

John A. Robey

## The rise and fall of Samuel Wilkes, Birmingham dialmaker

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Volume 43, No. 2 (June 2022) contains the following articles

- Bartholomew Newsam, c. 1530–1587 by *Adrian A Finch, Valerie J Finch and Anthony W Finch* 174
- Leonardo da Vinci's spring-driven clocks. Part 1 by *Dietrich Matthes* 197
- Scrutinizing Huygens's *Figura* drawing, by *Mart van Duijn, Ben Hordijk, Rob Memel and Jef Schaeps* 208
- The Priors: a successful British watch brand for the Ottoman market, by *Luigi Petrucci* 214
- The rise and fall of Samuel Wilkes, Birmingham dialmaker, by *John A. Robey* 222
- 'The feminisation of the horological craft'. Gisela Eibuschitz and Kitty Herz, forgotten Jewish pioneer horologists, by *Gerhard Milchram and Tabea Rude* 241

The front cover shows a detail from the portrait of a woman holding a clock, which is the subject of the Picture Gallery in this issue. The photo was kindly supplied by the Tomasso Brothers Gallery, Leeds. The painting is now in the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

# The rise and fall of Samuel Wilkes, Birmingham dialmaker

John A. Robey\*

*Samuel Wilkes was one of the largest of the later generation of clock-dial manufacturers in Birmingham in the nineteenth century. He initially worked with his father John Wilkes, who had previously traded as Wilkes & Baker, before Samuel took over the business. While his dials are regarded as not particularly special, he had an interesting life. He married into a family of important engineers and manufacturers, moved into property speculation, climbed up the social ladder, lived in a large house in a then fashionable northern suburb, and amassed a collection of Old Master paintings. After his almost inevitable bankruptcy in 1850 he was last recorded as a metal dealer. This article looks at his life and examples of the dials made by Wilkes & Baker and Samuel Wilkes, and also at the economics of the japanning and clock-dial trades.*

After the demise in the early nineteenth century of the Wilson, Osborne, and Ashwin/Byrne manufactories in Birmingham,<sup>1</sup> which were the earliest makers of painted longcase dials in Britain, a new generation of dialmakers emerged. These included Walker, Hughes, Finnemore,<sup>2</sup> and a host of smaller firms, as well as factors selling dials bearing their own names but made by others. Samuel Wilkes was originally one of the smaller dialmakers, who rose by 'perseverance and industry' to become the largest and most prolific of the later generation of dial manufacturers. He is usually regarded as making unremarkable dials. However, his overexpansion at a time of economic uncertainty and a decline in the popularity of longcase clocks, combined with unsuccessful speculation in the property market, contributed to his eventual downfall. While his dials may not be especially

interesting, the same cannot be said of his life story, which records one aspect of Birmingham's social history.

As later generations of the Wilkes family have claimed, incorrectly, that the dialmaker was related to the radical Member of Parliament John Wilkes, FRS (1725–97), their genealogy has been thoroughly, albeit not completely accurately, researched.<sup>3</sup> This article presents much new information on Samuel Wilkes, his business activities and his family connections.

## John Wilkes and Wilkes & Baker

Samuel Wilkes was the son of the dialmaker John Wilkes, who was born in 1755 to Thomas Wilkes and his wife Ann (probably née Minton), and died in 1835 at the advanced age of 80 years. He is said to have married twice, though no details are known

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1. John A. Robey, 'Birmingham Dialmakers, Some Biographical Notes, Part I', *Antiquarian Horology*, June 2007, 209–22.

2. Robey, 'Birmingham Dialmakers Part 2', *Antiquarian Horology*, December 2007, 470–80.

3. Information from Charles Eldridge, a direct descendant of Samuel Wilkes. Copies of letters exist from relatives who had visited Samuel Wilkes and other members of his family, though the emphasis is on family relationships rather than their business affairs. These have provided information that supplements online genealogical websites, especially ancestry.co.uk and findmypast.co.uk (using images of the original documents wherever possible), trade directories and newspaper advertisements.

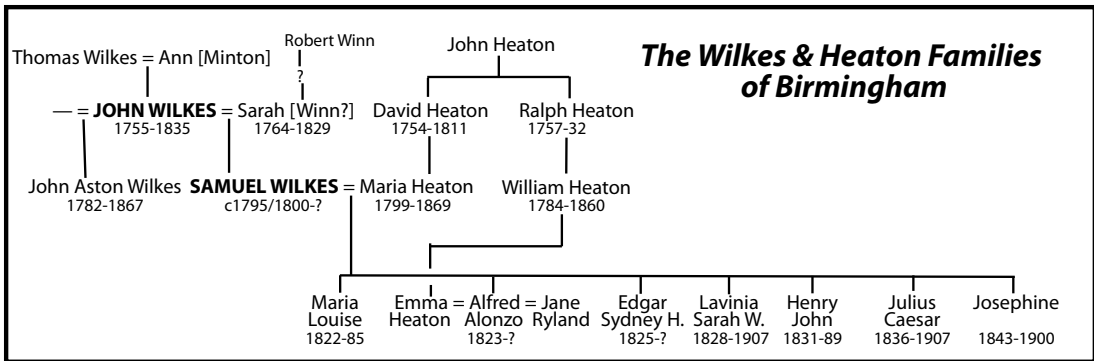


Fig. 1. The Wilkes family tree, showing the relationship with the Heaton family. Only the children of Samuel Wilkes who survived into adulthood are shown.



Fig. 2. A dial with a Wilkes & Baker falseplate made in 1815-19 for William Kirk of Stowmarket, Suffolk. Geometric patterns in the corners and a romanticised country house with very tall towers in the arch. Distinctive vertical Arabic hour numeral, especially the 7 and 3. (D. Creasey)



Fig. 3. Moon dial by Wilkes & Baker made about 1815 for John Parr of Tremadoc. The corners have roundels with flowers, while the post mill on the moon disc is a type common to East Anglia, not North Wales (M. F. Tennant)

of his first wife, and they had at least one son, John Aston Wilkes. About 1788 John Wilkes married Sarah, born in 1764, and though her surname is not confirmed, a granddaughter used Wynn as a middle name (see later in this

article). John Wilkes's second wife is likely to have been the sister of Robert Wynn (usually Winn), born a year earlier than Sarah. He was a blank tray maker, as was his son of the same name who also made blanks for clock dials.<sup>4</sup>

It is very likely that Robert Winn senior also made dial blanks,<sup>5</sup> so an alliance by marriage to a supplier of these would be to John Wilkes's advantage. John and Sarah Wilkes had seven children, with Samuel, born about 1795–9, being the only son to survive into adulthood.

John Wilkes and his son John Aston Wilkes were both subscribers to the Ebenezer Chapel in Steelhouse Lane in 1818, John senior becoming a deacon. John Aston Wilkes worked in various trades in Birmingham before becoming a Unitarian minister and emigrating to Canada. A nephew of Samuel Wilkes became a minister in the Congregational church, so Samuel would have grown up with a nonconformist background, though there is very little evidence that religion played any part in his adult life.

John Wilkes was working as a clock-dial manufacturer in Hospital Street in 1808–15, but no reliable reports are known of surviving Wilkes dials made as early as this. It is not known what he was doing before his earliest directory entry, when he would have been about 53 years old. Perhaps he had been working for one of the established dial-makers. By 1815 John Wilkes was in partnership with Samuel Baker as clock-dial manufacturers in Whittall Street in the Gun Quarter and opposite St Mary's Church, now the site of Birmingham Children's Hospital. The premises are later identified as number 13 Whittall Street, only a few doors away from the Osborne Manufactory at number 9. Though Osborne's works closed about this time there is no evidence that Wilkes took over the business. In the same directory John Wilkes is listed as still working independently as a clock-dial maker in Hospital Street.<sup>6</sup> Trade directories are not noted for their accuracy, and it may be that this entry had not been updated.<sup>7</sup>

Only a few clock dials (Figs 2–3) are known with Wilkes & Baker cast-iron falseplates, which were intermediate plates that facilitate

attachment of painted dials to the movements. The partnership was dissolved in March 1819, with John Wilkes continuing to make clock dials at the Whittall Street premises and Samuel Baker forming his own business in Slaney Street. Baker worked there until his death in 1847, after which his son, also Samuel, continued making dials there until 1859.

## Samuel Wilkes

[Samuel Wilkes is] a man of but limited education, but one who by perseverance and industry had been enabled to extend his business to a very great degree, and that while working in his manufactory he at the same time had employed parties in whom he thought he could safely confide, for the purpose of keeping his books.<sup>8</sup>

Samuel Wilkes is likely to have been working with his father after his 'limited education' ended, and it might be imagined that he spent more time helping in the dial manufactory than studying in the classroom. By the time he was fourteen years old he would have been working full-time for his father, perhaps as an apprentice dial painter, and then throughout the Wilkes & Baker years. When that partnership broke up Samuel, who was in his early twenties, formed a partnership with his father. This had certainly occurred within nine months of the end of the Wilkes & Baker firm, and in reality the changeover would have been quite seamless. It might even have been an eagerness by Samuel Wilkes to play a more prominent role in the business that caused Samuel Baker to leave Whittall Street. The business then traded as Wilkes & Son, as recorded on the falseplates of their dials (Figs 4–5), and on a price list for 'Japanned Clock Dials' published in January 1820, though this business name does not appear in trade directories.

4. John A. Robey, 'Blank Dial Makers', unpublished ms.

5. Also his father, yet another Robert Wynne, who is likely to have made the dial blanks for the earliest dialmakers, such as Osborne and Wilson.

6. *Wrightson's New Triennial Directory of Birmingham*, 1815.

7. Newspaper advertisements are much more reliable than directories, since the advertiser supplied the text.

8. *Birmingham Journal*, 23 November 1850.



Figs 4 and 5. Dial with a convex centre made for Mawkes of Derby about 1820 with a 'WILKES & SON BIRMINGHAM' falseplate. Minute numbers disappear completely about 1820. Adam and Eve automaton in the arch, only Eve's arm moves. (J. Robey)



It is significant that only two price lists are known from any dialmaker: one by Wilkes & Son (Fig. 6) and an undated one by Samuel Baker.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the different names and

the lack of a printer's name on the Baker one, they are identical, offering exactly the same sizes and styles at the same prices. Were they published to emphasize the independence of the two former partners, or do the identical specifications and prices indicate a cartel at work?

This was a formative period for Samuel as not only was he now in partnership with his father, but he married Maria Heaton on 28 June 1821 at St Martin's Church. Maria was born in 1799, the youngest daughter of David Heaton, with the witnesses being Samuel's older sister and Maria's older brother Emanuel. While neither David nor Emanuel Heaton are included in directories, Emanuel was a gun maker/finisher who had been awarded an important patent in 1814 for an improved method of making the locks and breeches of guns watertight.<sup>10</sup> Maria's father was an elder brother of Ralph Heaton,

9. *Antiquarian Horology*, Winter 1978, 200; Hugh F. Watson, *Keeping Time. A History of Clocks, Watches and Barometers in a Provincial Town from 1700 until 1900. Including a Directory of the makers in the town of Grantham in Lincolnshire* (2008), p. 26.

10. 'Locks and breeches of fire-arms', English Patent 3794, (1814); Bennet Woodcroft, *Alphabetical Index of Patents of Invention*, 1854, reprinted 1969, p. 262. The patent was considered of sufficient interest for the specification to be published in *Repertory of Arts, Manufactures and Agriculture* 2nd series, 25 (1814), pp. 131–3. The patent was assigned by Heaton to the Birmingham gun-maker, Theophilus Richards, who supplied the journal with additional illustrations.

Birmingham, January, 1830.

50 High Street.  
Wholesale from  
S. B. Wilkes

Prices  
OF  
Japanned Clock Dials,  
MANUFACTURED  
BY  
Wilkes and Son,  
WHITTALL-STREET, BIRMINGHAM.

FOURTEEN inch Arch Moon Dial	..	..	..	..	£	s.	d.
Thirteen inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	1	4	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	1	2	0
Fourteen inch Square ditto	..	..	..	..	1	0	0
Thirteen inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	1	2	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	1	0	0
Fourteen inch Solid Arch Eight Day	..	..	..	..	0	18	0
Thirteen inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	16	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	14	0
Fourteen inch Square ditto	..	..	..	..	0	12	0
Thirteen inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	14	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	12	0
Fourteen inch Round ditto	..	..	..	..	0	11	0
Thirteen inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	13	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	11	0
Thirteen inch Arched Thirty-hour	..	..	..	..	0	10	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	13	0
Eleven inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	11	0
Fourteen inch Square ditto	..	..	..	..	0	10	0
Thirteen inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	13	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	12	0
Eleven inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	10	0
Ten inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	8	6
Fourteen inch Round ditto	..	..	..	..	0	7	0
Thirteen inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	12	0
Twelve inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	10	0
Six inch Round Spring Dial	..	..	..	..	0	9	0
Eight inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	7	0
Six inch Arch ditto	..	..	..	..	0	8	0
Eight inch ditto ditto	..	..	..	..	0	8	6
					0	10	0

Oval and Round Dials of all Sizes.

Additional Paintings and Movements charged as follows:—

Seasons, Quarters, Virtues, Elements, &c.	..	..	..	..	0	8	0
Landscapes or Figure Pieces in Arch	..	..	..	..	0	4	0
Single Figures painted in Arch	..	..	..	..	0	2	0
Adam and Eve to move	..	..	..	..	0	7	6
Ditto, if Serpent to move	..	..	..	..	0	10	0
Ship to move, Old Time, &c.	..	..	..	..	0	6	0
Swan's Neck to move	..	..	..	..	0	6	0
Boy and Girl swinging, Harlequin and Columbine, &c.	..	..	..	..	0	7	0
Shuttlecock and Battledore to move	..	..	..	..	0	7	0

Movements and Paintings of every Description.

Printed by R. Peart, Bull-street, Birmingham.

Fig. 6. Price list by Wilkes and Son of 'Japanned Clock Dials', 1820. (Stubs Papers, Manchester Archives & Local Studies)

a noted Birmingham engineer, industrialist and inventor who became wealthy from his various enterprises.<sup>11</sup>

Samuel's marriage was his first step up the social ladder. From what is known of his later activities and character, marrying the niece of one of Birmingham's most significant and wealthy industrialists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would have inspired him to achieve a similar high reputation. Later a further connection would be formed between the Wilkes and Heaton families.

Samuel and Maria Wilkes had twelve children, of whom only seven survived to adulthood:

Maria Louisa 1822  
 Alfred Alonzo 1823  
 Edgar Sydney Heaton 1825  
 Emanuel 1827, died as an infant  
 Lavinia Sarah Wynn 1828  
 Miriam/Merzen Elizabeth 1830, died of smallpox in 1837  
 Henry John 1831  
 Harriet Sophia 1831, died of smallpox in 1837  
 Horatio 1834, died as an infant  
 Samuel Emanuel 1836, died of smallpox in 1837  
 Julius/Julian Caesar 1836  
 Josephine c. 1843.

Their eldest daughter Maria was named after her mother and the second daughter Lavinia was baptised with a middle name of Sarah after her paternal grandmother. However, she was married as Lavinia Sarah Wynn Wilkes, with the strong implication that her grand-mother was a Wynn and probably related to the Wynn/Winn family, who supplied blank clock dials

to dial painters. The use of double or triple given names, often genteel, even ostentatious, for many of the children is one of the clearest indications of Samuel's attempts to increase the family's respectability and social status, a characteristic that would contribute to his eventual downfall.

In 1828 John Wilkes was 73 years old and in poor health, so the partnership with his son was dissolved by mutual consent in December of that year, with all debts to be paid by Samuel Wilkes, who was now the sole owner of the dial manufactory.<sup>12</sup> It was probably Samuel who had been actually running the business for some time previous to this, as it is listed in the 1823 directory as S. & J. Wilkes, clock-dial makers.<sup>13</sup>

On 15 May 1835 John Wilkes died 'at the house of his son in Whittall-street after a protracted illness.'<sup>14</sup> However, Samuel and his family were no longer living 'above the shop', as he had continued his upward social mobility by relocating his residence to Aston at least four months earlier. A marble plaque was erected on the wall of St Mary's Church to record the death of John, his second wife Sarah and a daughter.<sup>15</sup> This would have been installed at the instigation of Samuel to achieve recognition and respectability for the Wilkes family. No other clock-dial maker is known to have been commemorated in a similar manner.

It was during this period that he used his 'perseverance and industry [...] to extend his business to a very great degree'. In January 1836, six months after the death of his father, Samuel acquired the substantial clock-dial business of Walker & Hughes from the executors of the late Thomas Hughes. Samuel Wilkes acquired 'all the Stock, Patterns, Tools, &c.',<sup>16</sup> but did not take over the former

11. His many inventions included the first automatic machine to perform successive operations on the same component. This machine, which could make 80,000 button shanks an hour, was much admired and regularly visited by foreign dignitaries. He had a considerable reputation for the manufacture of rose-engines and also made ovens for heating shells during the Siege of Gibraltar. [www.gracesguide.co.uk/Ralph\\_Heaton](http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Ralph_Heaton). His descendants purchased the machinery when Matthew Boulton's Soho Mint closed and the Birmingham Mint became the world's largest private mint.

12. *Birmingham Gazette*, 29 December 1828.

13. *Wrightson's Triennial Directory of Birmingham*, 1823.

14. *Birmingham Gazette*, 25 May 1835.

15. Recorded by a distant relative before the church was demolished in the 1920s.

16. *Birmingham Gazette*, 18 January 1836.



Fig. 7. A Wilkes dial made about 1840 for Joseph Dutton of Chester. A small globe and a dove of peace holding an olive branch replaces the more usual maps on the hemisphere humps. Small flowers in the corners. (M. F. Tennant)

Walker & Hughes premises in Fisher Street, instead he retained 13 Whittall Street as his clock-dial manufactory. It is unlikely that any employees remained at the Walker & Hughes works as in December of that year he advertised: 'WANTED Men in every branch of the Clock Dial Business. [...] None but good workmen will be employed'.<sup>17</sup> This indicates that additional workers were needed to cope with the expected demand for painted clock dials. It is probably about this time, or a little earlier, that the dial manufactory took over the adjoining 12 Whittall Street, which before then had been in separate occupation. Although the usual address of Samuel Wilkes was 13 Whittall Street, it was occasionally listed in directories



Fig. 8. A brightly coloured Wilkes dial made about 1840 for Thomas Taylor, Manchester. The gilt and black Roman hour numerals are on a bright blue ground, while the hemispheres have lake-side scenes that merge into the Four Continents in the corners. (M. F. Tennant)

as number 12, and just once as both 12 and 13.<sup>18</sup>

The following year tragedy struck the Wilkes family when three of the children, Miriam, Harriet and Samuel junior, died of smallpox within a few days of each other in early November 1837.<sup>19</sup> A large outbreak of smallpox in London had spread throughout Britain and resulted in a pandemic in Europe.

The loss of three of his young children came when his business should have been booming, but it signalled a turning point for Samuel Wilkes, and this was not the best time to expand the business. Even as early as 1826 there had been a petition to Parliament regarding the decline in Birmingham's manu-

17. *Birmingham Gazette*, 5 December 1836.

18. In 1829–30 number 12 Whittall Street was occupied by an engraver and copperplate printer, but no-one is listed there in 1833, which may indicate when Samuel Wilkes took it over. He is listed in directories at number 12 in 1839, and at both number 12 and 13 in 1847.

19. *Birmingham Journal*, 4 November 1837.

facturing industries.<sup>20</sup> In the 1840s there was uncertainty in the national economy, including a minor banking crisis (with the failure of several non-bank lenders) after the boom years of the railway mania. Also longcase clocks were falling out of favour. Birmingham directories record about a dozen clock-dial manufacturers in the period from 1815 to 1823, falling to about half that number in the early 1830s, with a gradual increase thereafter, coinciding with a rising demand for undecorated round white dials for fusee clocks. Only four makers of traditional longcase dials are listed in Pigot's 1842 directory.

The horological trades should be put in perspective, and making clock dials was just a minute part of the town's economy compared to trades such as making guns, jewellery and all manner of small decorative items in base and precious metals and other materials. While directory entries for the clock trade occupy just a few lines, each of these other trades sometimes fill several pages. Out of a total of 1,902 Birmingham manufacturers in a table accompanying the petition to Parliament in 1826, there were only twelve clock-dial makers compared to 89 gun makers, 130 brass founders, 131 platers and manufacturers of [silver] plated articles, and 144 jewellers.<sup>21</sup>

In an attempt to reduce his reliance on clock dials Samuel Wilkes turned to factoring, and in the 1839 directory he claimed to be a 'Manu[facturer] of clocks, clock dials, clock manufacturer, &c, clock materials in general', while another entry in the same directory includes clock hands.<sup>22</sup> In 1847 he also appears in a list of Watch Pendant Makers.<sup>23</sup> This is typical Victorian exaggeration, as, apart from dials, he is most unlikely to have made movements, clock hands or materials, and certainly not watch pendants, merely selling items actually made by others. This sideline probably continued on an increasing scale for the rest of his time at Whittall Street, and he was occasionally also listed as a factor or merchant. Factoring had small profit margins

but required only a modest amount of capital. Later evidence indicates that this side of the business was run by his eldest sons, Alfred and Henry, from 12 Whittall Street. They do not appear to have been partners with their father, and the firm was never known as Samuel Wilkes & Sons.

In order to save what must have become an increasingly struggling business, Samuel Wilkes attempted to make the full use of his skilled workforce by branching out into japanning. This was the decoration of all manner of articles, such as boxes, trays and dumb waiters, made of sheet iron, wood or papier-mâché, as well as tables and other pieces of furniture. After several coats of black lacquer the items would be painted with colourful scenes, all within the capabilities of his existing dial painters. In 1847 Samuel Wilkes was listed as a clock-dial manufacturer, and also called himself a 'Paper Tray, Snuff Box & Japanned Paper Ware Manufacturer';<sup>24</sup> the actual items having been obtained from specialist papier-mâché manufacturers in the town.

This diversification into japanning was not likely to succeed in an over-crowded market at a time when there were already sixty-three japanners and an additional twenty-three that specialised in japanned papier-mâché ware, working in the town. Even by 1835 the economic difficulties facing the japanning trade were becoming apparent. While the following report does not specifically refer to painted clock dials, similar factors must have been taking their toll on the dial trade as well.

The nominal price of the blanks have not varied for the last forty or fifty years, but the discount allowed has gradually increased during that time. Formerly the blank maker allowed ten per cent discount, but at the present time eighty per cent, that is, if he take to a warehouse, goods to the amount of £100, he will receive just £20. Common round corner trays with imitation border,

20. *The Globe* [London] 15 August 1826, much of it reprinted in the *Birmingham Chronicle* 17 August 1826, with an edited version in the *Birmingham Journal* 19 August 1826.

21. See footnote 20.

22. *Robson's Birmingham and Sheffield Directory*, 1839.

23. *Slater's Classified Directories of Birmingham, Bristol, [...], 1847*.

24. *Slater's General and Classified Directory of Birmingham*, 1847.

	1800 <sup>1</sup>	1820 <sup>2</sup>	1832-5 <sup>3</sup>	1833 <sup>4</sup>	1837 <sup>5</sup>
<b>8-day dials</b>					
13in arch moon	£1 2s 0d	£1 10s			
12in arch	14s 0d	£1 4s/£1 8s			
13in arch	16s 0d	£1 4s/£1 8s			
14in arch		£1 6s/£1 10s	8s 0d	16s 0d	
convex centre				16s 0d	
11in square	8s 0d	18s			
12in square	10s 0d	£1 0s			
13in square	12s 0d	£1 1s			
<b>30-hr dials (no seconds or falseplate)</b>					
13in arch	14s 0d	£1 3s/£1 7s			
14in 3arch			7s 6d	15s 0d	15s 0d
hr numerals only			7s 0d		
rocking ship			12s 6d		
Adam & Eve			14s 6d		
1 Stock transfer from Jonas Barber to his successor, presumably below cost					
2 Wilkes & Son price list. Total price of dial + arch and corner painting					
3 Joseph May, Birmingham factor					
4 Mabson, Labron & Mabson, Birmingham factors					
5 John & Thomas Balleny, Birmingham factors					

Table of known prices of painted clock dials.

thirty inches long, are sold at from sixteen to twenty shillings per dozen. These great reductions may be thus accounted for: — iron is considerably cheaper, the trays are made more slight, wages are reduced one half, and in some cases three fourths, and many improved methods have been adopted, both in making the blanks, and in the japanning, but more particularly in the latter. The trays only get one or two coats of varnish, instead of four or five, as formerly. The varnish, which cost eight shillings per gallon some years ago, now costs from three shillings, to three shillings and sixpence. The centre of a thirty-inch tray is now painted for fourpence, that used to occupy half a day. The figures intended to ornament a tray are drawn upon paper,

and transferred to the tray, and in some cases the same methods are adopted as stencillers use to imitate paper upon house walls. Notwithstanding the prices have been so reduced, the trade has kept advancing to perfection. Excellent work is still got up, which commands a good price, and none but the best will obtain good prices.<sup>25</sup>

Among the casualties of the economic woes of the japanning and blank-making trades was Robert Winn, maker of blank trays and blank clock dials, and very likely a cousin of Samuel Wilkes. Winn's manufactory, including large fly-presses and other heavy machinery for stamping out tray and dial blanks, was put up for sale in May 1848. Eighteen months later he was in Warwick Gaol as an insolvent debtor.<sup>26</sup>

25. William Hutton, *The History of Birmingham*, 6th edition, revised with considerable additions (including the quoted paragraph) by George Guest, 1835, pp. 490–1.

26. John A. Robey, 'Blank Dial Makers', unpublished ms.



Figs 9 and 10. Thirty-hour Wilkes dial made about 1845 for T. W. Cade, Northallerton. There are three long dial feet, without a falseplate. The dial rear is stamped 'WILKES BIRM'. The arch has a print applied as a transfer and then coloured. A young couple sit beneath a tree stump, the man wearing a farmer's smock. (J. Robey)

From the sparse data available on prices, summarized in the table,<sup>27</sup> it appears that a similar situation was also occurring in the dial trade. While there is only one of Wilkes's dials that is exactly comparable to later dial prices, a general trend can be seen. Disregarding for a moment the dials sold by Joseph May in 1832–5, the basic price of Wilkes's dials

in 1820 is comparable to that paid by John Manby of Skipton in 1833–7, but when the extra cost of painting the arch and corners is added, the price obtained in the 1830s was a half of that just over a decade earlier, and no doubt even lower another decade later. The response, as reported for the japanning trade, was to reduce the quality. Since Manby bought both May's half-price dials and those at the normal price from two other factors, these cheaper dials would have been of a much lower quality, with the subjects for the corner and arch scenes being formulaic and naïve, often consisting of identical crudely painted rural cottages, castles or churches.

While it appears that Samuel Wilkes did not produce these much inferior dials — or if he did this was not advertised on his falseplates — he used transfers instead (Figs 9–10). These monochrome images were applied to the arch and then large areas given a colour wash. This could be done by young girls paid low wages, to increase production rates and lower costs.

27. Brian Loomes, *Painted Clock Dials* (Woodbridge, 1994), p. 122.

Another economy employed by all the later dial makers was to replace cast-iron falseplates by cheaper ones stamped out of wrought-iron sheet, then abandoning false-plates altogether. The 1820 price list shows that thirty-hour dials were consistently one shilling cheaper than eight-day ones, about 7–8 per cent of the total, most of which would be accounted for by the cast-iron falseplate. These cost-cutting measures were not enough to save the struggling business and three years after his unsuccessful foray into japanning papier-mâché ware, Samuel Wilkes was declared bankrupt in May 1850, and thirty-five years of dial making at 13 Whittall Street finally came to an end.

Examples of Wilkes dials are shown in Figs 7–10 and many others are illustrated in *The Art of the Painted Clock Dial* by M. F. Tennant (2009). Known names on cast-iron falseplates include:

WILKES, BIR<sup>M</sup>  
 WILKES & SON, BIRMINGHAM  
 S. WILKES, BIRMINGHAM  
 S. WILKES, *Whittall Street*, BIRMINGHAM (Fig 11)  
 SAM WILKES, BIRM  
 WILKES & BAKER BIRMINGHAM.

Calendar and moon discs are not normally marked, but names stamped on sheet-iron falseplates and the rear of dials include:

W & S (Wilkes & Son)  
 Wilkes BIR<sup>M</sup>  
 WS (probably Wilkes & Son, but not confirmed).

### Property speculation and bankruptcy

The 1833 Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 12) shows the area north of Birmingham as being largely rural, with the county boundary separating Handsworth parish in Staffordshire from Aston parish, along with the town itself, being in Warwickshire. This boundary runs through Lozells, which was once one of the most prosperous areas with tree-lined roads and numerous buildings of architectural interest. These included Aston Villa, a large Georgian mansion that was demolished about this time to provide land for development.



Fig 11. Uncommon falseplate marked 'S. WILKES, Whittall Street, BIRMINGHAM'. This is the only known design from any dial manufacturer or factor that includes the street address, albeit rather faint on this example. (H. Cockwill)

Lozells was not far from a road linking Handsworth directly to the town centre, making it an obvious area to develop, initially with substantial middle-class villas for factory owners wanting to get away from the smoke and noise of the town, and later with good-quality artisan houses.

Samuel Wilkes saw the opportunity to buy land for development (though there is little evidence that he built houses himself), as well as houses to rent or sell at a profit. From the mid-1820s there were regular advertisements in the local newspapers for auctions of freehold building land at Lozells, mainly from the break up of the Aston Villa estate. His earliest mention in these transactions is as early as March 1830 in a sale of several plots of land, one of which fronted Lozells Road and 'adjoining land lately purchased by Mr. Wilkes'.<sup>28</sup> Six weeks later the following property was advertised to let:

about one and a half miles from the centre of Birmingham a genteel FAMILY RESIDENCE, containing seven sleeping-

28. *Birmingham Gazette*, 15 March 1830.

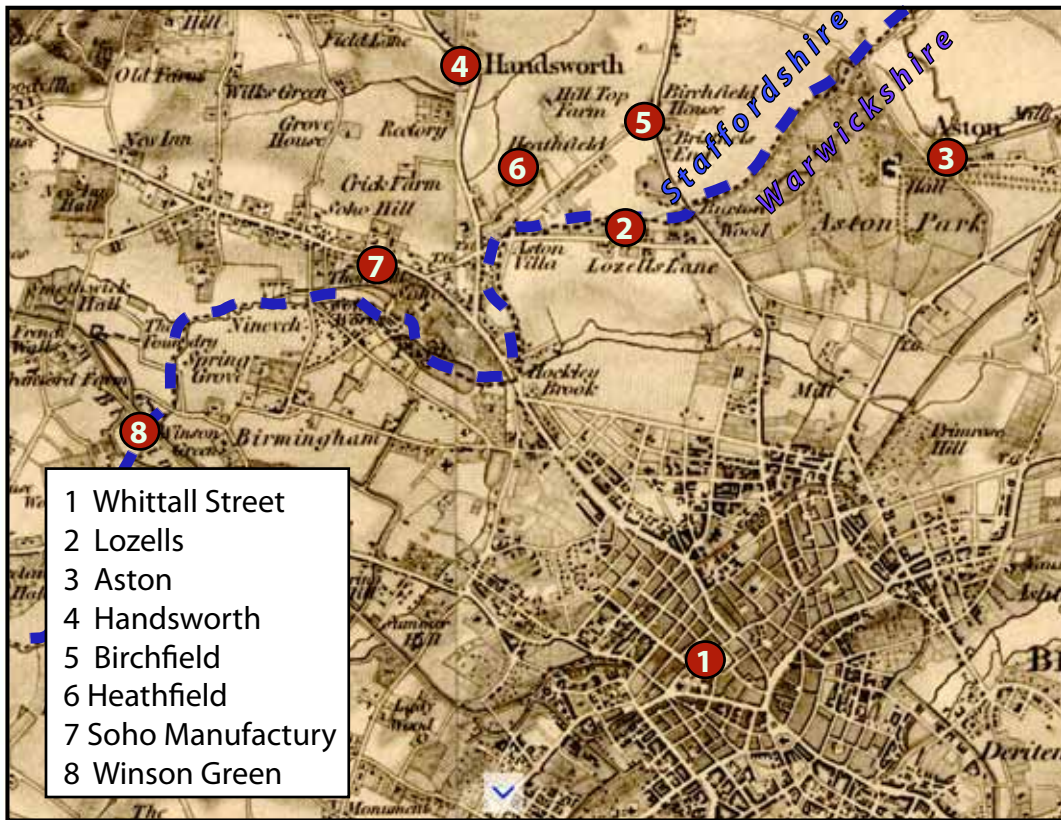


Fig. 12. The northern suburbs of Birmingham based on the Ordnance Survey 1in = 1 mile Old series 1815 revised 1833. It is likely that only the rapidly expanding conurbation was updated.

rooms and dressing room, dining, drawing, and sitting rooms, and kitchen, stabling, carriage house [...] outbuildings, walled Gardens, with 2½ Acres of Grass Land.

Though there was no contact name, enquiries were to be directed to 13 Whittall Street, so Samuel Wilkes was clearly the landlord.<sup>29</sup> When two of his daughters were baptised in 1834,<sup>30</sup> his residence was given as Whittall Street, so he did not live at the house and would have acquired it as an investment. If the house was as grand as advertised it would have been relatively expensive. It appears from later evidence that he mainly financed his land and property purchases by taking out mortgages, rather than relying solely on his own capital.

Five months later what was probably the

same property, described as ‘a House suitable for a family of the first respectability’ at Lozells, was to let, and this time enquiries were to be directed to Samuel Wilkes at 13 Whittall Street.<sup>31</sup>

From 1834 to at least 1837 the Wilkes family was living in Aston Road, Aston, and since Samuel Wilkes, clock-dial maker was stated to be a freeholder in Aston Manor in a list of jurors in 1835, he was not simply a tenant. His house would have been further east from Lozells, and probably recently built as part of the development of Aston Park. It is not known if Wilkes had the house built on land he already owned, or if he had bought it ready to occupy.

In December 1840 he extended his upward social mobility by being elected as a bailiff of

29. *Birmingham Gazette*, 24 May 1830.

30. Some of his children were baptized a few years after their birth.

31. *Birmingham Gazette*, 8 November 1830.

the Hemlingford Hundred Court.<sup>32</sup> This was an ancient court that dealt with minor civil disputes in north Warwickshire, including Birmingham, he being one of only three officers from the town. By this date the court's function was largely ceremonial and it was abolished in 1852, but Samuel Wilkes was primarily interested in boosting his prestige and status by associating himself with some of the local worthies, migrating from being a manufacturer to a pillar of the town's establishment.

By the time of the 1841 Census Samuel was living with his wife and their seven children and a female servant in Lozells Road, Aston parish. His occupation is given as clockmaker, which is almost certainly an enumerator's error for clock-dial maker. This is likely to have been the 'genteel family residence' with seven bedrooms he had advertised to let ten years earlier. What is most significant is that the next house was occupied by William Heaton, son of Ralph, and hence the cousin of Samuel Wilkes's wife Maria. This would have been a great boost to his ambitions. Samuel's eldest son, Alfred, and William Heaton's daughter, Emma, were both aged 15 and were later to marry.

Though it seems more than just a coincidence that Samuel's wife lived next door to her cousin, there is no evidence that he sold any land or property he may have owned in this area to her relatives. William Heaton was in business with three of his siblings as Heaton Brothers, which operated at various sites in Birmingham; William left the partnership in 1839.<sup>33</sup> Another brother, George Heaton, also lived nearby, and when his house was sold after his death in 1854, it was said to have been 'built in a most substantial manner [...] regardless of expense'.<sup>34</sup> This indicates the affluence of the area in the middle of the nineteenth century. While Samuel Wilkes's house (and that of his neighbour William Heaton) might not have been quite so grand, it would have been a desirable residence in which to entertain and impress his friends and business associates.

By the end of 1841 'Samuel Wilkes, clock-dial maker of Whittall Street' owned ten brick-and-tile cottages, all adjacent, in Lozells Lane, called Bratts Buildings, which he let out and insured with the Sun Life insurance company for £10 each.<sup>35</sup> This also indicates that he often used his Whittall Street address for his property affairs rather than where he actually lived.

He was still at Lozells in June 1842 when he was involved in what now seems an amusing incident, as recorded in a long rant in the local newspaper against the continued extortion of church rates, despite tithes having recently been abolished. Church officials tried to seize goods for non-payment of his church rate of 13 shillings, but the family, except his children, were not at home owing to the death of an unspecified friend. Silver spoons or money were demanded from the children, but as none were to hand the officials contented themselves with carrying off a couple of card tables, while someone else had two hams confiscated.<sup>36</sup> The refusal to pay the established church would have been influenced by his nonconformist upbringing.

By 1843 Samuel Wilkes had bought Birchfield House in Handsworth parish, like Lozells a short carriage ride from the centre of Birmingham, but further north. The house was situated about half a mile from Heathfield Hall, which had been built in 1790 by the engineer James Watt, who, like his business partner, the noted Birmingham industrialist Matthew Boulton, is buried in the nearby St Mary's Church.

When Birchfield House had earlier been for sale in 1833 it was described as comprising:

seven bed-rooms, library, dining-room 21 feet by 15 feet 10 inches, drawing-room 24 feet by 16 feet, small parlour, best and cooking kitchens, laundry, &c. coach house, barn, four-stall stable, and other requisite outbuildings, walled-in garden, hot-house,

32. *Birmingham Journal*, 12 December 1840.

33. [www.gracesguide.co.uk/William\\_Heaton\\_\(of\\_Birmingham\)](http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/William_Heaton_(of_Birmingham)) and [www.gracesguide.co.uk/Heaton\\_Brothers](http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Heaton_Brothers), with links to other Heaton enterprises.

34. *Birmingham Gazette*, 4 September 1854.

35. From the transcription by R. F. Carrington of the London Metropolitan Archives Fire Insurance Records, indexed and copied by the Antiquarian Horological Society.

36. *Birmingham Journal*, 4 June 1842.

shrubberies, pleasure grounds, and large lawn front, containing together nearly seven acres.<sup>37</sup>

In 1838, and probably for some while before, the house had been occupied by a George Joseph Green, but it was not advertised for sale after he died in 1839. The most logical explanation is that Wilkes had bought Birchfield House in the 1833 sale as an investment to obtain rental income, with Green as the sitting tenant.

The earliest record of Samuel Wilkes's involvement in this grandiose property is in July 1843 when he advertised for sale or let

BIRCHFIELD HOUSE [...] contains dining and drawing-rooms, each 26 ft. square by 13 ft. high, spacious sitting-room and parlour, with large bulk windows, breakfast-room and spacious kitchen, china-closet 25 feet by 7, and eight bed-rooms; entrance and servants-hall, large Coach-yard, Stables, Carriage-house, and all requisite Out-buildings, with large walled Garden, and Green-house and Vinery, with choice Vines in full bearing; Pleasure Garden, containing about five thousand square yards; circular Carriage-drive, enclosed with Forest Trees, Ever-greens, &c. &c.<sup>38</sup>

As the rooms are of a different size to those quoted ten years earlier, and there was an extra bedroom, it appears that the house had probably been remodelled to make it into a grander residence.

There were no buyers and five months later Samuel Wilkes again advertised both the Lozells and Birchfield properties.<sup>39</sup> This was only a modest advertisement, with little of the previous gushing description, and may have only been to test the market. Even so its wording is quite revealing, as it was headed 'TO CAPITALISTS VALUABLE INVESTMENT', implying that this had also been Wilkes's main motive in acquiring the properties. The house at Lozells was currently being tenanted, while

Birchfield House had been 'lately occupied by G. J. Green, Esq.', but any sale was to be by private treaty, confirming that while Wilkes owned the properties they were let to tenants, with G. J. Green being succeeded, probably for only a short period, by Colonel Hankey of the First King's Dragoon Guards.

Samuel Wilkes was living in Birchfield House by 1849 when his directory entry lists him at Whittall Street but living at Birchfield.<sup>40</sup> In June of that year he opened his gardens to the public<sup>41</sup>

HANDSWORTH AND LOZELLS FLORAL AND HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY, UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF THE NEIGHBOURING NOBILITY AND GENTRY.

THE SECOND EXHIBITION this Season will (by the permission of Samuel Wilkes, Esq.) be held in the GROUNDS of BIRCHFIELD HOUSE, the late residence of Colonel Hankey, on Tuesday the 28th June inst.

The Celebrated PROMENADE BAND, from the Josephson Gardens Leamington, is engaged [...]

It is perhaps significant that while the flower show was by permission of Samuel Wilkes, equal prominence was given to a previous tenant of higher status, hinting that Samuel was not quite as accepted into local society life as he would have wished. He was trying to act the part of a prosperous industrialist, moving further up the social ladder and living in an area once known locally as Millionaire's Row. He had not only acquired other properties in Lozells and Aston, he had also amassed a collection of Old Master paintings (see later), but his life of living like a lord was soon to come crashing down.

The first formal notification of his imminent downfall was in January 1850 when a notice in the local newspaper announced that:

the FACTORING TRADE carried on by Mr. SAMUEL WILKES, in Whittall-street, in this town, is now relinquished in favour of

37. *Birmingham Gazette*, 11 March 1833.

38. *Birmingham Gazette*, 10 July 1843.

39. *Birmingham Gazette*, 13 November 1843.

40. F. White, *History and General Directory of the Borough of Birmingham*, 1849.

41. *Birmingham Gazette*, 18 and 25 June 1849.

Messrs. Alfred and Henry Wilkes, and no orders in future will be issued in his name, but that of the firm named.

Should there be any orders now in course of execution in his name, such orders are to be considered cancelled after this notice.

SAMUEL WILKES.

P.S. Messrs. Alfred and Henry Wilkes inform their Friends that they still continue the Business at No. 12, Whittall-street.<sup>42</sup>

Samuel's sons Alfred and Henry had been running at least the factoring business for some time. As is revealed later Samuel sold the 'stock and trade' to Alfred for £80, though it was claimed to be worth £200.

Shortly after this Alfred and Henry Wilkes attempted to earn extra income by acting as the Birmingham agents for the recently formed English and Cambrian Assurance Society. This must have attracted few new clients as the advertisements only appeared in local Birmingham newspapers from June to September 1850.<sup>43</sup>

In March 1850 a further attempt was made to let Birchfield House, this time anonymously through an agent:

BIRCHFIELD HOUSE. TO be LET, the above pleasant and commodious RESIDENCE; it contains Dining, Drawing, and Breakfast Rooms. China and Butlers Pantries, convenient Kitchen, good Cellaring and Larders, four best Chambers, with Dressing Rooms; four Attics [...] and Water Closet; Carriage-house. Stabling and Yard: Back Lawn, Greenhouse, with Vines in full bearing, large Garden, [...] and the LAND in front of the House. The House is dry and warm, and is complete with useful Fixtures; [...] the situation healthy and delightful.<sup>44</sup>

On 8 April 1850 Samuel Wilkes, who was now 'late of 13, Whittall street' and still living at Birchfield, made a deed of assignment in favour of his creditors, who were to submit their claims by 27 April, while those owing money to him were to pay it to the accountants, not directly to Wilkes.<sup>45</sup> On 8 May, described as a 'Clock-dial Maker and Factor', he was declared bankrupt.<sup>46</sup> He was summoned to appear before the Birmingham Bankruptcy Court on 22 July for his creditors to prove their debts and then on 19 August to present his case.<sup>47</sup>

The main appearance before the Birmingham Bankruptcy Court was on 25 October, and the report of the public proceedings gives much interesting information.<sup>48</sup> His balance sheet on 1 January 1848 had showed a 'surplus' of £5,880 14s 6d — a considerable sum, equivalent to either £470,000 or £810,000 today.<sup>49</sup> At a bankruptcy petition on 6 May 1850 he had owed sundry creditors £3,995 15s 2d, 'to meet which the bankrupt estimated his assets as debts, supposedly good, as £573 3s 8d, and properties £4,437'. But the solicitor for the creditors pointed out that

the assets comprised freehold and leasehold properties subject to various mortgages and other charges and it was very doubtful whether they would realise any divisible proceeds, a portion thereof having been put up for sale, but had not been disposed of, owing to the low prices offered.

It was also stated that when Samuel Wilkes had first been examined he reported that he had transferred his business and stock to his son Alfred, to whom he stood indebted for wages at the previous Christmas. The solicitor for the creditors claimed that Samuel Wilkes

42. *Birmingham Gazette*, 28 January 1850.

43. *Birmingham Gazette*, 30 June–23 September 1850. The Society's first advertisement was in the *Weekly Dispatch* (London) 27 January 1850, and in August 1856 advertisements in various newspapers, but not in Birmingham, announced a change of name to the Commercial Assurance Society.

44. *Birmingham Journal*, 9 March 1850.

45. *Birmingham Gazette*, 22 April 1850.

46. *Birmingham Gazette*, 12 July 1850; *London Gazette* 12 July 1850.

47. *Birmingham Gazette*, 15 July 1850.

48. *Birmingham Gazette*, 26 October 1850.

49. £5,880 in 1850 has a purchasing power today of £471,552 (National Archives), or based on Bank of England inflation rates £809,618. A multiplying factor of 100 would be a realistic average.

had sold the stock and trade for £80 when it was actually worth £200. Samuel and Alfred explained that the stock ‘consisted of small parcels of unusable articles and though they might have cost £200 originally, they were not worth more than the sum given to any person in the trade.’

Samuel Wilkes had ‘kept no cash book or wages book, nor had he attended to the keeping of his accounts, but had trusted to his sons so to do’. Also before the bankruptcy a piece of land worth £80 had been conveyed to Alfred, which it was claimed should have been included in Samuel’s debts. The hearing was adjourned until later.

This report reveals some very interesting information about Samuel’s affairs, though, as might be expected, there are ambiguities and uncertainties. His surplus and the money owed to him, less the value of his property and what he owed to his creditors, left him with a deficit of almost £2,000. Since his stated surplus dated from more than two years earlier, this would, no doubt, have been much less by the time of his bankruptcy and the actual deficit larger. If it is assumed that an average sixty days credit was given to his trade customers, this equates to an annual turnover of £3,400. This considerable sum would have been even larger if the credit term had been shorter. The other unknown is whether this included over-due rents.

His next public hearing at the Bankruptcy Court on 18 November 1850 reveals more about his business and character.<sup>50</sup> It was emphasized again that Samuel Wilkes, ‘though trading very extensively had kept no cash book, nor were his other books kept in the regular manner the creditors had a right to expect’. His solicitor — who ironically had represented the creditors at the previous hearing — pleaded that

the bankrupt was a man of but limited education, but one who by perseverance and industry had been enabled to extend his business to a very great degree, and that

while working in his manufactory he at the same time had employed parties in whom he thought he could safely confide, for the purpose of keeping his books.

It was further claimed on his behalf that Samuel Wilkes was far from being in insolvent circumstances, but his property could not be disposed of at once in a manner satisfactory to his creditors. However, the creditors counter-claimed that it would realise less than what was necessary to pay off the mortgages on them, though, as might be expected, Samuel’s solicitor did not agree. The judge decided that, however much Samuel Wilkes might have been engaged in his manufactory, he had to consider his creditors and make sure that his books were kept in a satisfactory manner, hence only a second class certificate could be granted.

The system of grading bankruptcies into three classes had only been introduced the previous year, when a new Bankruptcy Act was passed.<sup>51</sup> A first class certificate was granted when only unavoidable misfortune contributed to the bankruptcy; when the bankruptcy was not only due to unavoidable losses a second class certificate was granted; or a third class if the bankruptcy was mainly due to avoidable losses. The judge clearly thought that Wilkes was partially responsible for his predicament.

The fact that he had relied on his sons to keep day-to-day records and accounts was a major factor in the failure of Samuel Wilkes’s business. His ‘limited education’ meant that his numeracy skills were probably rudimentary with little understanding of the significance of the accounts. He may not even have fully appreciated that he did not actually own the properties which legally belonged to the mortgagees. This led to a lack of control over his expenses, poor management of his business and the inability to take remedial action before it was too late. He spent too much time being in the spotlight as a property developer and showing off his house and gardens to the public to the detriment of his principal business.

From the middle of June 1850 and

50. *Birmingham Journal*, 23 November 1850.

51. Bankrupt Law Consolidation Act 1849 (12 & 13 Vict cap 106).

52. *Birmingham Gazette*, 17 June 1850, 1–22 July 1850, 21, 28 April 1851. A very detailed advertisement appeared in 26 August–23 September 1850, listing extensive property and land in seven lots.



Fig. 13. New Birchfield House in 1920, demolished about 1934. Though it was built by Samuel Wilkes in 1850 he never actually lived there. (birminghamimages.org.uk)

continuing over the next year, numerous advertisements followed in an attempt to sell his property.<sup>52</sup> Not content with buying extensive properties, Samuel Wilkes had also built another one, New Birchfield House. One of these advertisements included:

Also a large newly-built HOUSE (nearly finished), erected at one end of Birchfield House, containing a noble entrance-hall, splendid dining and drawing-rooms, breakfast-room, six bed-rooms, and two dressing-rooms, large kitchen, china and butler's pantries, and good cellarage.<sup>53</sup>

As might be expected these sales were all 'by order of the Mortgagee'.

New Birchfield House (Fig. 13) was not as large or as grand as his main residence, so it is likely that Wilkes had built it with the intention of either selling it at a profit or to let, rather than occupying it himself. The original Birchfield House was in existence by 1833 and was prominent enough to be named on the Ordnance Survey map (Fig. 12), but its date of construction is not known. It is likely to have been demolished by 1888 as only one

property, along with an out-building, probably a coach house, is shown on the tithe map. This was presumably New Birchfield House, which was demolished in 1934 and the site was never redeveloped.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to his property holdings, Samuel Wilkes had also amassed a collection of Old Master paintings. The sale advertisement described them as 'comprising important Galley and Cabinet Works' by Bartolomé Murillo, Bartolomeo Schedoni, Anthony van Dyck, Correggio (Antonio Allegri), Nicolas Poussin, Frans Floris, Jacob De Wit, Caspar Netscher, Philips Wouwerman, Domenichino and Abraham Storck.<sup>55</sup>

Meetings were arranged in November and December 1852 for the creditors to present their claims,<sup>56</sup> but it was not until 26 May 1856 that the sales of his assets enabled a first (and only) dividend of just 1s ¾d in the pound to be paid.<sup>57</sup> His creditors accepted the small amount they were offered and no-one sued him as an insolvent debtor, so avoiding the further humiliation of him being sent to the debtors' prison.

The bankruptcy of Samuel Wilkes, given that he had taken out mortgages to finance his property speculation, with income relying on rentals and the declining profits from his clock-dial manufactory, was almost inevitable. Despite the relatively large turnover, the profits can never have been very big, certainly not enough to support the lifestyle of a seemingly affluent businessman living in a large house with extensive grounds and gardens, and with an expensive taste in Old Master paintings, not to mention the construction of a new house. The fashion for longcase clocks with painted dials was past its peak and his business would have been struggling. It was the plain white dials for fusee wall clocks that were now in demand, and there were plenty of others only too keen to supply them.

53. *Birmingham Gazette*, 22 July 1850.

54. Birchfield Road was the turnpike linking Birmingham city centre to Walsall, now the A34, and joins the Perry Barr flyover, demolished in 2021. Wilkes Green, on the western side of Handsworth, near Victoria Park, has no connection with Samuel Wilkes.

55. *Birmingham Gazette*, 12 August 1850.

56. *London Gazette*, 19 October 1852, 26 November 1852.

57. *Birmingham Gazette*, 28 May, 2 June 1856; *London Gazette*, 18 July 1856.

## Samuel Wilkes and his family after the bankruptcy

After his bankruptcy the known activities of Samuel Wilkes raise more questions than answers. His last appearance in trade directories was in 1852–3 when he was listed as a clock-dial maker at 23 Great Hampton Row on the northern edge of the town, and also a metal dealer and agent for the Union Tin Company at 4 Upper Priory.<sup>58</sup> The first address was that of a brass founder who in 1841–61 had a total of ten workers, but Samuel Wilkes would have actually lived in an adjoining property. He had left by the end of 1852 when the following advertisement appeared

TO be LET, HOUSE and PREMISES, situated 23, Great Hampton row, Birmingham, late in the occupation of Samuel Wilkes, consisting of two sitting-rooms, four chambers, with entire Yard, and a considerable length of two-story Shopping [presumably workshops] behind the same. Rent, 35l. per annum.<sup>59</sup>

This would have been one of the houses in 23 Court at the rear of this address. It was a very modest property, a typical artisan's house and workshop — a far cry from the spacious Birchfield House. Samuel Wilkes cannot be identified in any of the houses in this court or elsewhere on Great Hampton Row in the 1851 Census.

The Union Tin Company was a short-lived and little-recorded firm which would have smelted tin in either Cornwall, or more likely in the Swansea Valley, where numerous smelters extracted copper, tin and other non-ferrous metals from ores shipped from Cornwall. The company bought a total of 51 tons of black tin (the tin ore cassiterite) from a Cornish mine in 1853, but the following year its liabilities exceeded its assets. Capital was raised by issuing new shares, and in 1856 some shareholders were demanding the return of their investment.<sup>60</sup> The company would have set up a warehouse in Birmingham to sell ingots of tin to those making items of tinplate,

pewter and Britannia metal, employing Samuel Wilkes as its sales agent, presumably being paid by commission. Number 4 Upper Priory had probably been newly built and it does not appear in the 1851 Census. The firm is not included in other local directories.

After his bankruptcy Samuel Wilkes seems to have been estranged from his wife and family, and there is no trace of him anywhere in the 1851, 1861 or 1871 Censuses. His name might have been mistranscribed, but this is unlikely to have happened three times. Also, his death is not documented in any burial records or the civil registers,<sup>61</sup> nor does he appear on emigration lists. The conclusion is that he gave false information to the enumerators of the 1851 Census, and that he changed his name, perhaps even moving to where he would not be recognised. When his son Henry first married in 1863, Samuel's occupation is given as a metal dealer, with no indication that he was deceased, but he had died when Henry remarried in 1874. While earlier he recorded his name on the rear of countless clock dials, in trade directories and newspaper advertisements, he made sure that he remained anonymous in his later life.

In the 1851 Census his wife Maria, her unmarried children and a female servant were living in Aston Road, perhaps the family's former property. If so it was soon to be sold to offset Samuel's debts. Her eldest daughter Maria Louisa had married and was later to emigrate to America, where her husband became a doctor, and then moved to Canada. In 1844 the eldest son Alfred had married Emma Heaton, who had lived next door on Lozells Road. She died just three years later, and in 1850 Alfred, a factor living in Bordesley, remarried, this time to the daughter of an innkeeper. From what we can surmise about his father's character, this step down the social scale would have met with disapproval, though Samuel would have had more pressing financial problems to worry about. In the 1851 Census Alfred and his wife

58. *Slater's General and Classified Directory of Birmingham*, 1852–3.

59. *Birmingham Gazette*, 6 December 1852.

60. [www.britishnewspapersarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspapersarchive.co.uk). Reports and letters in various London and Cornish newspapers, 1852–6.

61. He is not the man who died in the Birmingham Workhouse at Winson Green, and buried at Aston, in 1871, aged 72.

were staying with his in-laws at the Gate Inn, he being described as a clockmaker, though he was more likely to be factoring movements made by others. It is not known when Alfred died, but his widow was living in Lozells Road, Aston, in 1871 and still alive in 1881.

Edgar Wilkes, aged 24, was still living with his mother and his other unmarried siblings in the 1851 Census, occupation commercial traveller. Most likely he had previously been taking orders for clock dials, movements and other clock parts supplied by the Whittall Street manufactory, and he was continuing in this line. There is no other record of him.

Henry Wilkes was also living with his family in Aston Road in 1851 and, despite his later multifarious occupations, including factor, watchmaker, metal dealer, accountant, dyer, agent, travelling salesman and enameller, he managed to keep the rest of the family together in the absence of their father. At one stage he even takes on the role as head of the household with his mother stated to be his wife! After having been a factor with his brother Alfred at the Whittall Street works, his occupation is given in 1851 as a watchmaker aged 19, employing four men. By 1861 he was an accountant and agent living in Newington, south London, with his mother and three of his younger siblings. They had probably moved to Camberwell by 1869 when the death of Maria Wilkes aged 69 was registered there. In 1871

Henry Wilkes, commissions agent, was living in Camberwell with his two young children (his wife having died) and his two sisters, both yet to marry: Lavinia, 39, and Josephine, 27, 'Professors' or teachers of music and dancing respectively. In 1881 he was a dyer manager living in Islington with his much younger second wife. The year of his death has not been confirmed. Lavinia did not marry until 1878, a spinster aged 50, at St Pancras, London, when, as stated earlier in this article, her full name was given as Lavinia Sarah Wynn Wilkes.

Samuel Wilkes was one of the most prolific of the nineteenth-century Birmingham dial-makers, probably second only to Walker & Hughes and William Finnemore. This study shows that he was not only ambitious in his business affairs, he tried to elevate his social status, with disastrous results. During the first fifty years of his life he kept himself in the spotlight, then preferring the shadows for the rest of his life.

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