BIRMINGHAM DIALMAKERS:
SOME BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES – PART I

by John A. Robey

IN September 1772 an often quoted announcement in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* heralded the most significant stylistic advance in domestic clocks that had taken place for over a century: the production of the first painted iron dials to replace the traditional brass dial with its separate chapter and seconds rings and cast brass corner decoration.

Over a decade earlier, the progressive clockmaker John Whitehurst of Derby had eliminated as unnecessary the chapter ring and corner spandrels to produce the single-sheet round longcase dial,[1] while smaller round bracket clock dials made of vitreous enamel had been used earlier by John Ellicott and others in London. A few longcase dials were also made of vitreous enamel, but none can be positively dated and they may be later attempts in the 1780s to compete with the new and popular painted dials, despite the latter being promoted as being 'in Imitation of Enamel'.

In any event vitreous enamel dials had practical disadvantages, such as the difficulty of attaching dial feet (a brass or iron framework behind the dial was necessary), large dials were prone to cracking and the arch had to be added. There was also a limited colour palette, and the known vitreous-enamel dials have only black together with either rose pink, blue, or gilt decoration. Painted dials had none of these disadvantages, and it was soon appreciated that they were not limited to just these hues. Very quickly dials became embellished with colourful flowers, birds and other subjects, and before long the traditional brass longcase dial was relegated to history.

The painted dial originated in Birmingham and although they were produced elsewhere, particularly in Scotland, the town remained the centre of the industry. While the dials themselves have been studied in detail,[2] so that they can be dated quite accurately from their design, there is little known about the dialmakers themselves. In comparison with brass dials, where the names of those who made the dials (when it was not the clockmaker himself) are virtually unknown, the manufacturers of painted dials often identified themselves on the falseplates commonly used to fit the dial to the movement, or on the back of the dials themselves. While a good proportion of brass dials would have been supplied by specialist dialmakers, none are known in trade directories, and the work of only a few of the known clock-dial engravers can be identified.[3] On the other hand the makers of the new painted dials had a fresh approach to business, and they were keen to promote themselves, not only on their dials and falseplates, but in trade directories. So their names, addresses and working dates are well known,[4] but little has been recorded of their personal details.

This article attempts to redress the balance, and correlates information on the dialmakers themselves from a number of diverse sources. It also sheds fresh light on the business relationships between some of the dialmakers. Only some of the most significant of the numerous Birmingham dialmakers are considered here, and it must be appreciated that many of the names that appear on falseplates or in directories were factors, merchants, even gunmakers and others, all keen to get a share of this new business by selling the wares of others under their own

1. The earliest known single-sheet brass round longcase dial is dated 1760.
2. B. Loomes, *Painted Dial Clocks* (1994); M.F. Tennant, *Longcase painted Dials* (1995); J.A. Robey, *The Longcase Clock Reference Book*, vol. 2 (2001), chapter 10.
3. A list of known clock-dial engravers is given in Robey, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp.48-53
4. The most comprehensive and up-to-date lists are in Robey, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp.548-54, and J. McKenna, *Clockmakers of Central England*, (2002), pp.30-7. The latter includes addresses.

name. It should be noted that the dials pictured here are primarily to illustrate points discussed in the text, and are not intended as a survey of the style of any particular maker.

BIRMINGHAM IN THE EIGHTEENTH & EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURIES

At the start of the eighteenth century Birmingham was still a small town of half-timbered houses, its main industries being cutlery, nailmaking and other metal-based trades. These metalworkers steadily increased in number and the old buildings were rapidly replaced by workshops and houses of brick. The parish church was St Martin's in the Bull Ring towards the southern end of the town, and its parish included all of the populated area and many of the surrounding fields. The population was expanding so rapidly that a new church, St Philip's, was completed in 1715 on the brow of a hill overlooking the old town, and a new High Town parish was carved out of St Martin's.[5] Its congregation was mainly well-to-do merchants and industrialists who did not want to negotiate their way through the busy market area to St Martin's. St Philip's became Birmingham Cathedral in 1905.

Birmingham's early clockmakers, such as the Hadley and Stretch families, worked in or near the High Street in the old town, but when the first dialmakers appeared in the 1770s they set up their businesses further north in areas specially developed for mixed industrial and residential use. Most artisans lived on the premises, but as they prospered many moved to pleasanter suburbs away from the pollution that they had helped create, and some of the dialmakers were no exception. The town expanded so much that despite the building of St Philip's church, St Martin's could still not cope with all the new births, deaths and marriages, and a chapel-of-ease, St Mary's, was built in Whittall Street in 1774 by the Derby architect Joseph Pickford.[6] Before it became a separate parish in the ninetenth century, anyone living in the parish of St Martin could be married, baptise their children or be buried at St Mary, Whittal Street.

St Mary, Whittal Street, must have been a more popular option than using the main parish church, and many of the dialmakers discussed here are to be found in its records. It was demolished in 1926, but not before its monumental inscriptions had been recorded. Unfortunately, as we shall see, although the gravestone of James Wilson, the most important of the dialmakers, existed at that time, nothing more than his name could be deciphered. The gunmaking industry, which had initially been concentrated in the Digbeth area, south of St Martin's church, moved to the square around St Mary, Whittall Street, after 1777, which soon became known as the Gun Quarter. Ann Osborne, one of the major dialmakers, set up business in Whittall Street, and a number of other dialmakers were also located nearby (Fig. 1).

The continuing expansion of the population in the centre of Birmingham resulted in the building of further chapels in St Martin's parish. St Paul's church was built in 1779 on the northern side of the parish in what became known as the Jewellery Quarter. Noted occupants of its pews were Matthew Boulton and James Watt (although he rarely attended), but it was used mainly for burials, and no dialmakers are known to have been recorded there.

Another daughter chapel of St Martin's was Christ Church, at the top of New Street, whose foundation stone was laid in 1805, although it was not consecrated until 1813. It was not until the 1850s that it performed its own baptisms, marriages and burials. Before then the occupants of St Martin's parish would have had to use the mother church, 15 minute's walk away. Hence for this investigation we only need to be concerned with the records of St Martin, St Philip and St Mary.

Apart from the fact that virtually no business documents survive from any of the clock-dial manufacturers, research into the industry is not helped by the lack of marriage registers from St Mary, Whittall Street. Furthermore most of the other surviving Birmingham registers do not mention occupations (apart from St Paul's in 1813-32, but none have horological

5. J. McKenna, *Birmingham, The Building of a City* (2005), especially chapters 2, 3 & 4.

6. E. Saunders, *Joseph Pickford of Derby* (1993), chapter 11. Pickford was a friend of the Derby clockmaker John Whitehurst, the father-figure of the Birmingham-based Lunar Society, and did much work for its members, including Josiah Wedgwood's Etruria Works. The commission for St Mary's was probably due to his Lunar Society connections.

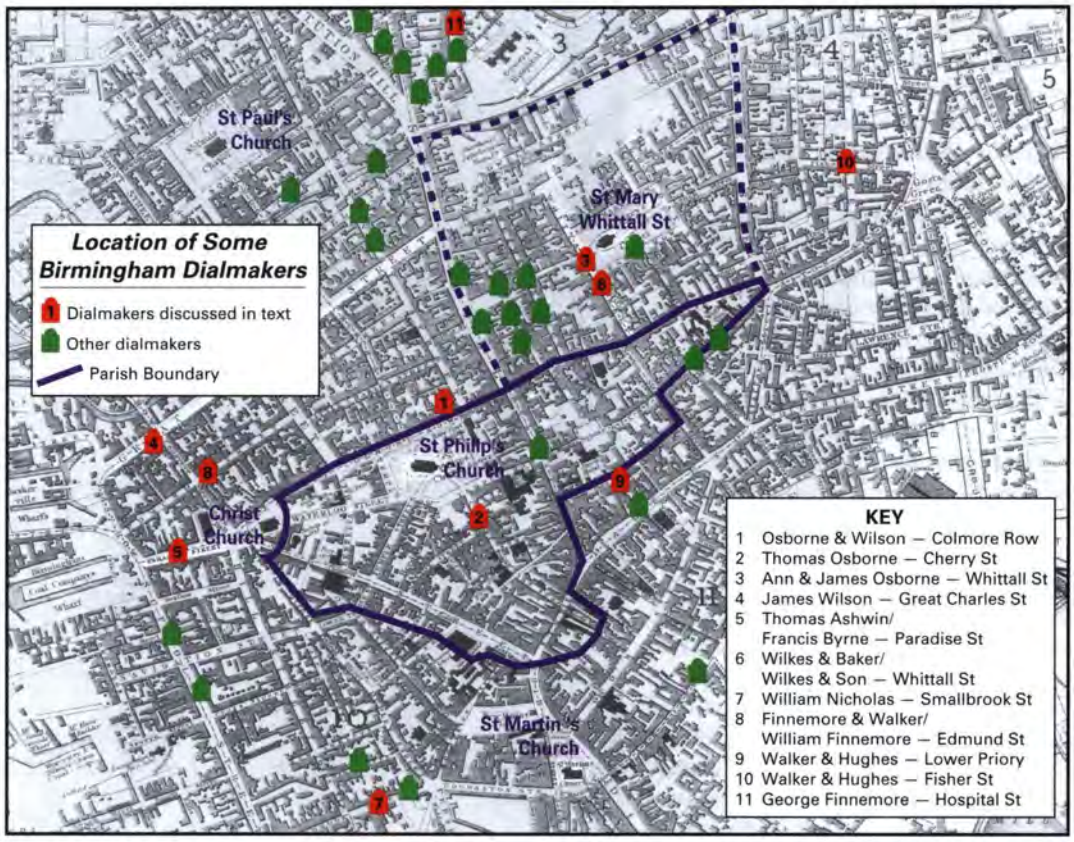


Fig. 1. Map of Birmingham in 1833, showing the boundary of St Philip's parish and the location of some of the manufacturers of painted clock dials.

connections), making it difficult to distinguish different people with the same name. Some of what is presented here is, by necessity, somewhat speculative or based on circumstantial evidence, until more positive information becomes available.

OSBORNE & WILSON

The 1772 announcement in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* reads:

> White Clock Dials
> Osborne and Wilson, Manufacturers of White Clock Dials in Imitation of Enamel, in a manner entirely new, have opened a Warehouse at No. 3, in Colmore-Row, Birmingham, where they have an Assortment of the above-mentioned Goods ...

This reference to dials made 'in a manner entirely new' has often been interpreted as being the date of the first painted dials, but the advertisement actually records the opening of their new warehouse (and presumably also their manufactory, as they are listed there in directories in 1776-7), for these new dials had been available to the clock trade for some time before this. Exactly how much earlier has not been established, but Thomas Worswick of Lancaster is the first clockmaker known to have used them when he supplied Gillows, the furniture makers, with 'A clock with jappan'd or enamelled face' in May 1772. Gillows received an even earlier order for a clock with a similar dial in January 1772,[7] eight months before Osborne & Wilson's advertisement. If clockmakers in Lancaster, over 120 miles from Birmingham, were using the new dials, then it is reasonable to suppose that they would have

7. S.E. Stuart, *Clockmaking in North Lancashire & South Westmorland 1680-1900.* M. Phil. thesis, University of Salford, Department of Modern Languages (1986), p.188.

been used even earlier by clockmakers local to the dial manufacturers. The earliest documented dial known is on a clock by William Wilson of Kendal (not related to the dialmaker), in a case dated 1774 (Figs 2 & 3).

The partners were Thomas Hadley Osborne and James Wilson. Thomas Osborne was born in 1753 at Sutton Coldfield (about 7 miles from the centre of Birmingham), son of Samuel Osborne, 'gent', and his wife Ann. The marriage of Thomas's parents has not been traced, but his mother was probably Ann Hadley, baptised in 1733 at St Philips, Birmingham, daughter of Humphrey Hadley, the third of a dynasty of noted local clockmakers of that name. Thomas Osborne is said to have been apprenticed to John Barnes as a painter,[8] but he was less than nineteen years old when he formed the partnership with James Wilson. John James Barnes was recorded as a miniature painter when he died on 10 November 1805.[9] Although Barnes is included in a list of British painters as working about 1796,[10] Birmingham Art Galley knows of no work by him. (Henry Barnes, aged twenty-one, son of John Barnes, pawnbroker, who was a clock-dial painter in 1841, a landscape painter in oils aged thirty-one in 1851, and a landscape painter aged fifty-nine in 1881, may have been related to Thomas Osborne's master, maybe a grandson.)

While Thomas Osborne was only nineteen when the Osborne & Wilson partnership first arrived on the scene, his partner James Wilson appears to have been even younger, being only seventeen years old (see later). In what must have been only a very short period they not only conceived the idea of a painted iron dial to replace the traditional type of brass dial, but would have had to arrange for the manufacture of the iron dial sheets, the printing plates for the hemisphere maps on moon dials (see Part II, to follow), and the casting of iron falseplates. The latter had been developed by the time of the 1772 advertisement as they were specifically mentioned (although the term 'falseplate' was not used):

> N.B. The Dial Feet will be rivetted [*sic*] in the Dials, and such Methods used as will enable the Clock-Makers to fix them to the Movements.

Fig. 2. The earliest documented painted-dial clock, by William Wilson of Kendal, in a case dated 1774. The dial is by Osborne & Wilson, although not marked by them. The calendar is a silvered ring, as used on brass dials, while the spandrels are of *repoussé* brass, riveted to the dial sheet, both features only found on very early painted dials. The hemisphere maps are similar, but not identical, to those found on other early dials. No falseplate or winding-hole collets. At Townend (National Trust), Troutbeck, Cumbria, *Jonathan Betts*.

8. McKenna, 2002, *op. cit.*, p.37. The source of the information is not stated.
9. Death notice in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette.*
10. *A Checklist of Painters c1200-1976, Represented in the Witt Library, Courtauld Instiute of Art, London.*

Fig. 3. The moon faces of the William Wilson clock are of high quality, *Jonathan Betts*.

The two earliest known painted dials have a rolling moon in the arch. The one shown in Figs 2 & 3 has the usual saw-shaped teeth moved by a lever system fixed to the rear of the dial, while a very similar dial, although in a distressed condition, has gear-shaped teeth on the moon disc and is advanced by a gearwheel on the back of the dial. This implies a great deal of collaboration with a clockmaker (probably not the person named on the front of the dial), who would have had to cut the teeth on the edge of the moon disc as well as making the appropriate mechanism to link it to its movement.

Not only did the dials have to be manufactured and painted, but clockmakers and their customers had to be persuaded to buy them, and as we have seen, some of the earliest were 120 miles away. No doubt salesmen and factors specialising in the clock trade would have been employed, but exactly how these radically new dials were marketed and advertised is not known.

As well overcoming the practicalities of manufacture the venture had to be financed. It may be that the connection of Thomas Osborne's mother with her clockmaking family, the Hadleys, provided the inspiration to apply his newly-taught skills as an artist to a new type of clock dial. Not only was Ann Osborne's father a clockmaker, but also her brother and cousin in Birmingham. They might also have provided some of the vital contacts and development work necessary before production could start, as well as producing and fitting moon discs and their operating levers. The possibility that Thomas Osborne's mother had a more important role in the introduction of the painted dial than had previously been thought is reinforced when, as we shall see, it is suggested that she continued his business. Without the support and assistance of family or colleagues it is difficult to see how these two young men could have created a new industry in such a short period. The use of his full name of Thomas Hadley Osborne in a later advertisement may be his way of publically acknowledging his clockmaking relations. Thomas's father was described as a 'gent' in the parish register, and he was clearly of some social standing, as in 1758 he was elected to Sutton Coldfield's governing corporation known as the 'Warden and Society'. Little more is known about him, especially how wealthy he was, but after he died in 1766 his widow may have been sufficiently prosperous to finance her son's new dial-making venture.

One intriguing detail of Samuel Osborne's otherwise uninformative will, made in 1755, is that a witness was John Luckman. There were no Luckmans in Sutton Coldfield at this period, and although there was a saddler of this name in Birmingham in the 1780s, it is most probable that this is John Luckman (born 1732, died 1798), clockmaker of Bickenhill, aproximately 8 miles south east of the centre of Birmingham. How he became associated with the Osbornes is not known, but he may have been apprenticed to Humphrey Hadley and made friends with his daughter Ann, who was his contemporary. There is no direct relationship between Luckman and the Hadleys or the Osbornes. The possibility arises that John Luckman, as well as the Hadleys, may have also been involved with the development of the painted dial.

Some very early painted dials have scenes of a high quality, including two with landscapes that include a monument with the words '*Et in Arcadia Ego*' (Fig. 4). They appear to be influenced by the eighteenth-century concept of an idealised Arcadian landscape, rather than being based directly on one of the two paintings of this title by the French artist Nicholas Poussin, 1594-1665 (Fig. 5). The arch paintings may even have been inspired by the Shepherds' Monument, commissioned by Thomas Anson in 1748 at Shugborough Hall, near Stafford, only 20 miles north of Birmingham, which *was* based on Poussin's painting. Whatever the origin of this dial painting, it is clear that it was executed by someone familiar with the work of the classical artists and could interpret such a

Fig. 4. The arch of a dial, signed for Jesse Torkington, who worked at Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, in 1767-91, with a scene including a monument inscribed *Et in Arcadia Ego*. This Arcadian landscape appears to have been inspired by Nicholas Poussin's painting, but in an eighteenth-century style. Altenatively it may even have been a fanciful representation of Shugborough Park, Stafford, with the Shepherds' Monument, the Essex Bridge over the River Trent, and the Tower of the Winds, *Hugh Cockwill*.

Fig. 5. *Et in Arcadia Ego* by the French artist Nicholas Poussin, about 1638, in the Louvre, Paris, showing a group of shepherds inspecting a tomb and contemplating their mortality.

scene, but in a contemporary eighteenth-century style.

Other early dials are known with good quality landscapes occupying almost the full arch, and Figs 6-7 show a dial signed for Charles Horwood, Bristol, apprenticed in 1750 and working to 1784. Although these dials have no falseplates both the Horwood dial and one of the '*Et in Arcadia Ego*' dials have gilt corners identical to a dial with an Osborne & Wilson falseplate.[11] Figures 8-12 show a high quality dial made for James Hartwell of Uttoxeter, Staffordshire, with four-seasons corners having

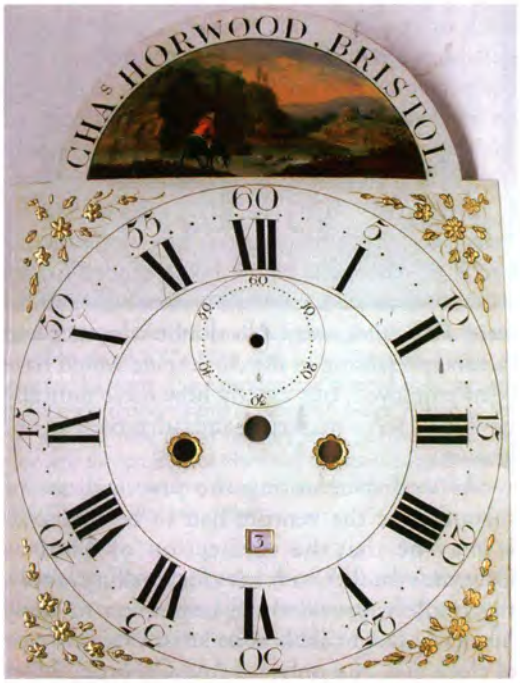


Fig. 6. A dial signed for Charles Horwood, Bristol, with the very early type of square calendar aperture and a silvered date ring. No falseplate or winding-hole collets, *Ian Pritchard*.

cherubs instead of the more usual female figures. It has an unmarked cast-iron falseplate, and may

11. Tennant, *op. cit.*, pp.17, 29, 217.

Fig. 7. Detail of the arch with a classical landscape, and simple gilt flowers in the corners, *Ian Pritchard*.

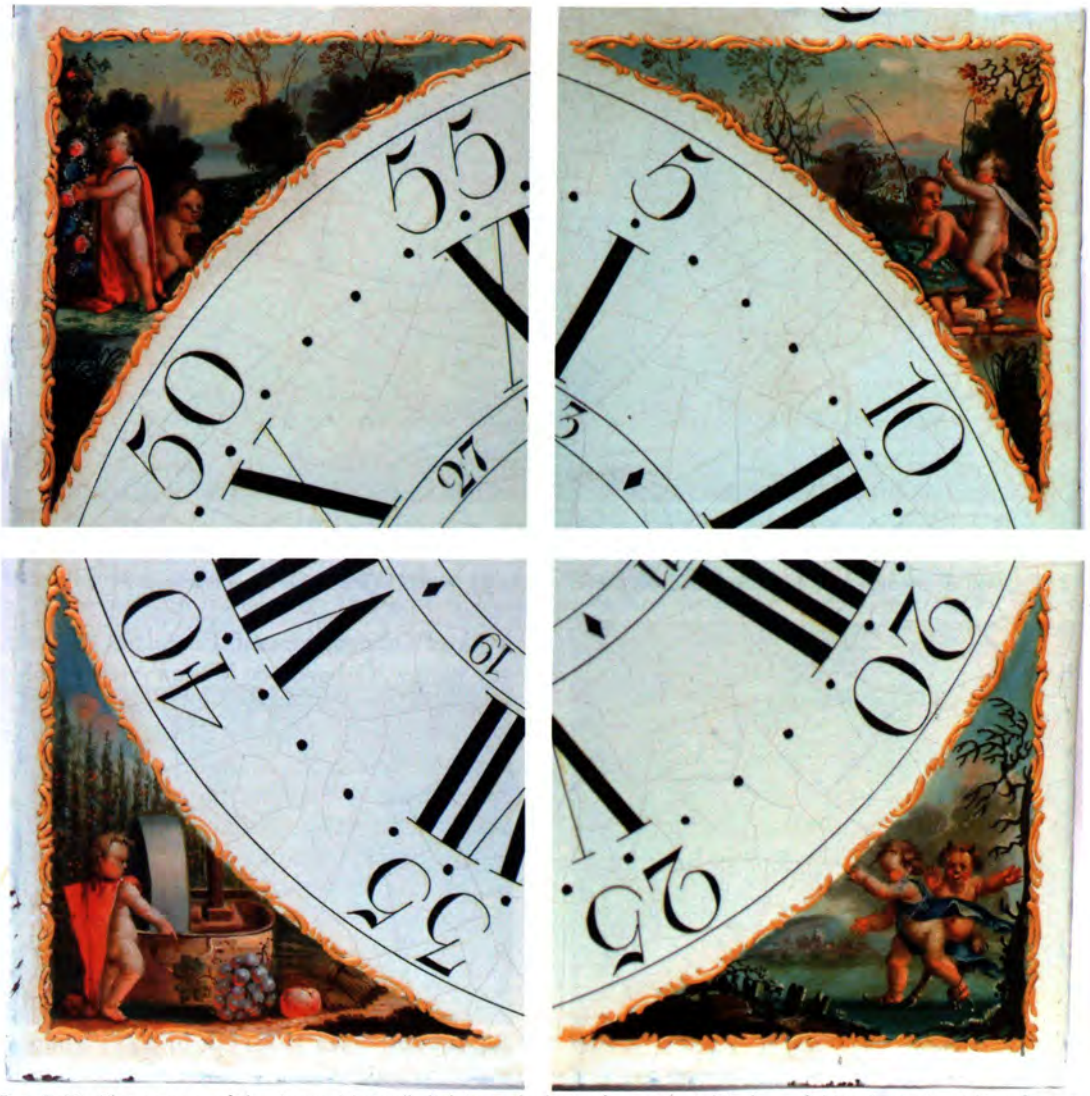
Fig. 8. A dial signed for James Hartwell, Uttoxeter, with a blank falseplate and no winding-hole collets. Probably a later Osborne & Wilson dial. The four-seasons corners with high-quality cherubs have not been seen on any other dial.

be an Osborne & Wilson dial, made before it was appreciated that falseplates could be used for displaying the dialmaker's name. As Thomas Osborne had been trained by a painter of miniatures, it is likely that all these dials were the work of Osborne himself. Falseplates cast with the names 'Osborne & Wilson' are probably from the latter part of the partnership.

The partnership in Colmore Row only lasted for five years, when it was dissolved in September 1777, and in January 1778 Thomas Hadley Osborne announced that he 'intends to carry on the Manufactory of Clock Dials as usual' at 20 Cherry Orchard, more usually known as Cherry Street, which had been cut through Cherry Orchard, close to St Philip's church. This address had been occupied by a chaser and modeller in 1770-6, then by a tinplate worker in 1777, but by 1785 a button maker was listed as being there. Events seem to have overtaken Thomas Osborne, as, despite this announcement, he was never listed in directories in his own right. He may not even have traded from Cherry Street, for within two years the business appeared under the name of Ann Osborne. He could have been ill, and probably died about this time, when he would have been only about twenty-six years old. If Thomas Osborne had lived longer no doubt there would have been many more very high quality dials painted by this young gifted artist.

ANN & JAMES OSBORNE

The business was continued by Ann Osborne, briefly at Great Charles Street in 1779-80, before moving to 9 Whittal Street, in premises that would have been relatively newly built. The dial



Figs 9-12. The corners of the James Hartwell dial (anti-clockwise from top right) show: fishing (spring), picking flowers (summer), making wine (autumn), and skater chased by a devil (winter).

in Figs 13-14 with an Osborne falseplate and a good hunting scene in the arch is quite early, made shortly after the break-up of the Osborne & Wilson partnership for Thomas Griffis of Birmingham. The firm is variously listed in directories as Ann Osborne & Co, Ann Osborne & Son, Ann & James Osborne and finally as James Osborne.

It has previously been assumed that Ann was Thomas Osborne's widow and James their son, but no marriage has yet been traced, nor the birth of any children. There is the distinct possibility that it was his mother Ann who continued the dial business, along with her youngest child James, Thomas's younger brother by 9 years. Ann's husband, Samuel Osborne, had died at Sutton Coldfield in 1766, when she was aged thirty-three and her son Thomas Hadley Osborne was about 13 years old. It is significant that neither the death of Ann Osborne or any of her children are recorded in Sutton Coldfield after this date, nor is she known to have remarried.

It appears that with no husband or other family ties to keep her in Sutton Coldfield, Ann Osborne and her children moved back to her home town so that Thomas could train as an artist. She may then have joined him in his expanding dialmaking business, or even helped to set it up. Alternatively, if Thomas had a

serious illness that caused his early death she may have helped him run the firm as his health deteriorated. This could have occurred around the time that the Osborne & Wilson partnership was dissolved. If James Osborne is Thomas's brother, rather than his son, he would have been aged about twenty-five when Ann Osborne & Son are first listed in directories in 1787.

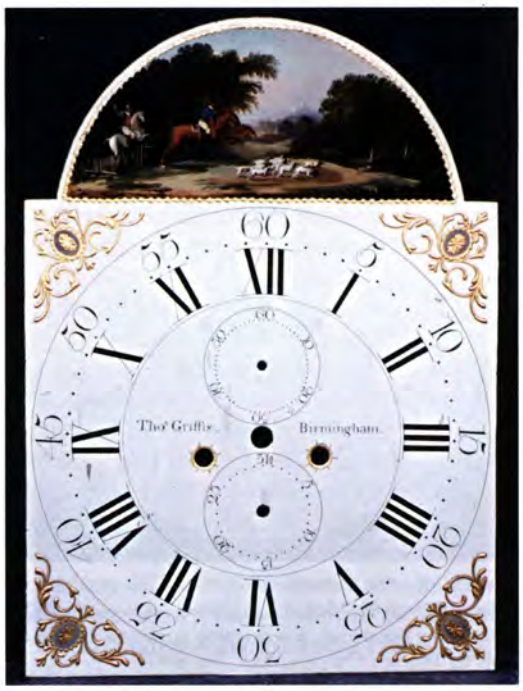


Fig. 13. A dial with an Osborne falseplate, made for Thomas Griffis of Birmingham, *M.F. Tennant*.

Whether Ann and James Osborne were also painters, like Thomas, or if they employed other artists is not known, but as the firm expanded it is likely that there were a number of workers. These would have prepared the dial sheets by applying multiple coats of base paint, painted the decoration, applied and gilded raised gesso work, while dial writers applied hour and minute numerals and other blackwork (the 'graphics'), and, on moon dials, maps were printed on the hemisphere 'humps'. With so many operations necessary to produce a finished dial, and from the large number of surviving Osborne dials, it is clear that there was the potential for a significant workforce, but how many is unknown. Despite this, if the meagre evidence from later dialmakers is a guide, there were probably not as many workers as might be imagined.

The firm was listed in directories as Ann & James Osborne until 1808. Ann probably died about this time, and she may have been the Mrs Osborne of Ashted Row, who died on 23 May 1809.[12] Ashted was developed from 1787, aimed at prosperous business people and manufacturers,


Fig. 14. The hunting scene in the arch of the Griffis dial, *M.F. Tennant*.

12. She is unlikely to have been the Mrs Ann Osbourne who died on 7 Nov 1805, aged 78 years (St Mary, Whittall Street, monumental inscription), who would have been too old for either a possible wife or his mother.

and it was the sort of place that a successful dialmaker would have moved to, so as to be out of the smoke of the town, just half-an-hour's walk away.[13] In the 1815 directory, although the Osborne dialmaking business is no longer included, a James Osborne, with no occupation, is listed at Ashted, and is additional evidence that Ann Osborne and her son James may have moved to Ashted. George Walker was another dialmaker who lived at Ashted, but worked in the town centre (see Part II, to follow).

The business was continued by James Osborne until 1812, after which he may have retired or sold the business. Neither his death or marriage have yet been established, and any record of the latter is likely to have been in the missing registers of St Mary, Whittall Street, and is another example of the gaps in this investigation.[14] In 1808-12, as well as James Osborne listed as a japanner and clock-dial maker in Whittal Street, there was also a man of the same name living in Great Charles Street (where Thomas Osborne's former partner James Wilson had lived and worked until his death in 1809), but he is not included separately in the trades lists. If they are the same person (and there was certainly at least one other James Osborne in Birmingham at this time, a refiner in Snow Hill), then he might have been involved in an unknown capacity with the final years of the Wilson manufactury.

The firm used cast-iron falseplates with the words 'Osborne' or 'Osborne's Manufactory Birmingham' cast into them with at least eight variations of style, some with decorative borders. The ones that include 'Manufactory' may be later than the others, and these were certainly used from 1785 to about 1795 on Osborne dials exported to America, after which time Wilson dials increased in popularity there, but probably not to the extent of Osborne.[15] Later Osborne dials (Fig. 15), while of good quality are not of the same high standard as those painted by Thomas Hadley Osborne during the Osborne & Wilson partnership. The Osborne clock-dial business seems to have finally ended about 1812, after 34 years of operation. It is not known if the manufactory was continued by anyone else, but it may have been by John Wilkes (born 1755, died 1835). Wilkes was a clock-dial maker in Hospital Street in 1808-15, then as Wilkes & Baker at 10 Whittal Street in 1815-20. Samuel Baker (born 1766, died 1837) then left to form his own business in Slaney Street, later trading as Baker & Son until 1854. Wilkes was then at 13 Whittall Street to 1830, and as he was initially next door to the Osborne works within a couple of years of Osborne's last directory entry (and this gap may be simply due to the time between publication of the directories) he

Fig. 15. A later Osborne dial, made about 1800 for William Costen of Kirkham, Lancashire, who died in 1803. Although a good dial, the painting is not as fine as on dials by Thomas Osborne, *M.F. Tennant.*

13. Local information from Joseph McKenna.

14. Children were born in May 1810 and September 1811 to James and Elizabeth Margaret Osborne, who may be the dialmaker. James Osborn, buried at St Paul on 23 March 1815, aged twenty-seven, is too young, while James Osborne, buried at St Mary, Whittal Street, on 26 March 1818, aged sixty-nine, is too old to have been either Thomas Osborne's son or brother. The death notices in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* includes: 'Mrs James Osborne of Birmingham died at Sidmouth 6 March 1799', but as there is no record of her burial in the Sidmouth parish registers it is not confirmed that she was the wife of James Osborne the dialmaker, nor is her Christian name known.

15. Information from Tom Spittler. Ironically the earliest American importer of Birmingham painted dials was the silversmith Paul Revere, the anti-British hero of the War of Independence, in 1785, only one year after the end of the war.

may have taken over Osborne's old business. Although there is no conclusive evidence, there is a definite possibility that the Osborne business may have continued under new ownership. In 1820 Wilkes & Son published a price list of 'Japanned Clock Dials' with thirty combinations of size and style – square, solid arch, arch moon and round – and additional features such as various types of simple automata in the arch. Apart from a trade card from Walker & Hughes (see Part II, to follow), this is the only known surviving document from any of Birmingham's numerous clock-dial manufacturers.[16]

JAMES WILSON

Although the birth of James Wilson has not been traced, he is said to have been born in 1755 and hence aged only seventeen when he advertised with the 19-year-old Thomas Osborne in 1772 the manufacture of the new white clock dials.[17] After his split with Thomas Osborne in September 1777, Wilson announced in January 1778 that he 'continues the Clock Dial manufactory (late Osborne & Wilson's) at No. 11 Great-Charles-Street'. This was at the western end of the street, not far from the junction with Congreve Street, in premises occupied until then by a buckle maker, and James Wilson lived and worked there to the end of his life. The buildings on this street were large family houses of three stories, plus a basement, typically with seventeen rooms (excluding closets, pantries and smaller rooms), as well as a brew house and other outhouses in an outside court. Clearly there was plenty of space for running a business as well as for living accommodation. A rating plan of the area in 1870 includes house numbers, so the property may be identified, while an earlier survey at a larger scale shows it to be essentially the same

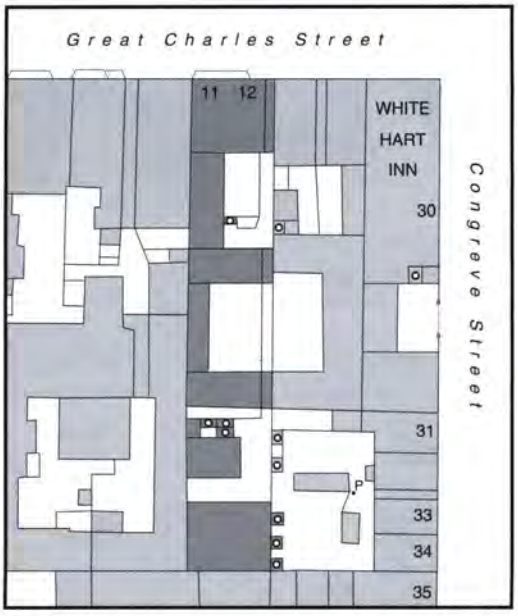


Fig. 16. A plan of the western end of Great Charles Street, based on rating surveys of 1850-5 and 1870-1. James Wilson's premises at No.11 and the adjacent No.12, are shown in a darker tint.

building in 1850-5, and no doubt little altered since Wilson's time (Fig. 16).

At the time of these surveys, numbers 11 and 12 Great Charles Street appear to be combined as one property, and this may have occurred in Wilson's time. Up to 1788, 12 Great Charles Street had been occupied by a chape maker,[18] but thereafter, at least during the period that Wilson was at number 11, there are no separate directory entries for number 12. The very large number of Wilson dials that survive from the 1790s indicate that additional space could have been needed. He may have had enough rooms to rent out a few of them, for in 1800-1 not only his brother Richard, portrait painter, but also John Thomason, attorney, were listed in

16. A.A. Treherne, 'British Clocks, 1700-1900, a review' *Antiquarian Horology*, 11/2 (Winter 1978), 20.

17. B. Loomes, *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World, Complete 21st Century Edition*, (2006) listed James Wilson as born in 1755 and married in 1776. Brian Loomes confirms that this information came from an unrecorded correspondent, who also reported that he married a Sarah Porter. While neither his birth nor his first marriage have been traced by the present author, there is evidence that the marriage details are likely to be correct. Hence both birth and marriage details have been tentatively accepted, until their source is discovered. Unfortunately the licence for his second marriage only states 'aged 21 years and upwards', while his age at death is not recorded and his gravestone was illegible when recorded before the demolition of St Mary, Whittall Street. Wilfred A. Seaby, 'James Wilson, Clockmaker of Belfast', *Antiquarian Horology*, 14/2 (June 1983), 14, states that 'he [James Wilson of Birmingham] died . . . in his 62nd year during 1810'. The source of this statement is not given and James Wilson actually died on 3 April 1809. Nor is there any evidence that he was a Presbyterian and related to the Belfast clockmaker of the same name, as speculated by Seaby. It is more likely that he was from the Birmingham area.

18. A chape is part of a buckle.

Fig. 17. A dial made by James Wilson for Walter Urie of Dundee, about 1790, with an automaton shipbuilding scene in the arch.

Fig. 18. A later Wilson dial, made for Samuel Deacon of Barton-in-the-Beans, Leicestershire. The 30-hour movement is dated 1800 and the case has an invoice dated December 1799.

directories at 11 Great Charles Street. In 1815-23, after Wilson's death, 11 Great Charles Street was occupied by a firm of merchants.

James Wilson appears to have inherited at least some of the Osborne & Wilson falseplate patterns, as examples are known with the partnership names on one side and just Wilson's added on the other. The earliest of his falseplates have the name as 'James Wilson', with no placename, and one of these is known with a movement dated July 1778, only 10 months after he began working on his own.[19] They are not common, and those he used later were marked either 'Wilson, Birm' or just 'Wilson', in contrast to Osborne's array of different falseplates styles.

James Wilson became the most prolific of the early dialmakers, and, apart from those by Osborne & Wilson, his manufactory produced the finest dials (Figs 17-18). This phrase has been chosen with care, as I personally do not feel that Wilson was an actual dialpainter, but more of a businessman, or he may (initially at least) have just done the graphics. This view is not universally accepted, but it is difficult to otherwise explain the various markings painted or stamped on the back of his dials (and perhaps significantly, not generally used by other dialmakers), as well as the enigmatic job labels or tickets sometimes found. There is little consistency, and these markings and labels are not found on every Wilson dial – even the Wilson 'trademark' of a white paint splodge with scribed lines is sometimes missing from dials clearly identified with his name.[20] His output may have been so great that there had to be some means of identification. Even if Wilson was using a number of different outworkers he would have needed quite a sizeable area for warehousing as well as some means of quality

19. Dial signed John Deacon, Leicester, but with a movement made by Samuel Deacon of Barton, numbered 78 122 and dated July 1778. It is an 8-day round dial (hence without corner or arch decoration, which would have been useful for stylistic comparisons) with the winding and seconds holes filled with lead plugs by Wilson and used with a 30-hour movement. Conversely, 30-hour Wilson dials are known originally used on 8-day clocks, which are not subsequent marriages.

20. It has been suggested that the lines were scratched through the paint splodge to record the number of base coats applied (Ian Pritchard, personal communication). This is a very reasonable explanation, apart from the fact that neither the white splodge or scratched lines are to be found on dials from any other manufacturer.

control, and the various marks could be part of such a system.

James Wilson, aged twenty-one, first married Sarah Porter, aged twenty-four, in 1776, and their son Thomas Porter Wilson was baptised at St Philip's church in 1777, but died young. Another son was 'James Wilson jun., son of — Wilson, clock dial maker of Great Charles St. died 26 May 1801'. He was baptised at St Philip's in February 1779, so would have been twenty-two when he died. No doubt he worked with his father, but did not live long enough to continue the business. A gravestone at St Mary, Whittall Street, recorded: 'Sarah wife of James Wilson, died March 2nd 1788, aged 36'.[21]

A couple of years after the death of his first wife James Wilson, japanner and widower, married again, on 10 February 1790, to Sarah Jorden, spinster aged twenty-four and 11 years his junior, of Kinfare (Kinver), south Staffordshire, at St Martin's church, Birmingham. In 1793 a daughter Frances Elizabeth Wilson was baptised, followed by Eleanor Caswell Wilson, Jeremiah Caswell Wilson in 1795 and Frederick, born in 1800, but died in 1802.[22] Sarah, born in 1792 is not mentioned in James Wilson's will and probably died young. Caswell may have been his mother's maiden name, but this is not confirmed. It was clearly not the maiden name of either his first or second wife. The second Sarah Wilson died on 28 November 1804, aged thirty-nine.

Nothing more is heard of James Wilson and his family until he wrote his will on 2 March 1809, just a month before he died on 3 April 1809, aged fifty-four, at Great Charles Street and was buried at St Mary, Whittal Street. A gravestone survived into the twentieth century and recorded the death of his first wife, their son Thomas Porter Wilson and 'Also of James Wilson ... [defaced]', and has ensured that his origins remain unconfirmed. The beneficiaries of James Wilson's will were his three surviving children (all from his second marriage): Frances Elizabeth Wilson (aged fifteen), Eleanor Caswell Wilson and Jeremiah Caswell Wilson (both aged almost fourteen), who were to receive their inheritance when they reached 21 years of age. (They have not been traced in the 1841 Birmingham or 1851 Warwickshire Censuses, nor the obituary index to *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, so they had probably married, or had moved away.) If they died before reaching twenty-one the estate was to be divided between the surviving unnamed children of his late brother Richard. It is significant that the will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury rather than locally at Lichfield. This implies that either he had property in more than one archdeaconry (for which there is no evidence), or that his estate was substantial and he chose the prestige of the Canterbury Court. The indication is that his dialmaking business was very successful, and he was quite prosperous when he died. The same is true of the dialmakers George Walker, Thomas Hughes and William Finnemore, who also had their wills proved at Canterbury (see Part II, to follow).

The trustees of the will were James Wilson's friends Thomas Warner and George Burrish, both gentlemen, and Edward Simpson, japanner. Warner was probably the jeweller, gold-seal maker and gold and silver toy maker at Spiceal Street in 1775-6, Colmore Row 1791-8, and 33 Newhall Street (as Warner & Griffith) in 1800-1. Burrish was an attorney at Cherry Street in 1797 and 44 New Street in 1800-1. Edward Simpson is not listed in directories as a japanner, but may be the man at Colmore Row with no specified occupation in 1800-1, and possibly one of James Wilson's employees or outworkers.

James Wilson's brother Richard was almost certainly the portrait painter and drawing master in Whittal Street in 1785-98. Richard's wife Mary died in March 1796 and he then moved to Great Charles Street in 1797-1801 to stay with his brother (the slight overlap of the dates is no doubt due to delays between collecting the data and publication of the different trade directories). It is likely that he painted at least some clock dials while at Great Charles Street, but was he working for Mrs Ann Osborne at Whittal Street before then? As there was a James Osborne (although not confirmed to be the dialmaker) in Great Charles Street in 1808-12, there may have been more collaboration between the two major dialmaking concerns in their latter days than

21. Monumental inscription, St Mary, Whittall Street. Microfiche published by the Birmingham and Midland Society for Genealogy and Heraldry.

22. While they were both baptised on 4 Oct 1795, Eleanor was born on 24 May 1795, and Jeremiah was aged one at his baptism.

might be supposed. By 1803 Richard Wilson had moved to the Sand Pits, on the western edge of the town centre, and only about 10 minute's walk away, where he died on 18 July 1807.

Apart from any possible unattributed clock dials, none of Richard Wilson's work is known to have survived, but he did paint a sign for a public house in Navigation Street, called the 'Man Loaded with Mischief'. This was based on a sign by William Hogarth for an inn in Oxford Street, London, and was a representation of marriage, showing a man carrying his wife, a monkey and all sorts of other things burdening him down. Richard Wilson's sign is said to have atttracted such large crowds that the magistrates ordered it to be taken down.[23]

James Wilson's clock-dial business was continued by Nathaniel Porter, who made clock dials with falseplates having 'Wilson' on one side and 'N. Porter late Wilson' on the reverse. Porter was a factor at 57 Bartholomew Row in 1800-11, but is listed in trade directories as a clock-dial maker at Great Charles Street in 1812. He was probably related by marriage (maybe a brother-in-law) as James Wilson's first wife was a Porter. The scarcity of these 'Porter late Wilson' dials indicates that Nathaniel Porter was not able to continue Wilson's success. A major reason may have been that he could not produce dials of sufficient quality, as one of the few dials known by him is naively painted (Fig. 19). The later directory entries were somewhat out of date by the time they appeared in print, for Nathanial Porter, 'dial maker, Birmingham', was declared bankrupt in June 1811.[24] He had married in 1795 at Edgbaston, and had a son, also Nathaniel, baptised at St Philip's, Birmingham, in 1799. He does not appear in the 1815 or later directories.

Other Wilson falseplates are known also bearing the names of W. Francis or Walker & Hughes, both of Birmingham, as well as Hawthorne of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (whose dials were actually made by Whitaker of Halifax). The patterns (probably of brass) used for casting Wilson's iron falseplates were disposed of after either the closure of Wilson's business or after his successor, Nathaniel Porter, abandoned

Fig. 19. A dial signed W. Knight, Stafford, with a falseplate marked 'N. Porter late Wilson'. The quality of the painting in the corners and on the moon disc is much inferior to those on dials made when James Wilson was running the business. The hemisphere maps are one of the styles used on Wilson dials, confirming that they came from the same manufactory, *M.F. Tennant*.

dialmaking, and reused by adding the new names. Perhaps it was due to its prestige that the Wilson name was retained instead of being completely obliterated, in an attempt to imply a continuing connection with a well known and respected business.

REFERENCES

Where not specifically referred to, most of the biographical information has been taken from trade directories, parish registers (including the International Genealogical Index), censuses, death notices in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* (index in Birmingham Central Library), the National Burial Index, marriage licences and wills in the Public Record Office and Lichfield Record Office.

23. E. Edwards, *Old Taverns of Birmingham*, (1879). I am grateful to Joseph McKenna for this reference, and for much other local information.

24. *Hereford Journal* 5 June 1811 (no doubt copied from *The London Gazette*). I am grateful to Dr John Eisel for this reference.