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New light on Osborne and Wilson

Antiquarian Horology, Volume 39, No. 2 (June 2018), pp. 251–258

Front cover: The clock, watch and sand-glass depicted in the painting *The Paston Treasure* are discussed in this journal issue by Jonathan Betts.

New light on Osborne and Wilson

John A. Robey*

A recently discovered employment agreement of 1772 shows that the partnership between Osborne and Wilson that made the earliest painted dials in England needs radical revision to confirm the original business partners. Also the key involvement and influence of third parties in establishing a successful business needs to be recognised. As well as a proposal by Osborne & Wilson to japan gun barrels, James Wilson was involved with relatives in making tortoiseshell boxes, while a fire at his Birmingham clock dial manufactory may have hastened his death.

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 by 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 several important sources of information have become more readily 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, has made available a large amount of information in areas where previously there had been a paucity of contemporary records. Thirdly the British Library's newspaper archive is also now available online.[4]

Osborne & Wilson[5]

In September 1772 *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* announced the opening of a warehouse at 3 Colemore Row by: 'Osborne and Wilson, Manufacturers of White Clock Dials in Imitation of Enamel, in a Manner entirely new' (Fig 1). Painted dials had certainly been made nine months before this date and probably even earlier.

Painted clock dials had been used for a long time before this date, especially on German and French Gothic clocks since the fifteenth century, but they were painted directly onto the rough wrought-iron dial plate with little attempt to produce a smooth surface. By the late eighteenth century vitreous enamel was being used for the dials of watches, small clocks and even a few longcase clocks.[6] It was

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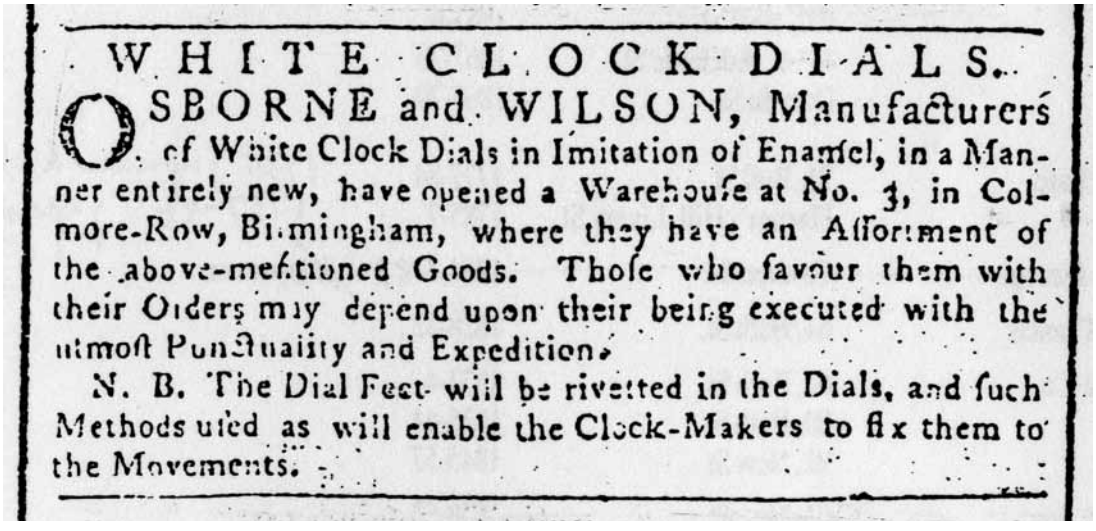
1. John A. Robey, 'Birmingham Dialmakers: Some Biographical Notes', *Antiquarian Horology*, Part 1 June 2007, 209-22; Part 2 December 2007, 470-80.

2. M. F. Tennant, *The Art of The Painted Clock Dial* (Mayfield Books, 2009). 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. Currently there are some important gaps in the coverage of *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, including the period of Osborne & Wilson's announcements. All the biographical information is from parish registers available online and death notices in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*.

5. 'Osborne & Wilson' is used here, except in quotations, for the partnership, and 'Osborne and Wilson' when they worked independently.


WHITE CLOCK DIALS.

OSBORNE and WILSON, Manufacturers of White Clock Dials in Imitation of Enamel, in a Manner entirely new, have opened a Warehouſe at No. 3, in Colmore-Row, Birmingham, where they have an Aſſortment of the above-mentioned Goods. Thoſe who favour them with their Orders may depend upon their being executed with the utmoſt Punctuality and Expedition.

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

Fig. 1. Osborne & Wilson's advertisement, *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 21 September 1772.

Osborne & Wilson who were eventually able to produce 'White Clock Dials in Imitation of Enamel', opening up the prospect of colourful dials available at an affordable price.

In their directory entries of 1776-7[7] the firm is, like in their announcement of September 1772, only referred to as 'Osborne and Wilson', with no first names. In December 1777 *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* 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 thenceforth 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.[8] In 1772 Thomas Hadley Osborne was only 19 years old[9] 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 Samuel Osborne and James Wilson are described as 'clockmakers japanners and copartners' and it may be significant that 'japanners' had been inserted as an afterthought. It appears that these two young men began a clockmaking business, but soon decided to develop a new type of painted clock dial, rather than having been japanners who moved into the clock-dial trade.

Samuel Osborne was the grandson of Humphrey Hadley, the third of a dynasty of Birmingham clockmakers of that name, and he may have been apprenticed in the clock trade. Likewise, James Wilson may have been apprenticed to Humphrey Hadley, but since Birmingham apprentice records are very sparse and the town's prosperity was aided by the lack of control by trade guilds and formal apprenticeships, the evidence is lacking.

Samuel Goodwin Osborne probably handed over control of the business to his younger brother, Thomas, as soon as the latter had finished his apprenticeship, likely to have been about 1774. He may then have traded as a factor for a while as a Samuel Osborn [sic] was a factor in New Street in 1776 and at Catherine Street in 1777-81, but it is not confirmed that this was James Wilson's former partner. After the presumed death of Thomas Osborne at an

6. John A. Robey, *The Longcase Clock Reference Book* (Mayfield Books, revised 2nd edition 2013), volume 2, pp. 566-7.

7. *The Birmingham Directory or Merchant's & Tradesman's Useful Companion* 1776, 1777.

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

9. Robey, 'Birmingham Dialmakers', Part 1, 212.

early age in the early 1780s Samuel may have then worked with their mother Ann Osborne at Weaman Street, St Mary's Square. However, by the early nineteenth century it was the youngest brother James Osborne who is listed in directories as a clock-dial manufacturer until 1808. Nothing more is heard of Samuel Osborne until newspapers reported the death on 'Saturday last [30 Dec 1809], in St Mary's-square, Birmingham, Mr. Samuel Osborne, of that town, after a confinement of ten years, from a paralytic stroke'.[10] If he had been an invalid for a decade this might explain why the youngest brother, James, was running the business at this period. 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 employment 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 and 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 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'.[11] As carboys are of varying sizes the total quantity would have been anything from 300 to 900 gallons (1,200-3,600 litres), which is a considerable quantity, and indicates the scale of these industries in Birmingham at that time.

It is not known if Benjamin Salt was employed to make the necessary paints and varnishes, but it seems likely since seven years would be a long time to purely transfer knowledge without involvement in manufacture. 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.[12] After 1797/8 until his final directory entry in 1815 he was only listed as a varnish maker.[13] 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.[14]

10. *Morning Post* (London), 4 January 1810, also Bristol and Kent newspapers, all probably syndicated from *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, which is currently not available on the British Newspaper Archive for this period.

11. *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* 7 Oct 1791.

12. *The Birmingham, Wolverhampton, … Directory*, 1780, 1781, 1789; *The Universal British Directory*, 1792; *The Birmingham Directory*, 1798.

13. *Pye's Birmingham Directory*, 1797; *Chapman's Birmingham Directory*, 1800, 1801; *Wrightson's New Triennial Directory of Birmingham*, 1815.

Fig. 2. Unsigned dial attributed to Osborne & Wilson without a falseplate. There is an engraved and silvered calendar ring with the date appearing in a square aperture. Heavy gilt gesso 'spandrels' in the corners and arch. (M. F. Tennant)

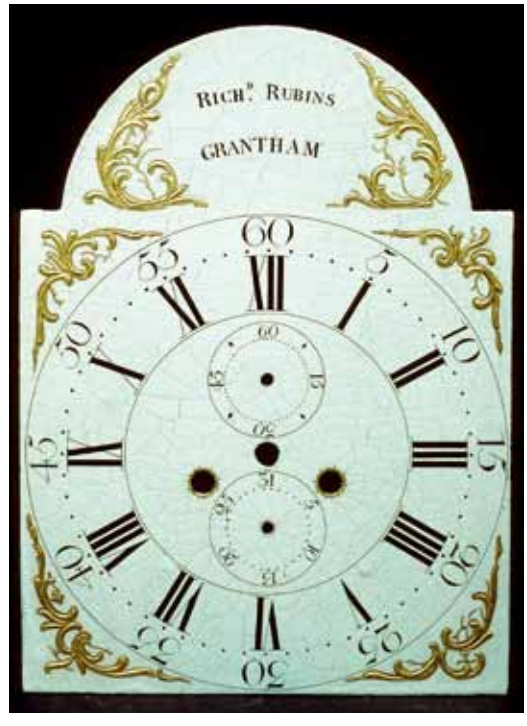


Fig. 3. Dial attributed to Osborne & Wilson without a falseplate. The gilt-gesso decoration simulates the rococo-style spandrels used on brass dials. (M. F. Tennant)

The japanner Benjamin Salt is clearly a key player in helping Samuel Osborne and James Wilson realise their commercial ambitions of producing painted dials reliably by employing the existing varnishing technologies used in other industries. The indenture provides clear evidence that the Osborne & Wilson partnership was not originally between the younger son Thomas Hadley Osborne and James Wilson, but between Samuel Osborne and James Wilson.

The earliest painted dials

The employment agreement is a draft, not signed and only dated 1772 with the day and month left blank, 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. Since they were originally clockmakers rather than japanners this lack of knowledge about the different varnishes is not surprising. These would have been used as the medium 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 known that some painted dials had been made in January and May 1772, several months before the announcement in September of that year.[15] These very early dials have small square calendar apertures with a traditional brass calendar ring (Fig 2), while the very earliest painted dials have applied repoussé brass

14. 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.

15. Robey, 'Birmingham Dialmakers', Part 1, 211.

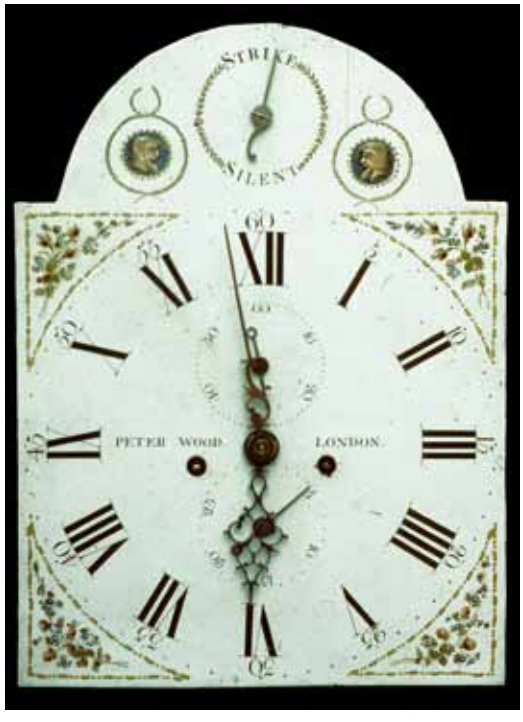


Fig. 4. Dial attributed to Osborne & Wilson fitted with an unmarked cast-iron falseplate. The roundels in the arch contain profiles of Plato and Socrates. (M. F. Tennant)

spandrels.[16] It was not long before these features, which were a continued usage of similar items on traditional brass dials, were replaced by calendar discs and gilt gesso spandrels.

The 1772 announcement (Fig. 1) also refers to special means of attaching the dials to the movements, these being what are now referred to as falseplates. Some early painted dials have long dial feet and no falseplates. These are likely to have been made by Osborne & Wilson before falseplates had been devised. They often have gilt-gesso corner and arch decoration mimicking the cast brass-applied spandrels used on brass dials (Fig. 3). A number of early painted dials have cast-iron falseplates without any maker's name (Fig. 4). The partners soon realised that the falseplate presented an ideal opportunity to promote the business and its innovations so their name was cast into the metal (Figs 5 and 6). This falseplate is quite scarce and the name is small, but later dialmakers made full use of the advertising potential with as large a name as possible.

Other potential partnership activities

There is one unusual entry in the employment agreement 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 […].

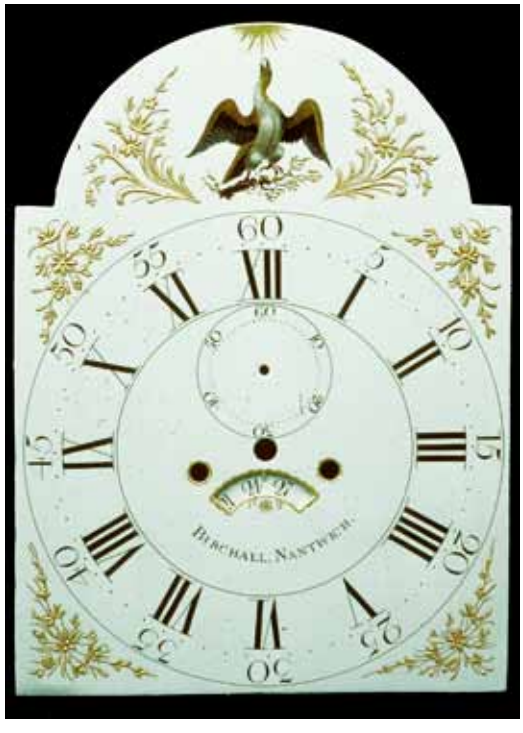
Presumably the missing words relate to payment. In the eighteenth century British military gun barrels were generally burnished bright, but in 1817 the East India Company records japanning of gun barrels where it meant 'browned'. At this period the final stage of browning a barrel was to lacquer it and this might have been what the Osborne & Wilson document refers to.[17]

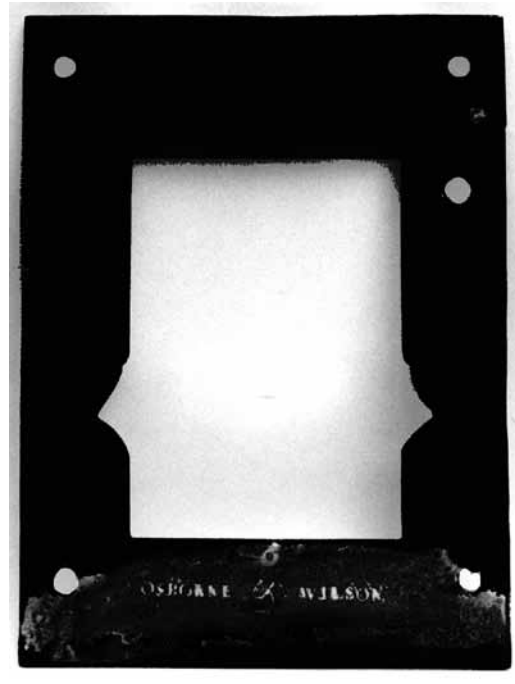
Alternatively the reference might be for cheap trade guns sold to the American Indians or to the African slave trade. The guns made in Birmingham for the African trade were of the cheapest kind, poorly made and with garishly painted red stocks. No trade guns for the American Indians are known with japanned barrels.[18] 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 any further, whatever it was.

16. Robey, *The Longcase Clock Reference Book*, Vol 2, pp 588-9.

17. 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.

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





Figs 5-6. Dial with a falseplate signed OSBORNE & WILSON. (M. F. Tennant)

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,[19] was a fugitive in the Fleet Prison in June 1776, extradited from Dunkirk.[20] 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 the 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,[21] 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

While workers in trades such as japanning and dial painting were not exposed to the dangers of heavy machinery or hot furnaces, there were large quantities of flammable solvents such as turpentine. With the presence of stoves for drying the wares there was always a risk of a conflagration. Hence it is not surprising that in November 1808 a fire occurred at James Wilson's manufactory:

> Thursday morning, the shopping[22] belonging to Mr. James Wilson, clock-dial manufacturer, of Great Charles Street, Birmingham, was

19. Information from Joseph McKenna, former Senior Assistant Librarian, Birmingham Central Library.

20. *London Gazette*, 15 June 1776.

21. *London Gazette*, 6 October 1803.

> discovered to be on fire, which nearly destroyed the whole, with its contents, before it was got under [control]; the adjoining premises, which were threatened with destruction, were happily saved.[23]

This must have spelled the end of the most prolific dial-making business in Birmingham, whose painted dials are now regarded as being of the highest quality. Although the building and adjoining premises were saved, there must have been considerable damage to the workshops and loss of stock that would have made continuing the business not viable. It is also likely that James Wilson suffered from the effects of inhaling smoke and fumes that resulted in his death shortly after the fire. Within four months he had made his will and died a month later on 3 April 1809. There does not appear to have been a sale of his stock, equipment or premises, which indicates that either the fire had left little of value worth selling or the stock was taken over by his successor Nathaniel Porter, who was probably a relative of James Wilson's first wife. Nathaniel Porter had been in partnership with Charles Welch as factors, until it was dissolved in March 1807.[24] The fact that Porter himself was bankrupt in May 1811[25] indicates there might not have been much of Wilson's fire-damaged stock worth salvaging.

James Wilson's other business activities

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.[26] 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 trade directories and James Wilson may have only played a minor role in the manufacturing activities of 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 still be 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.[27] The notice of this meeting claimed that 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,[28] to which Richard and Walter Jorden were entitled. The notice also stated that on 25 September 1802, (which was just three days after the dissolution of Jorden & Wilson), this indenture had been 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 had 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 hinges (see later) he was probably not involved in the production of either boxes or hinges. 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

22. The word shopping occurs regularly in contemporary newspaper reports, but it does not seem to mean a retail shop, or the activity of buying, or the goods bought. It is likely to refer to a building with both showrooms and manufacturing workshops.

23. *Worcester Journal*, 17 November 1808. The British Newspaper Archive does not include copies of *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* for this period.

24. *London Gazette*, 11 April 1807.

25. *London Gazette*, 28 May1811

26. *London Gazette*, 28 Sept 1802.

27. *London Gazette*, 8 May 1823.

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

could afford not to recover such a large sum indicates how prosperous his main business as a manufacturer of clock dials had been.

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 *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* 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.

Richard Wilson

A little more is now known about James Wilson's brother, the painter Richard Wilson (not to be confused with the better known North Wales artist of that name). He is listed in indexes of British artists simply as 'of Birmingham, 1752–1807'. While his death is confirmed his birth, which might lead to establishing the origin of his dial-making brother, is not. In 1776, when he would have been 24 years old, he was employed as a painter for five years by the renowned firm of Boulton & Fothergill.[30] One of his tasks was to finish 'mechanical paintings' or 'polygraphs', which were reproductions of oil paintings produced by a system devised by Matthew Boulton and Francis Eginton.[31] He also engraved the dies for the Parys Mines Company halfpenny copper token, minted in 1791 by Matthew Boulton.[32] As well as working at Boulton's Soho Works he painted landscape pictures and may have painted some clock dials for his brother as well.

Acknowledgements

In addition to those acknowledged in the footnotes, the author would like to thank Joseph McKenna for assistance in access to the employment agreement while it was awaiting conservation, M. Frances Tennant for the use of illustrations and to the anonymous referee whose useful comments have been incorporated into the final version of this article.

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

30. Birmingham Archives & Heritage, Boulton & Watt Archive, Agreements.

31. Barbara Fogarty, *Matthew Boulton And Francis Eginton's Mechanical Paintings*, MPhil Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2010 (available online), pp. 25, 26 and 60.

32. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Object No. CM.BI. 2189-R.