaker family of Nessfield and that, after moving to London from Leeds in 1822, he died there in 1830.

However the George Prior of Nessfield appears in the Leeds directories of 1811, 1817, 1822, and so on until 1858, but never in the London ones; the only trace of him moving to London is in the patent published in *The Repertory of Arts, Manufactures, and Agriculture* of December 1818, where in the patent dated 29 January 1818, it is explicitly written:

Specification of the Patent granted to George Prior, late of Leeds, but now of Howard's Green, City Road, in the County of Middlesex; [...]

This seems to indicate that George No. 2 was in London for a brief period between 1817 and 1822; furthermore since the Priors of

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1. *Notes and Queries*, 268 [tenth series] (13 February 1909), p. 135. archive.org.

Nessfield focused on precision horology,² I doubt that George Prior of Nessfield ever specialised in watches for the Turkish market.

This article will focus on the watch brand George Prior no. 1 created and the four main actors involved during the 113 years of its existence from 1765 to 1878.

George Prior

George Prior was born on 2 March 1735³ as the son of George Prior of Kilton⁴ and Joane Hare of Thurlbear.⁵ He was almost certainly apprenticed to his uncle Thomas Prior, watchmaker trading in Prescott Street, Goodman's Fields; London; at the death of the uncle in 1763, he inherited the shop.⁶ From 1765 onwards, he appeared in various London directories⁷ as watchmaker active at Prescott Street (initially at number 31), where he also had his residence. The house is located in the parish of St. Mary, Whitechapel, where the dissident protestants celebrated.

On 14 August 1769, George Prior married Mary Hulbert at Corsham, Wiltshire;⁸ five daughters and five sons were born to them;⁹ Edward was the youngest son.

His trade with Turkey is excellently and comprehensively described by Ian White,¹⁰ and hence it will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that George Prior was successful on the Ottoman market to the point of it becoming proverbial:

- John Griscom, in a book entitled *A Year in Europe [...] in 1818 and 1819*, reported that when visiting La Chaux-de-Fonds 'many of those [watches] shown us were marked George Prior, London.'
- William John Bankes esq., in a note in the *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Giovanni Finati* (London, 1830, vol ii, p. 385), wrote that 'throughout the East no watch is in any esteem that has not the name of George Prior upon it.'
- Sir Richard Phillips, in *A Million of Facts of Correct Data [...]* (London, 1853, column 813), wrote that 'The Nubians & c. will buy no watch which has not George Prior on it!'

Thanks to the commercial success, George Prior bought in 1775 the Home estate of Halse,¹¹ where he had already inherited some land and the manor, and with it acquired the title esquire. The seal he used is seen in Fig. 1, where the pedigree of the family Prior of Halse is presented.¹² Furthermore, in August 1787 he bought the manor house called the Lawn at Sydenham.¹³

On 28 May 1784, George Prior acquired by redemption the freedom of the Levant Company,¹⁴ which allowed him to trade with the Ottoman empire in his own right, and to indicate as profession 'Turkey merchant'. In the same year, he sent his first son, also named George Prior, to work for the merchant Morier

2. Ian White, *English Clocks for the Eastern Market* (Sussex : Antiquarian Horological Society, 2012), p. 64.

3. J J Howard and F A Crisp, *Visitation of England and Wales: Volume 1* (1893), p. 9. Google Books.

4. A P Baggs, R J E Bush and M C Siraut, 'Parishes: Halse', in *A History of the County of Somerset: Vol 5* (London: ed. R W Dunning, 1985), pp. 73–81. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol5/pp73-81> [accessed 3 October 2021].

5. Marriages at Thurlbear: 1780–1812. ancestry.co.uk.

6. White, *English Clocks for the Eastern Market*, p. 63.

7. Information about address history has largely been drawn from [Ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk), *London, England, City Directories, 1736–1943* [on-line database provided in collaboration with London Metropolitan Archives and City of London Libraries – Guildhall Library].

8. Wiltshire, England, Marriages, 1538–1837. ancestry.co.uk.

9. Howard, *Visitation*, p. 9.

10. White, *English Clocks for the Eastern Market*, pp. 46–74 and 261–285.

11. Baggs, County of Somerset.

12. Howard, *Visitation*, pp. 9–10.

13. White, *English Clocks for the Eastern Market*, p. 63.

14. D Wilson, *Levant Company: Admissions of Freeman and Grants of Liberty of Trade, 1695–1824* (2017), p. 22. www.levantineheritage.com.

Prior, of Halse House, Taunton, Somerset.

Arms.—Quarterly: 1 and 4, Argent, on a fess sable three boars' heads couped or; 2 and 3, Argent, on a cross azure between four martlets sable five bezants.
Crest.—Out of a crescent or, flames of fire issuant pye. *Motto.*—Crestant courtois.

Arms on Book-plate used by Dr. R. C. A. Prior.

George Prior, of Halse House, near Taunton, and Mary, daughter of John Hulbert, Champion Hall, Sydenham; born 2 March 1735; died 23 April 1814; buried at the Presbyterian Church, Essex Street, London, where his uncle, the Rev. William Prior, D.D., was the minister. Will dated 1 Oct. 1813, proved 4 May 1814. (313 *Bridport*.)

The portrait of the Rev. William Prior, by Hudson, is now in the possession of Dr. Alexander-Prior, of Halse House.



Seal used by George Prior,
of Halse House.

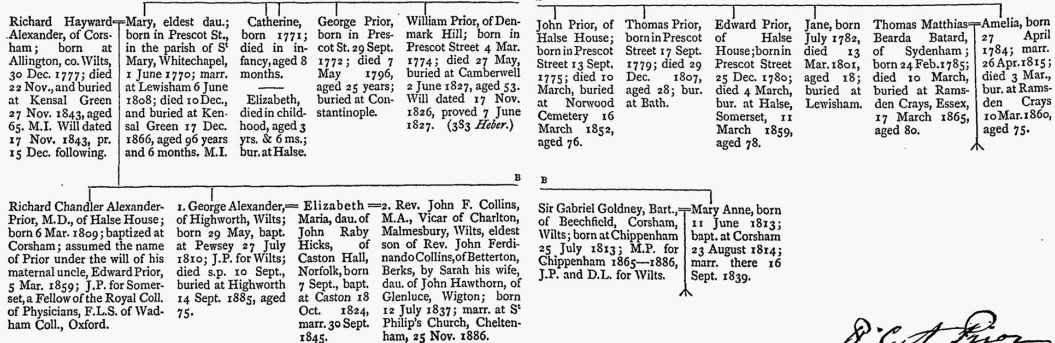


Fig. 1. Prior family tree from J J Howard and F A Crisp, *Visitation of England and Wales: Volume 1* (1893).

in Constantinople and later for Richard Lee & Sons in Smyrna;¹⁵ here George the younger acquired the freedom of the Levant Company on 27 May 1794.¹⁶ However, in May 1795, George Prior junior died aged 25 and was buried in Constantinople.

1784 is also the last year the shop was located in Prescot Street. Depending on the year and the Directory consulted (*London Directory*, *Kent's* or *Lowndes'*), from 1765 to 1783 it was situated at number 3, 31, 33 or 34. In the following years, the address changed several times:

- in 1785 it was at 31, Stewart Street, Spitalfields¹⁸
- in 1790 at Rosamond's Row, Clerkenwell¹⁹
- in 1800 at 5, George-Yard, Lombard Street²⁰
- in 1805 at 9, George-Yard, Lombard Street²¹
- in 1811 at 16, Great St. Helen's, Bishopsgate Street.²²

While in the *London Post Office Directory*, George Prior kept being referred to as 'watchmaker' until 1811, in *Kent's Directory* he was referred to from 1806 onwards as 'Turkey Merchant'. Furthermore in 1814, also

15. White, *English Clocks for the Eastern Market*, p. 63.
 16. Wilson, *Levant Company*, p. 22.
 17. Howard, *Visitation*, p. 9.
 18. *Kent's Directory*, 1785. Ancestry.co.uk.
 19. *Holden's London Directory*, 1790. Ancestry.co.uk.
 20. *Kent's Directory*, 1800. Ancestry.co.uk.
 21. *London Post Office Directory*, 1805. Ancestry.co.uk.
 22. *London Post Office Directory*, 1811. Ancestry.co.uk.



Fig. 2. The incuse mark (left) and Fig. 3. The Edward Prior watch.

Edward Prior, his youngest son, was reported as a merchant being active at 16, Great St. Helen's, Bishopsgate Street.²³

In the same year on 23 April, George Prior died aged 80 at his house in Sydenham²⁴ and was buried at the Presbyterian Church of Essex Street, London;²⁵ as a testimony to the success of his commercial activity, the will in which he divided his properties among the family members is two pages long.

Edward Prior

Edward Prior esquire was born on 25 December 1780 at the house on Prescott Street²⁶ and picked up the watch business at his father's death in 1814. However Edward Prior is neither referred to as 'watchmaker', nor did he ever make use of the title; his profession was always indicated as (Turkey) merchant, since he acquired the freedom of the Levant Company on 28 February 1811.²⁷ In 1818 the shop moved to South Street,

Finsbury, and it was closed in 1825,²⁸ the same year in which the Levant Company was dissolved.²⁹ It re-opened for three years in 1828–30 at 11, Great Winchester Street.³⁰

Edward Prior never got married and in the census of 1841 he was found residing at 48 York Terrace, Regent's Park, Marylebone, with three servants; in the census of 1851, still at the same address, his profession was indicated as 'Retired Turkey Merchant'. He died on 4 March 1859 aged 78;³¹ his inheritance was left to his nephew Richard Chandler Alexander,³² who following a condition in the will assumed the family name Prior.³³ Richard C. A. Prior, known for writing among others the book *On the popular names of British plants*, did not get involved with the watch business.

William Chambers

The business of producing watches signed Edward Prior was instead taken up by William Chambers of Coventry, Warwickshire.³⁴ About

23. *London Post Office Directory*, 1814. Ancestry.co.uk.

24. *Morning Post*, 29 April 1814. Newspaper.com.

25. Howard, *Visitation*, p. 9.

26. Birth Certificate, registered at Dr. Williams Library on 20 March 1871. Ancestry.co.uk.

27. Wilson, *Levant Company*, p. 22.

28. *London Post Office Directory*, 1825. Ancestry.co.uk.

29. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Levant_Company.

30. *London Post Office Directory*, 1828 and 1830. Ancestry.co.uk.

31. *The Morning Chronicle*, 9 March 1859. Newspaper.com.

32. Alexander was the family name

33. Howard, *Visitation*, p. 9.

34. UK Census 1851. Ancestry.co.uk.

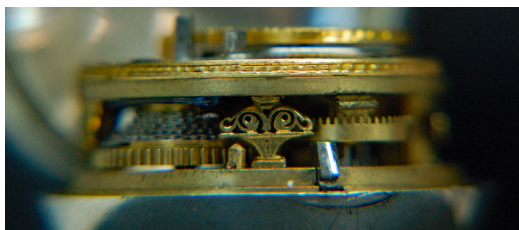


Fig. 4. The movement of the Edward Prior watch.



Fig. 5. The clock of the Edward Prior watch.



Fig. 6. The initials E P highlighted in colour.

him, F. J. Britten wrote in 1904:

Chambers, Wm., watch finisher. City Rd., 1830; afterwards in partnership with Prior, Ed., at 18, Powell St. East, King Sq.

However in the census of 1841, the profession of William Chambers resident at Bath Building, City Road, St. Luke, Middlesex was already indicated as watchmaker, but no entry was present in the London directories; probably he was already working for Edward Prior. In 1849, aged 51, William Chambers moved to 18 Powell Street East with the entire family and appeared in the London directory as watchmaker; he was now partner with Edward Prior or more probably took control of the watch business, as indicated by the fact that the incuse mark 'EP C' (see Fig. 2) started appearing in the internal watch case of the watches signed Edward Prior (see appendix).

The watches bearing the name of Edward Prior maintain the same pattern through the sixty-one years of their production:

- The dial is always white enamel with the inscription Edward Prior London, in general with blued steel beetle and poker hands (see Fig. 3).
- The movement has a verge escapement and pierced pillars (see Fig. 4).
- The cock is pierced in rococo style with the plants springing in most cases from an urn (see Fig. 5). The initials E P may be made out from the intertwining plants (Fig. 6).³⁵ This is often found on watches made for the Turkish market as a sort of secret signature that, while allowing for the watchmaker to recognise the movement as his own, preserved the integrity of his work intact. Beside Edward Prior, Ralph Gout and George Prior are also known to have employed this tactic;³⁶ in particular George Prior used it on his later watches when signing either as George Prior or as George Charles.³⁷
- The silver regulator dial is engraved with Turkish numerals.
- Usually the watch has three cases, the first

35. Reinhard Meis, *Taschenuhren* (1985), pp. 170–171; Cedric Jagger, *The Artistry of the English Watch* (1988), pp. 138–139; Jan Kraminer, letter to editor, *AH*, vol 18, n. 3 (1989), 319–321; *AH*, vol 6, n. 3 (1969), 159, watch sold at auction.

36. Jagger, *Artistry*, p. 139; Kraminer, letter to editor.



Figs 7 and 8. The cases of the Edward Prior watch seen from both sides.

two in silver and the third covered by horn or shell with silver pique decoration and with an engraved silver bezel (see Figs 7

and 8); after 1840 the second silver case is often also engraved with symbols of music or arms.

The watch shown in the photos, owned by the author, has serial number 77063; the silver cases have been hallmarked by the London assay office in 1866–1867. The watchcase-maker mark (AT) was registered by Alford Thickbroom (10 Galway Street, Bath Street, London) in 1856.³⁸

In the September 2021 journal, a list of the watches by Edward Prior was presented, which — with permission of the two original authors — combined and added to the lists created by Jan Kraminer³⁹ and Ian White,⁴⁰ whom I would like to thank for their support. An extended and updated version has been made available on the AHS website (Members area). In that list, a column is present to indicate where it was possible to check if the mark ‘EP C’ was present; serial numbers ‘out of order’ are presented in red.⁴¹

William Chambers was well known in the profession as shown by his election in 1859 to the council of the British Horological Institute;⁴² in 1866 he left 18 Powell Street East and the 1871 census found him living at 369 Prior Villas, St. James Road, Croydon, Surrey with his second wife Ellen and a servant, as a ‘retired watchmaker’. He died in the same year and he was buried on 30 September 1871.⁴³

George Chambers

The business had passed to the son George Chambers trading under the firm of ‘William Chambers & Son’. In 1866 the firm ‘William Chambers & Son’ was located at 18 Powell Street East as ‘wholesale watch

37. George Prior used the pseudonym George Charles on lower quality watches (White, *English Clocks for the Eastern Market*, p. 61).

38. Philip T. Priestley, *British Watchcase Gold & Silver Marks 1670 to 1970* (NAWCC, 2018), p. 170.

39. *AH*, vol. 27, n. 6 (December 2003), 710.

40. White, *English Clocks for the Eastern Market*, Appendix C.

41. The list includes a few items, indicated ‘Kurz’, which refers to Otto Kurz, *European Clocks and Watches in the Near East* (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1975).

42. ‘Annual Meeting of the British Horological Institute’, *Horological Journal*, vol. 1 (March–August 1859), 143–144.

43. *Burials in the year 1871 in the South Metropolitan Cemetery*, p. 4576. Ancestry.co.uk.

44. *London Post Office Directory*, 1866. Ancestry.co.uk.

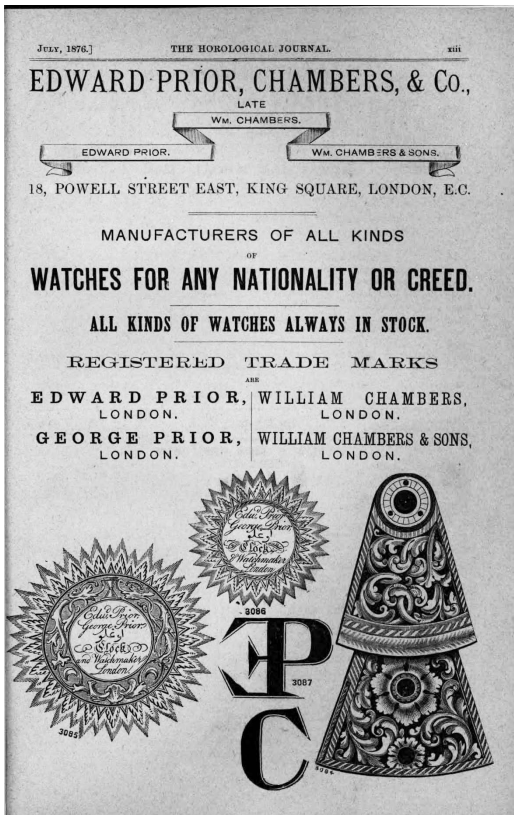


Fig. 9. Advert in the *Horological Journal* July 1876.

manufacturers';⁴⁴ according to the 1871 census George Chambers lived at the same address with his family. However the London Post Office directory from 1867 to 1877 reported an 'Edward Prior, Watchmaker' being active at 18 Powell Street East, as well as 'William Chambers & Son'. Perhaps George Chambers saw this as a marketing tool, or as a way to avoid questions about the verge watches signed 'Edward Prior' still being produced.

From the list in the appendix it appears that George Chambers stopped the production of these watches in 1875. In the same year he became a member of the British Horological Institute,⁴⁵ and advertised in the *Horological Journal* from May 1875 to May 1876. Furthermore in 1876 he registered trademarks No. 3080 to No. 3087, including the incuse mark 'EP C'; some of these marks are visible in Fig. 9 reproducing the full-page advertisement published in the *Horological Journal* in July



Fig. 10. Dial of the watch number 79021.



Fig. 11. Plate of the movement of the watch number 79021, signed Edward Prior, London. Note the cock with the initials EP, which is the same as the trademark No. 3084 in the advert.

1876. At the top of the advertisement the firm Edward Prior, Chambers & Co is named, a name that fits perfectly with the initials of the incuse mark. However I could not find any trace of such a firm in any directory. Also to be noted is the trademark No. 3084, which protected a cock for a full-plate lever movement with the initials EP; such a cock is shown in Fig. 11.

The dial of the watch (Fig. 10) and the plate of the movement (Fig. 11) are signed Edward Prior, London. The movement has a fusee and the escapement is an English lever with a single

45. 'List of new Members', *Horological Journal*, vol. XVII (August 1875), 182.

46. 'Trade Marks relating to Watches and Clocks', *Horological Journal*, vol. XXVI (September 1883), 8.

roller. The watch shown in the photos, owned by the author, has serial number 79021. The hunter watchcase is marked with the incuse mark 'EP C' and the watchcase-maker mark (WCS) was registered by William Caleb Scott (70 Rahere Street, Goswell Road, London) in 1863.⁴⁷ The serial number appears to follow the numbering of the other watches signed Edward Prior, as can be seen in the list published in the September 2021 journal and in the extended and updated version on the AHS website.

Notwithstanding this flurry of activity (or maybe because of it) the business was not flourishing anymore, as 'William Chambers & Sons' was declared bankrupt on 22 January 1878 by the London Bankruptcy Court under the Bankruptcy Act of 1869.⁴⁸ And with this end the one hundred and thirteen years of history of the most successful British watch brand for the Ottoman market.

47. Priestley, *British Watchcase Gold & Silver Marks*, p. 272.

48. *The London Gazette*, Issue 24624 (13 September 1878), p. 5168.

Appendix

A list of the serial numbers of the watches by Edward Prior was published with the author's Letter to the Editor in the September 2021 journal. An updated list will be made available on the AHS website in the Members area. The short list below shows the lowest and highest serial numbers known to the author for each of the three periods distinguished in this article. In the column 'Casemaker's Mark', the superscripted '3' means the watch has a lever escapement. Serial numbers 'out of order' are presented in red.

Head of business	Serial number	Hallmark Year	Casemaker's Mark	Number of cases	Mark "EP C"	Source
Edward Prior	38.694	1814	IR	3		Auction P. Klöter 06/88
	38.833	1814	IR	3		Auction P. Klöter 03/87
	39.236	1814	IR		no	NAWCC Forum
	63.687	1848	JB/WW	3		eBay 06/14
	63.806	1848		4		Auction Sotheby's 07/89
	65.229	1848	JB/WW	4		http://www.cogsandpieces.com
William Chambers	63.829	1849	JB/WW	3	yes	Auktionhaus Kendzia 19/02/2021
	63.882	1849		4		Antique watch dealer
	64.293	1849	JB/WW	4		British Museum
	64.371	1849	JB/WW	4		eBay 11/09
William Chambers and Sons	76.291	1865		3		Antique watch dealer
	76.338	1865		4		Auction Weschler's 09/04
	76.711	1865		3		Auction Sotheby's 03/89
	77.804	1865	WCS	4		Auction Dr. Crott 05/98
	76.694	1866		2		eBay 01/18
	76.872	1866		4		Auction Christie's 15/12/2004
	78.894	1872		4 ³		Albin Schaefer: De underbara Uren
	79.021		WCS	1 ³	yes	Private collection
79.148	1875	WCS	3 ³	yes	http://www.cogsandpieces.com 11/09	
79.149	1875	WCS	4 ³		eBay 01/18	
80.191	1875		2 ³		Antiquarian Horology 03/58	