

HALIFAX DI

Part 2: Whitak

Part 1 of this article described how William Whitaker started to make clock dials in Halifax, probably in the late 1780s or 1790s. After his death in 1800, the dialmaking business was run by his younger brother Henry. In the 1790s William Shreeve from Birmingham had been employed as a dial painter and married William's daughter Leah in 1806.

Henry Whitaker, would have been assisted by his nephew John and niece Leah, probably until shortly after 1809, when the company was still listed in a trade directory under the William Whitaker brand name, though these directories were often out of date by the time they were published. William Shreeve was now not only an important contributor to the high quality of the firm's clock dials, but he had also become a member of the family and a partner with Henry Whitaker. Exactly when this occurred is not known, but the firm's name first appears as Whitaker & Shreeve in 1816, in *PIGOT'S COMMERCIAL*

by **John Robey**, UK

DIRECTORY, still at Aked's Road.

This new partnership did not please everyone in the Whitaker family, especially John, who no doubt might have expected to eventually take over the business. The interloper clearly had upset him, and while we can only guess what harsh words and arguments took place, John left Halifax and moved to Leeds, where he worked as a clock dialmaker in competition to his uncle, sister and brother-in-law (see Part 3).

After the formation of the partnership their longcase clock dials had falseplates cast with the joint names and they continued to be used until the 1830s. The two partners appeared in a list of applicants for patents from 28th January



Figures 6 and 7. An unrestored square dial with a Whitaker corner decoration. Signed 'R: Richardson, Lancaster'.

to 22nd February 1817 as 'Whittaker, H. and Shreeve, W, Halifax, painters'. Since they do not appear in the official list of patentees, a patent (possibly for an improved type of varnish) was never granted, because in February 1817 the *LONDON GAZETTE* announced that:

The Partnership between Henry Whitaker and William Shreeve of Halifax, Painters

and Japanners under the firm of Whitaker & Shreeve is dissolved.

William Shreeve must have continued to paint clock dials for another six months until he died as a result of an horrific accident on 15th April 1817. This has achieved some notoriety in horological history ever since it appeared in the second edition of *YORKSHIRE*

ALMAKERS

ker & Shreeve



er & Shreeve falseplate, about 1810-1815. Delicate rococo
r, who is unrecorded. Photographs by John Robey.

CLOCKMAKERS by Brian Loomes, in 1985.

This quotes a report from an unknown source that had appeared in 1869, more than 50 years after the event. Recently several contemporary newspaper reports have been discovered that throw more light on what happened. The shorter one in the *LEEDS MERCURY*, records:

On the 15th inst, Mr. William Shreeve,

enameler, and painter, of Halifax—His death was most calamitous; he was in the act of making varnish, which took fire, by which he was dreadfully scorched as only to survive a few hours.

This report was even syndicated in the *PUBLIC LEDGER AND DAILY ADVERTISER*, published in London. A more detailed account appeared in the *LEEDS*

INTELLIGENCER and even the *STAMFORD MERCURY*:

Dreadful Accident.—On Thursday last, Mr. W. Shreeve, a respectable painter, in Halifax, mixed some varnish with a quantity of turpentine, for the purpose of thinning it, and after he had heated it in a copper kettle, he incautiously took it to the door, when from the action of the air upon it, it took fire, when he was so dreadfully burnt that he survived but a few hours afterwards. He was a native of Birmingham, of a respected family, and has left a wife and 4 children.

We can speculate that he had been making the improved type of varnish that he had unsuccessfully tried to patent. It is worth noting that the much later unidentified account in 1869 states that he was 'a house painter, and did business in clock faces, himself being the chief embellisher', but as this is not included in the contemporary

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reports, it was probably based on local information from those who could still remember the family and their business. This tragedy was included in *THE OLD CLOCKMAKERS OF YORKSHIRE* by N V Dinsdale, published in 1946, but for some unaccountable reason the name was given as William Selorice and this was repeated in *LOCAL CLOCK & WATCH MAKERS [HALIFAX]* by G Dent in 1955.

Despite the wide coverage the accident received in both local newspapers and those further afield, no coroner's report has been traced, nor a press summary. This is particularly unfortunate as it might have revealed a good deal of information about the business that is lacking: the size of the workshop and the type of

equipment such as drying stoves, the number of employees, was he working alone or were others present?

William Shreeve survived just long enough for a basic will to be hastily drawn up, which he only managed to sign with a cross as his mark. Everything was left to his widow and after her death equally to his four children, but it was not proved until 15 months later, rather than the usual couple of weeks or so. Why the delay is not known, especially as his estate was estimated as not exceeding £400; even if the results of an inquest had been awaited this should have taken place shortly after the event.

Despite the official dissolution of the partnership, Whitaker & Shreeve continued to be included in directories for many years afterwards. After William Shreeve's death the firm was probably continued jointly by Henry Whitaker and Leah Shreeve until Henry's death in 1823 and thereafter by Leah as the sole proprietor. Perhaps the tragic events of April 1817 changed attitudes and she formed a new alliance with Uncle Henry, reinstating the recently dissolved partnership's name. This would be entirely in keeping with the wishes of William Whitaker for his family to continue the business, now being run by his brother and his daughter.

Whitaker & Shreeve supplied longcase clock dials to clockmakers throughout northern England, especially to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where they formed a special relationship with Beilby & Hawthorn, the major suppliers of clock parts in the North-east. The evidence for this trading link comes from the names of both firms being recorded on falseplates (see Part 3), which provide a unique source of information that is not recorded in more conventional documents. On a few special dials this information is also included on the front of the dial.

Ralph Beilby set up as an engraver in 1765 and was regarded as one of the finest engravers of silver in England and also engraved brass clock dials. He retired from engraving in 1797 to devote himself to making watch glasses. In 1801 he formed a partnership with his brother-in-law James Hawthorn, a brass founder and clock-movement maker, as suppliers of clock and watch parts and also having a 'Lancashire Tool Warehouse'. After Ralph Beilby died in 1817 the business was continued by Hawthorn until his death in 1831.

Figures 6 and 7 show an example of the high quality dials made by Whitaker & Shreeve, while the moon dial in figure 8 has many characteristic features found on their dials from the early nineteenth century. The corners often show young



Figure 8 (above). Eight-day moon dial made about 1810 by Whitaker & Shreeve, Halifax and sold by Beilby & Hawthorn of Newcastle upon Tyne to J & Blaylock of Longtown, near Carlisle. Halifax dials often have a gilt band with black edges round the chapter ring and the square part of the dial, running straight across beneath the distinctive half maps. The corners have women in red dresses and large red hats, typical of Whitaker dials. Photographs by John Blaylock.





Figures 9 (above) and 10 (left). Special dial made by Whitaker & Shreeve and sold by Beilby & Hawthorn, signed for the unrecorded PH Bell, Gateshead. Photographs by John Robey.

women wearing red dresses or coats and red hats to represent the Four Seasons. Also typical is a gilt band round the chapter ring and round the square part of the dial and beneath the moon maps. This gilt border is different to the usual Birmingham practice. These women in fashionable red or pink dresses continued

to be painted into the 1830s and are likely to have been a speciality of Leah Shreeve.

The dial shown in **figures 9 and 10**, made about 1810-17 by Whitaker & Shreeve and sold by Beilby & Hawthorn, is titled 'VIEW of a Coal ENGINE on the RIVER TYNE, with a PIT at work'. It depicts a small-scale colliery with a steam winding engine, a horse whim (also for winding), a capstan and horses pulling coal wagons, with Newcastle in the background. While this appears to be technically accurate it cannot be identified with any actual colliery. Since William Shreeve was said to be 'the chief embellisher' at this period it is likely to have been his work, based on published prints and his own observations of collieries in the Halifax area.

A dial made in the period from 1817 to 1831, when James Hawthorn was the Newcastle factor for Whitaker & Shreeve dials, is shown in **figures 11 and 12**. This example dates from the 1820s. The arch shows a boy in a red jacket setting a box trap to catch linnets and other songbirds, which were sold at local markets to earn pocket money.

Square dials with a so-called '12 o'clock moon' were popular in the north of England as this arrangement enabled a moon display to be included on a clock that could fit in a low-ceilinged house. The typical example in **figure 13** also includes a transfer of 'Whitaker & Shreeve, Dial Makers, Halifax' in the corner and 'W&S' between the hemisphere maps, **figure 14**. The colliery scene in **figure 10** has 'Sold only by BEILBY & HAWTHORN NEWCASTLE' round the top of the arch, both examples making it quite clear who was the actual maker and who was the factor. This contrasts with Birmingham factors, who often sold dials with their own names cast into the falseplates, implying that they were the actual makers, even though they played no part in their manufacture.

The Halifax dial manufacturer is included in various trade directories, without any specific mention of the proprietor, until in 1830 William White's *DIRECTORY OF LEEDS AND THE CLOTHING DISTRICT* lists 'Whitaker & Shreeve (and japanners), 2 Aked's Road' in the classified section for painters, while the alphabetical list of proprietors includes 'Shreeve, Leah, painter, &c., h [= house] 2 Aked's Road'. This confirms her continued connection with the business and she had probably lived at this address since her marriage, while her father and uncle appear to have lived in nearby Sowerby Bridge.

The death of Leah Shreeve in March 1834 aged 57 marked the end of the



Figure 11. Whitaker & Shreeve dial sold by James Hawthorn about 1820-25. Signed for Ralph Weston, Wolsingham. County Durham. The replaced hands are of an earlier style. Photograph by Ian Beilby.



Figure 12. The falseplate by Whitaker & Shreeve Halifax / Hawthorn Newcastle used from 1817 to 1831. Photograph by Ian Beilby.

involvement of the Whitakers and Shreeves in making clock dials in Halifax. Her brother John had moved to Leeds where he made dials, while others, possibly former employees, continued the trade in Halifax. Within three months of her death, sale notices appeared in both the Birmingham and Leeds newspapers:

To be disposed of, and entered upon immediately, an old established Business in the HOUSE and ORNAMENTAL PAINTING and CLOCK-DIAL MANUFACTURING, consisting of Good-will, Stock in Trade, and Fixtures.

The concern has been established upwards of forty years, and has a good connection attached to it; and affords advantageous prospects for any respectable and industrious man possessed of a small capital.

He left Sierra Leone in poor health and returned home via New Orleans and Florida.

Apply by letter (post paid) to A. B. at the Post Office, Halifax.

While no name or address is given, it is clearly the former Whitaker & Shreeve business that is being sold, and though the sale included the goodwill, stock and fixtures, the property is not specifically mentioned. If 'upwards of forty years' can be relied on, it confirms that the firm started in the 1790s.

Leah Shreeve's three daughters are likely to have worked as clock-dial painters, though there is no documentary evidence to confirm this. However, Leah's only son William Whitaker Shreeve, who was only four years old when his father died, became a painter (though no examples of his work can be identified), and he would have inherited artistic skills from both sides of the family. He is likely



Figure 13. A 12 o'clock moon dial made for Richard Martlew of Ormskirk in the 1820s. Photograph by MF Tennant.



to have assisted his mother in painting clock dials, but he did not continue in the dial trade. Instead, no doubt influenced by his nonconformist upbringing, he travelled the world to gather information for anti-slavery reformers and what little is known about this remarkable young man is worth recording.

In 1847, as 'late acting writer to her Britannic Majesty's commission under the slave trade suppression treaties', he was the author of *SIERRA LEONE THE PRINCIPAL BRITISH COLONY ON*

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Figure 14. Detail of the name 'Whitaker & Shreeve. Dial Makers. Halifax' along the top edge and the initials 'W&S' between the moons. Photograph by MF Tennant.

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THE WESTERN COAST OF AFRICA. This is a very comprehensive survey of the colony, which had been set up as a safe haven for freed slaves. It details the people, their religion, customs, living conditions, trade, climate and many more topics—even the price of medicines. The earliest mention of his six-month visit is December 1842, when he would have been 29 years old.

The text reveals that he had visited America in 1835 and 1836 (aged 22/23). He left Sierra Leone in poor health and returned home by the roundabout route of New Orleans and Florida. He was very scathing of New Orleans, probably after seeing for himself the conditions on the cotton plantations. He reached England

having 'at last recovered from the effects of a long residence in an African climate'.

In May 1849, after the publication of his book, he was living in Liverpool where he registered as a merchant seaman. His seaman's ticket states that he was a painter with a fair complexion, 6ft 3½in tall with brown hair and eyes and a cut on his nose.

It also reveals that he had first gone to sea, also as a painter, in 1836, which is likely to have been the occasion of his first visits to America. This may have been an earlier mission to make an official illustrated record of conditions on slave plantations, but this is not confirmed.

In May 1852 he was a passenger on the ship *GOLD SEEKER* leaving Victoria, Australia, bound for Launceston in

Tasmania. It is reasonable to suppose that this visit was to report on and illustrate the conditions of convicts in the penal colony. After this he disappears from the records and does not appear in any British census or death records. He is likely to have died in a remote corner of the British Empire while reporting on social injustices. He was the last Shreeve with any connection to the Halifax clock dial trade, which he left behind after his mother died and the business was closed.

The final part of this article will look at the different falseplates used by William Whitaker and Whitaker & Shreeve, the very distinctive maps used on their moon dials, John Whitaker's activities in Leeds, and later attempt to make clock dials in Halifax. 📄