

A Guide To Dating Morbier Clocks

by Ken McWilliams

When it comes to dating clocks there is only one hard and fast rule and that is, “There are no hard and fast rules.” This is especially true for Morbier clocks. Unlike most mass produced clocks, the Morbier was not made in a factory. The Morbier was in fact the product of many families working together from various villages scattered throughout the remote Franche-Comte region of eastern France. Often an entire village would be involved, in some way, with the making of the clock. One family may make the dials, another the hands, or cut wheels or make the cases, each specializing in some part of the clock. The final assembly was usually left to a few clockmakers. Design control under these conditions would be difficult at best, and any improvements could easily take years to be implemented.

To compound the problem of determining when a Morbier was made, clockmakers, throughout the clock's 240 year history, would offer “upgrades and improvements” to the existing clocks. Often owners would make cosmetic changes themselves, like replacing the dial, hands, headpiece or surround.

There are usually little tell clues indicating that a change was made to the original, much like finding an extra set of mounting holes in a kitchen clock indicates that the movement has been changed.

By using the attached Morbier Time Line and applying a little detective work, you will be able to make a very good educated guess as to when the clock was made; much better than most of the exaggerated dates that I see on eBay and at the marts.

A good starting place, in our dating process, is with things that don't usually change, like the pendulum suspension housing. This is a triangular shaped housing on the top of the case that the pendulum hanger is attached to using a heavy string. If it is located at the rear, and is around five inches tall, you can be pretty certain that it is older than 1760. If it is around two and a half inches tall but still on the rear, it was made between 1740 and 1800. The suspension tower moved to the front of the case in about 1795. It was between two and three inches tall and still used string to attach the pendulum hanger. These were used from around 1795 to 1825. Around 1815, shortly after the anchor escapement started to be widely used, the tower housing disappeared and was replaced with a suspension spring mounted flush to the top-front of the case. This configuration continued to the end of it's production.

Here is an example of when detective work is required. Lets say that your clock has a suspension spring but you have many indications that it is older than that. Clockmakers often removed the tower and upgraded to a suspension spring to improve reliability. Here is how to tell if this is the case. They usually used the tower's old holes to mount the spring holder so that won't help, but, the cases that were designed for a suspension spring will have a small rectangular hole, just wide enough for the housing to fit, while the tower designed cases will have a large hole almost as wide as the mounting holes to allow for swing. If it has the larger hole, you can amend your date accordingly.

Another good thing to look at is the “detentes.” (These are the locking levers in the strike train.) This will tell you quite accurately which side of 1800 the clock was made. Up to about 1800 the large detante was activated by a spring mounted on the right rear post of the clock frame. After 1800 the spring was replaced by one or two counter weights mounted directly to the arbor. These are

easily recognized. Open the right door of the case and look at the top half of the strike train. The counter weight(s) will usually be very ornate with fancy tops.

Having said that, here again is our old problem of the clockmaker making improvements. Early spring steel was not very reliable and was a major cause of failure for the strike train. Clockmakers would add counter weights to replace the springs. Some remnants of the original spring or it's mounting will usually remain. Most of the replacements I have seen still had the spring; it was either broken off or bent out of the way. At the very least, the mounting holes will still exist.

Examine the headpiece or surround very carefully. Look for old attachment screw holes, fit, and any telltale signs of replacement. If you are reasonably convinced that it is original, it can be very useful in dating. The cast brass headpiece that adorned the top of the clock was used from the late 1600's to the early 1800's. The repousee (thin pressed brass) surround replaced the headpiece from the early 1800's to the end of production. There was very little overlap of the two types.

The motif of the cast headpiece usually indicated the political era of the time, thus narrowing the dating. For example, the backward looking rooster (Vigilance) was popular during the reign of Louis XIV and XV. Clapsed hands showing solidarity with the king was also popular. The revolution (1795-1799) saw the use of the backward looking rooster and the Phrygian (Liberty) cap. Napoleon was not fond of the rooster and eagles adorned the headpiece during his reign.

The theme of the repousse surrounds was much different. They depicted scenes of common occurrences of the people such as harvests, weddings, dancing, hunting, lovers and other generally happy events. It is important to note that from about 1805 till 1850 the surround was made of two pieces joined together at about the three and nine. They did not extend beyond the case on the sides or bottom, only at the top. Around 1850 the surround became one piece but still did not extend beyond the sides or bottom. Around 1860, the surrounds began to expand well beyond the case and became more ornate, some were painted and others had semi-precious stones set in them. Matching repousse pendulums began showing up around 1850.

There are hundreds of other indicators for dating the Morbier clock but if you study the time line and use some logic, you will be able to come very close to determining it's age.

The data in the Morbier time line was determined after researching many articles, books, websites and conversations with collectors. It is a work-in-progress because there are many conflicts and disagreements among some of the experts in the field. I will continue to update it as I find more reliable information.

For newcomers to Morbier clocks, I would recommend a four part series that was published in the NAWCC Bulletin over a five year period. The issues are; #157 April 1972, #162 February 1973, #172 October 1974 and #188 June 1977. Old issues can be found at local Chapter marts and on eBay. While I don't necessarily agree with everything in the articles, it is one of the most comprehensive studies I have found on Morbier clocks.

If you have any information that you think would help in improving the time line, please contact me at Ken@TheTicTocShop.com.

I hope this helps in your Morbier dating and understanding of these historical old clocks.

Best regards, Ken McWilliams

Morbier Time Line

1680 1700 1750 1800 1850 1900 1930

