

BIRMINGHAM DIALMAKERS Part — III

by John A. Robey

Note

The first part of this article was published in *Antiquarian Horology*, June 2018, pp251-8, 'New Light on Osborne and Wilson'.

Two earlier articles considered the biographical information obtained from sources such as parish registers, trade directories and wills, of the major manufacturers of painted clock dials working in Birmingham in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹ Since then a major new work on the subject has considered not only dials made by the most important dialmakers, but also the smaller concerns as well as some of the numerous factors and merchants who sold clock dials with falseplates marked with their name, but actually made by others.²

Recently two important sources of information have become available. Firstly, a document — the only one known relating to any dialmaker — turns on it head the previous assumptions about the earliest dialmakers. Secondly, all the past issues of the *London Gazette*, since its inception in 1665, have become available in a searchable online format.³ The ready access to this official Government newspaper, which includes notices of bankruptcies, the dissolving of many (but by no means all) partnerships and some legal matters, and has made available a large amount of information in areas where previously there had been a paucity of contemporary records. In addition the British Library's newspaper archive is also available online.

The information gleaned from the *London Gazette* has added a few more details to those published in the previous articles, and it has shed much more light on the activities of the minor dialmakers and dial factors, which will be considered in later articles. Many of the latter were in business for only a short period and their partnerships changed as frequently as their bankruptcies. The first part of this

article updates the earlier work and is followed by details of the minor manufacturers (some of whom did not mark their dials) and some of the factors. Unless specified otherwise all the information presented here is from the *London Gazette*, together with directory entries and biographical details from the International Genealogical Index (IGI).

Osborne & Wilson

As recorded previously, in September 1772 'Osborne and Wilson, Manufacturers of Enamel Clock Dials, in a manner entirely new' announced the opening of a warehouse at 3 Coleman Street. Painted dials had certainly been made nine months before this date and probably even earlier. In their directory entries of 1776-7 the firm is again only referred to as 'Osborne and Wilson', with no Christian names. In December 1777 it was announced that the partnership between Thomas Hadley Osborne and James Wilson was dissolved, with a further joint announcement a month later that the former partners would trade separately.

The natural assumption has been made by all previous researchers that the partnership that existed in 1772 was between the same people who split up five years later. However, a document has recently become available that shows that this is not the case.⁴ In 1772 Thomas Hadley Osborne was only 19 years old and probably still training as an artist. The original partnership was in fact between James Wilson and Samuel Goodwin Osborne, Thomas's elder brother, who was aged almost 23 years in September 1772. In this document (discussed below) Samuel Osborne and James Wilson are described as 'clockmakers japanners and copartners' and it may be significant that 'japanners' is inserted as an afterthought. It appears that these two men began a clockmaking business, but soon decided to develop a new type of painted clock dial, rather than starting off as japanners.

Nothing more is heard of Samuel Osborne, apart from his death in December 1809, when he was 'of St Marys Square' and buried four days later at St Mary Whittall Street, which was situated close to the later Osborne works. This implies that he was

1 *Antiquarian Horology*, June 2007, pp209-22 and December 2007, pp470-80.

2 M. F. Tennant, *The Art of The Painted Clock Dial*, 2009 (Mayfield Books). Most of the information on dialmakers was provided by the present author.

3 It should be noted that online searching employs optical character recognition (OCR) and in some instances the low contrast of the original copies does not give reliable results.

4 Birmingham Archives & Heritage, MS 379/2. The document is in several pieces, damaged and in a delicate state.

still involved with the Osborne manufactory, but this has not been confirmed. A Samuel Osborn [*sic*] was a factor in New Street in 1776 and at Catherine Street in 1777-81, but it is not known if this was the same man. Samuel Goodwin Osborne may have handed over control of the business to his younger brother Thomas as soon as the latter had finished his apprenticeship, probably about 1774. He may then have traded as a factor for a while. After the probable premature death of Thomas Osborne in the early 1780s he may have then worked with their mother Ann Osborne, although by the early nineteenth century it was the youngest brother James Osborne who is listed in directories as a clock-dial manufacturer until 1808. Like all the other members of the Osborne family of dialmakers, no will has been found for Samuel Goodwin Osborne.

The document mentioned above is an agreement made in 1772 between Samuel Goodwin Osborne and James Wilson on the one part and Benjamin Salt, japanner of Birmingham and his wife Mary of the second part. Benjamin Salt and his wife agreed to work for Osborne & Wilson for seven years, with Benjamin receiving wages of 2s 6d a day and Mary 1s 2d a day. Each day was to be of 'thirteen hours of labour from six o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock at night one and a half hours only for breakfast and dinner being allowed, Sundays only excepted'.

Within one month of the start of the employment Benjamin Salt was to

fully bona fide discover to Samuel Goodwin Osborne and James Wilson the art of compounding and making copal oil varnish and all other varnishes proper to the said arts trades and business of enamelling and japanning ... and teach and instruct Samuel Goodwin Osborne and James Wilson the art [etc] to his best knowledge so as to enable Samuel Goodwin Osborne and James Wilson to compound and make the same for themselves.

Once Benjamin Salt had taught Osborne & Wilson how to make the necessary varnishes he was to receive an extra £3 4s as recompense. If Salt was absent for a certain number of consecutive days (the actual period left blank) he could be dismissed, but if he was not absent then he was to be rewarded with a final sum of £20.

This document also shows that copal varnish was an essential ingredient used by dialmakers. This is confirmed, when in July 1791 the stock of a bankrupt

factor and dealer in Edmund Street, located close to several dialmakers, was sold by auction. This included 'upwards of sixty Carboys of Copal and Spirit Varnish, for Japanners, Coach-makers, Clock Dial-makers, &c, &c'.⁵ As carboys are of varying sizes the total quantity would have been anything from 300 to 900 gallons (1,200-3,600 litres), a considerable quantity, and indicates the scale of these industries in the town at that time.

There is one very unusual entry in the document that is unfortunately close to the most damaged area and is not completely legible. If, at any time during their seven-year employment, Benjamin Salt or his wife 'shall procure or occasion copal oil varnish to be sold or any India Gun Barrels to be japanned by Samuel Goodwin Osborne and James Wilson ... Benjamin Salt shall have and be [...]' Presumably the missing words relate to payment. In the eighteenth century British military gun barrels were generally burnished bright, but in 1817 the East India Company records japanning of gun barrels where it meant 'browned'. At this period the final stage of browning a barrel was to lacquer it and this might have been what the Osborne & Wilson document refers to.⁶

Alternatively the reference might be for cheap trade guns sold to the American Indians or to the African slave trade. The guns made in Birmingham for African trade were of the cheapest kind, poorly made and with garishly painted red stocks. No trade guns for the American Indians are known with japanned barrels.⁷ This reference may have been an early attempt by the firm to develop a method of protecting cheap guns destined for the export market from rust by applying a layer of lacquer or japanning, in the form of a coating of heat-resistant black paint rather than a decorative finish. There is no evidence that Osborne & Wilson ever developed this process, whatever it was, any further.

The indenture is a draft, not signed nor fully dated, but it is clear that in the early stages of their partnership Samuel Osborne and James Wilson did not have enough expertise in making the necessary varnishes. These would have been used as the medi-

⁵ *Birmingham Gazette* 7 Oct 1791.

⁶ Information from Jonathan Ferguson, Curator of Firearms, Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds. David Evans of the Birmingham Proof House Museum knows of no reference to japanned gun barrels.

⁷ Information from James A. Hanson, Museum of the Fur Trade, Nebraska, and David Kleiner American arms specialist.

um to which pigments were added to produce paints, as well as being used as a clear coating. Some very early dials have a base layer of a bituminous paint which never sets. Subsequent paint layers 'float' on this bitumen layer causing severe crazing, and these dials are extremely difficult to restore satisfactorily. Had this proved to be a problem right from the start of the production of painted dials? If so this may have been why outside help was needed.

It is not known if Benjamin Salt was taken on to solve this problem, but he may well have done so. It is not until 1780, by which time his seven years' employment with Osborne & Wilson would have just ended, that he was listed in trade directories as working on his own account as a japanner and varnish maker in Weaman Street. After 1797 until his final directory entry in 1815 he was only listed as a varnish maker. It was clearly his expertise in making the paints and varnishes that were in demand, rather than any abilities he may have had as an artist. He was baptised at Harborne, near Birmingham in 1749, making him 23 years old in 1772, and he married in 1770. His wife Mary died in 1798, and he must have remarried as a second Mary Salt, wife of Benjamin Salt japanner of Weaman Street, died in 1821. He may have been the man buried in January 1822.⁸

Thomas Osborne

Although nothing further has been uncovered regarding Thomas Hadley Osborne, the man to whom he is said to have been apprenticed as a painter, John Barnes, was a fugitive in the Fleet Prison in June 1776, extradited from Dunkirk. This would have been the port from which he was returned back to England, not where he was captured. Presumably he had fled to France to escape his creditors. He was stated to have been a 'japanner ... formerly of Birmingham'. He must have been released from Fleet Prison and returned to Birmingham, where he died in 1805, when he was described as a miniature painter. It is significant that Barnes was called a japanner, a skill that he would have taught to Thomas Osborne.

Thomas Osborne's younger brother, James, who eventually continued the dialmaking business with their mother Ann, joined the Birmingham Volunteer Infantry and became a Captain in October 1803, when he would have been about forty-one years of age. This was one of a number of voluntary militias

formed throughout England at a time of enhanced fear of invasion by Napoleon, and some other dialmakers and japanners were also officers.

James Wilson

As well as becoming the most important of the early Birmingham dialmakers, James Wilson is now known to have had other business interests. On 22 September 1802 a partnership between James Wilson, Richard Jorden and Walter Jorden, trading as Jordens & Wilson, was dissolved. They were tortoiseshell and ivory box and case makers of St Paul's Square, in what is now known as the Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham. This firm is not listed in directories and James Wilson may have only played a minor role in the firm. Although there were a number of makers of boxes and other items in both tortoiseshell and ivory, trade directories do not list any in the St Paul's Square area at this period. Richard and Walter Jorden are almost certainly relatives of Wilson's second wife, Sarah (née Jorden), but the exact relationship is not known at present.

It was not until 1823, fourteen years after Wilson's death, that the surviving executors of his will realised that the estate might be still due a large sum of money which had never been claimed, and a meeting of creditors was called to see if it was worth pursuing a suit in equity. In 1788 an indenture had been drawn up for the recovery (from whom is not stated) of several amounts totalling the considerable sum of £1,000,⁹ to which Richard and Walter Jorden were entitled. On 25 September 1802, just three days after the dissolution of Jordens & Wilson, this indenture was assigned to James Wilson. It is not known if Wilson's executors ever managed to reclaim the money owing to them.

The exact details are not clear, but James Wilson may have invested £1,000 in Richard and Walter Jorden's business in 1788 as a sleeping partner, and though he devised a machine for cutting box hinged (see later) he was probably not involved in their production. When the partnership broke up fourteen years later he was formally entitled to his money back, but actually never claimed it. If this is the case, the fact that he could afford not to recover such a large sum indicates how prosperous his main business as a manufacturer of clock dials had become.

Despite the reported dissolution of the Jorden & Wilson partnership in 1802 and its omission from trade directories, it probably continued in business in one form or another until the *Birmingham Gazette*

⁸ This man was aged 82 when he died, which is about ten years too old, unless either his age is in error, or he was baptised a long time after his birth.

⁹ Worth £56,000 in present-day values.

announced on 13 and 20 September 1824 the sale:

in one lot a complete set of brasses for the pressing of tortoiseshell boxes and segar [cigar] cases (250 in number), with the books of patterns, list of prices, &c., formerly the property of Messrs. Jorden & Wilson, together with a curious Machine invented by the late Mr. James Wilson, clock-dial maker, for cutting box joints, also a Machine for cutting shreads of gold and silver for inlaying guns, boxes. &c.

James Wilson was clearly more than just a successful maker of clock dials and this aspect of his life has not been recorded before. He did not patent his machine for cutting box joints (hinges), nor one for cutting thin strips of gold, though the advertisement does not specifically give him the credit for inventing this.¹⁰

It is now known that the successor to Wilson's dial-making business, Nathaniel Porter, had been in partnership with Charles Welch as factors, until it was dissolved in March 1807. As previously reported Nathaniel Porter, 'Factor and Clock-Dial-Maker, Dealer and Chapman',¹¹ was bankrupt in May 1811.

A very unusual falseplate of about 1820 is known marked 'Wilson & Hodgkins, Birmingham', probably a short-lived firm of factors, but there is no known connection with James Wilson.

Thomas Ashwin

The known facts of Thomas Ashwin's life and death have been detailed earlier. Although he was previously thought not to have been the boy born in 1758 as the dialmaker was married in 1774 by licence, which states that he was '21 years and upwards', it is likely that he falsified his age, a not uncommon occurrence. One of his brothers was Edward Ashwin, two years older than Thomas, whose son became a japanner and Edward may have been the other partner in the firm of Thomas Ashwin & Co, which is listed in directories during 1787-91.

10 Bennet Woodcroft, *Alphabetical Index of Patents of Inventions*, (1854, reprinted 1969). There were no patents awarded to James Wilson, Richard Jorden or Walter Jorden.

11 A chapman was one who was in business to buy and sell goods; an archaic term for a hawker and peddler. The words 'dealer and chapman' were routinely added in bankruptcy notices to emphasise that the person was a tradesman, as the bankruptcy laws only applied to those in business.

A dial by Thomas Ashwin has been recently been reported that indicates he was making clock dials before his earliest recorded directory entry.¹² This is a 12in wide arched dial with long dial feet and no falseplate. There is a small square calendar aperture and a silvered date ring — normally only found on very early painted dials. On the rear of the arch is painted 'T. Ashwin & Co.' in large letters (Fig ??), but very difficult to see being painted in black on a dark ground and covered with two centuries of dirt. The dial was signed for Worgan & Son, Bristol, the Worgan family being prominent Bristol clockmakers in the 18th and early-19th centuries. Matthew Worgan's son James became a Burgess in 1784, after which he worked with his father as Worgan & Son until 1795.¹³ It is likely that this dial was made near the start of this partnership, possibly about 1784.

As the quality of this dial does not match those by Osborne or Wilson it is likely that Thomas Ashwin did not make many clock dials until he was able to raise his standards, as his dials with Ashwin falseplates are of good quality, even if they do not quite match those of James Wilson.

After Thomas Ashwin's murder in the Birmingham 'Priestley Riots' of 1791, the business became Ashwin & Byrne during 1792-8, although the existing stocks of Ashwin & Co falseplates were still used for a while. One is dated 1792 (**** L/C Ref book Fig 10.72, Richard Harper's pic). It was assumed that Ashwin & Byrne was Francis Byrne, newly arrived from London, running the japanning and dialmaking business with, or on behalf of, Mary Ashwin, Thomas's widow. There is now the alternative possibility, as yet unproven, that the partnership was between Edward Ashwin and Francis Byrne.

In January 1813 a partnership that had existed between William Roberts and Edwin Ashwin junior, japanners was dissolved. William Roberts was a japanner in Park Street in 1813, but no clock dials are known by either him or the partnership with Edward Ashwin.

Francis Byrne

The bankruptcy of Francis Byrne in 1780 as a factor in London, and his presumed move to Birmingham, where he took over the japanning and clock-dial business of Thomas Ashwin after the latter's murder in 1791, has already been discussed. Byrne's last inclusion in directories was in 1803 and it is now

12 Information from Dr John Thorpe.

13 Moore, A. J., 1999, *The Clockmakers of Bristol 1650-1900*, pp414-15.

known this was due to his further bankruptcy in June of that year. He was described as a 'Japanner, Dealer and Chapman'. In January 1805 a meeting of his creditors was held to make a dividend of Byrne's estate and assets. Although a clock dial is known with a movement dated 1806, this must have been old stock, perhaps sold off when his effects were disposed of, as there is no evidence that the business resumed or was taken over by anyone else.

Francis Byrne may have returned to the London area as a man of this name died at Woolwich at the end of 1807, leaving just a few clothes and a silver watch. Although the circumstances of the Woolwich man fit that of the Birmingham dialmaker, such as no mention of a wife or children in his will (the dialmaker was widowed in 1801 with no known children) and having few possessions, it is not yet confirmed that they are the same person.¹⁴

Walker & Finnemore and the Finnemore Brothers

Walker & Finnemore are listed in Birmingham trade directories from 1808 to 1811, although they must have been in business for several years before this. It is now known that the partnership between George Walker and William Finnemore as 'Clock-Dial Makers and Japanners' was dissolved on 7 April 1810. Sometime after this date Walker formed a partnership with Thomas Hughes which became one of the most prolific dialmaking firms of the early nineteenth century until Walker died in March 1835 and Hughes 18 months later. In 1827 George Walker, along with a jeweller and a brass founder, was a trustee for the estate of John Woodward, a bankrupt Birmingham factor, on behalf of the other creditors. Woodward may have been selling painted clock dials supplied by Walker & Hughes and was still owing them money, but this is not confirmed.

William Finnemore continued alone as a clock-dial manufacturer in Edmund Street and was joined by one of his sons, William junior, about 1819 as an equal partner. In December 1824 an intriguing advertisement appeared in the local newspaper:

TO PAINTERS, &c.

PERSONS accustomed to painting or ornamenting CLOCK DIALS, having leisure

time, may have it filled up by applying to W. FINNEMORE, at his old established Manufactory, Edmund-street. None but good workmen need apply, as the best prices will be given.

This implies that in addition to full-time employees there were some painters in Birmingham who worked on a freelance or part-time basis, perhaps decorating different types of articles in the town's wide variety of trades.

On 24 December 1836 the *Birmingham Gazette* reported that:

A fire took place about three o'clock on Wednesday morning last in Edmund Street, on the premises of Mr. Finnemore, clock-dial manufacturer. Engines from the different local fire offices were promptly on the spot, and by their united excursions the fire was prevented extending beyond the shopping¹⁵ where it originated.

Fortunately this did not appear to make a serious impact on the business, and, considering the use of inflammable paints, varnishes and solvents, it is surprising that more dial makers were not affected in this manner.

After the death of William Finnemore senior in 1838 William junior inherited his father's share of the business, 'on condition that he take his brother George into partnership allowing him one third part or share of the profits'. This implies that the two brothers did not get on well and their father had realised that without this stipulation George, the youngest son, who had probably been already working in the business, might have been excluded. The firm traded as William & George Finnemore in 1841-7, although no clock dials are known marked as such. These directory dates are only approximate as George Finnemore was working alone in Hospital Street in 1846.

Although George Finnemore could not be found in Warwickshire in the 1851 Census the previous supposition that he had died by then is not correct, as he was declared insolvent in September 1853. He is said to have been a hosier, draper, haberdasher, grocer and provisions dealer 'at present and for four years past at 102 Hospital Street', but in 1851 this

14 The Woolwich man had brothers George, Peter and Francis, but the latter may have been a transcription error as the official document is a hastily scribbled copy. No family with these names has been traced.

15 Shopping frequently occurs in advisements for property sales of the period and appears to mean a display area for the sale of goods, not the act of buying or the goods purchased.

address was occupied by George Henderson, provisions dealer, and his family. Perhaps Finnemore was working for Henderson, but out of the county on the day of the Census. More importantly, it states that he was 'also during the whole time a Journeyman Clock-dial Writer'. Those making painted clock dials included dial painters and dial writers. The former painted flowers, birds, shells figures, etc, in the corners, centre and arch, while the latter applied the black lines, Roman and Arabic numerals for the hours, minutes, seconds and date, together with the clockmaker's name and place — what are today termed the 'graphics'.

Although George Finnemore is recorded in the 1846 directory as a clock-dial maker it seems that he was, or later became, an employee adding the graphics to dials, rather than being an actual manufacturer, which explains why no dials are known identified as having been made by him. Whether he worked for his brother or another manufacturer is difficult to say, but the partnership with William Finnemore cannot have lasted long (there is no formal notice of its dissolution in the *London Gazette*). If he was running a general shop selling clothing and provisions, as well as working as a dial writer, how did he combine the two activities? Did he own or manage the store at 102 Hospital Street, with George Henderson actually running it, while he worked in one of the clock-dial manufactories? Or did he work on them at home, in-between serving in the shop, collecting and returning them to the dial works when they were finished, which would have invited damage to the vulnerable dials? In any event it did not prove to be a successful combination of occupations, as his insolvency shows.

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