

# HALIFAX DI

## Part 1: Willio

The British painted longcase clock dial originated in Birmingham about 1772, made by by Osborne & Wilson, and these attractive and multicoloured dials soon replaced the traditional brass ones. Many enterprising manufacturers embarked on their production, mostly in Birmingham, which became the centre of the industry, where it cornered at least 90 percent of the market (though this a guess as no production figures available). But painted dials were also made elsewhere, especially in Scotland, and also in Manchester, as well as Halifax and Leeds in Yorkshire.

Instead of there being dozens of dialmakers, as in Birmingham, the Halifax trade was mainly confined to just one concern: William Whitaker (occasionally incorrectly recorded as Whittaker) and his successors. Fortunately Halifax dials, which are of high quality, often have cast-iron falseplates that provide some information, including the change of name to Whitaker & Shreeve. The tragic and horrific death of

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by **John Robey**, UK

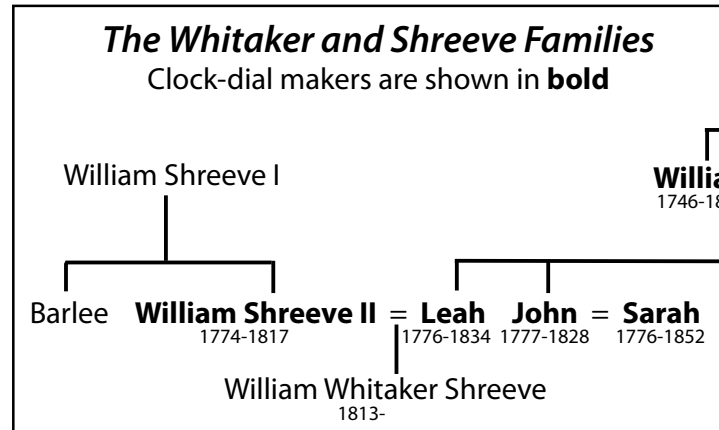
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William Shreeve, which was widely reported in local newspapers, adds drama to the story and some of the details have been recorded in horological books. In addition Halifax dials were sold in Newcastle upon Tyne by Beilby & Hawthorn, who were factors of clock movements and parts.

However, previously published accounts have relied on names on falseplates and a limited range of trade directories, which give only part of the story. It has even been said:

*It is difficult, if not impossible, to establish when William Whitaker worked alone in Halifax, when he worked with a painter called William Shreeve, and when he*

*Figure 1 (right). Simplified genealogy of the Whitaker and Shreeve families.*



*worked in partnership with Beilby & Hawthorn.*

Now online resources have enabled the history of the Halifax dialmakers to be unravelled, and it has proved to be more complex and interesting than once thought, especially as the businesses involved continued to trade under their original names long after the deaths of their founders. **Figure 1** is a simplified family tree of the Whitaker and Shreeve dialmakers.

The making of painted dials in Halifax for longcase clocks was begun by William Whitaker, who was baptised in July 1748, the eldest child of Giles Whitaker, a butcher of Halifax, who then had two daughters, another son, Henry, and a further daughter. Neither son followed his father's trade, as using their artistic skills must have been more appealing than cutting up meat. It is not known how they learned to paint, as none of the people mentioned in this article appear in registers of apprentices.

About 1775 William Whitaker married Hannah Sladdin, who was baptised in November 1753 at Ovenden, near Halifax. They had seven children: Leah (1776), John (1779), Barnett (1779, probably died young), Mary (1781), Sarah (baptism not recorded), Leonard (1785) and William Jonas (1787). They were all baptised at Sowerby Bridge, where the family probably lived, just 2½ miles from Halifax, where the clock dials were made. The exception was the youngest, who was baptised at nearby Warley, which may signify a move to a new residence. Leah Whitaker became an important part in the story of Halifax's



# ALMAKERS

## William Whitaker

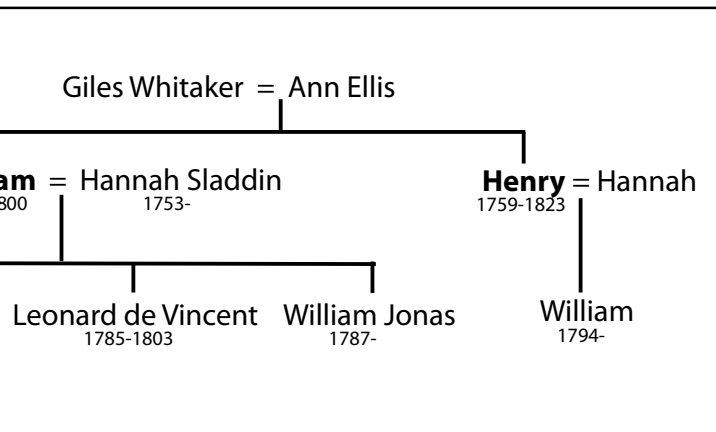


Figure 2 (below left). Early dial by William Whitaker with his characteristic hemisphere maps, made for Henry Fisher of Preston, recorded 1742-1782. Photograph by John Robey.



dialmakers, while her brother John moved to Leeds, where he made clock dials. None of the other children are known to have worked in the business, though this was clearly William Whitaker's desire just before he died in early 1800, aged 51.

In previously published articles and books the earliest records of William Whitaker had been stated to be about 1809 to 1815, which turns out to be long after he had died. But from the style of some of his dials, with falseplates signed 'Willm Whitaker, Halifax' or simply 'W. W. Halifax', it had been assumed (correctly as it turns out) that he was working as a dialmaker much earlier. Recent research shows that the earliest positive indication of his trade is in a newspaper advertisement on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1796 when the following appeared in the *LEEDS INTELLIGENCER*:

**JOURNEYMEN PAINTERS WANTED, ONE or Two good Hands at Pencil Work, and One who perfectly understands House Painting in all its Branches, will meet with constant Employment, and Wages according to Merit, by applying to William Whitaker, Painter, Japanner, &c. in Halifax.**

At the time of this advertisement William Whitaker was almost 48 years old and would have been a very experienced painter and signwriter. The inclusion of japanning indicates that he may well have already been making clock dials, as japanner and enameller were the usual contemporary terms used for dial painters. He was expanding his business by taking on more staff, most likely to increase his

share of the expanding market for the supply of clock dials to the northern market, which up to then had been dominated by Birmingham dialmakers. It should be noted that 'Pencil Work' was not using graphite or so-called 'lead' pencils, but pencil brushes for fine line work when painting signs or clock dials.

It is significant that while he was seeking just one man for house painting, one or two men were required who were skilled in using these fine brushes. This advertisement might have also appeared in Birmingham, or Whitaker might have gone there to recruit skilled painters, as it is likely that William Shreeve was taken on at this time. **Figures 2 and 3** show a dial from this period, identified by the hemisphere maps as coming from the Whitaker workshop, and probably made during William's lifetime. The distinctive hemisphere maps used by Whitaker and his successors are discussed in Part Three of this article.

Nothing more is known about the early history of Halifax dialmaking until William

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### Part 1 of 3

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Whitaker, painter of Halifax, wrote his will on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1800 and it was proved two months later. Some wills can be rather basic and uninformative, but this one turns out to be anything but, and also gives an insight into William Whitaker's character. There is no mention of his wife, who had probably already died, and his main concern was the continuation of the clock-dial business in his own name. His executors—his brother Henry Whitaker, John Pattison a noted local clockmaker and Joseph Mason, grocer—were to:

*retain as much money as they shall deem necessary for carrying on the trade or business I now follow and which I direct shall be carried on in my own Name and* 🎯

*which Trade or Business I commit to the management of my brother not doubting his Care and Fidelity therein and ... he shall first take out of the profits 100 guineas annually together with one tenth of the clear remaining profits as a compensation for the extraordinary trouble ... until my youngest child shall reach the age of 21.*

In addition the executors were to

*put out my two youngest sons Leonard de Vincent and William Jonas to some trade or business requesting that the former of them to be brought up to the trade or business that I follow.*

The youngest sons were just 12 and 14 years old and had not yet started an apprenticeship, while the oldest children Leah and John were in their 20s and probably already working with their father. William clearly had such aspirations for Leonard, who was simply identified as Leo at his baptism, that he named him after one of the greatest artists of the Italian Renaissance. Whether he lived up to his name, or even took any role in the clock-dial business, is not clear as he probably died in 1803.

After the youngest child reached the age of 21 William's estate was to be divided equally between his six children:

*Provided every one of my children shall out of their fortune pay to my brother £100 apiece for seven years on receiving interest to form a capital for the purpose of continuing the trade or business to be carried on by my brother and my sons John and Leonard de Vincent as long as they can agree about the same. But if they my said sons shall withdraw themselves from the said partnership shall leave to my brother £100 for seven years to be able better to carry on the business on his own account.*

If his eldest son John conducted himself in the trade to the satisfaction of the executors he was to receive an unspecified weekly recompense from the estate. This is the will of someone extremely keen, perhaps almost to obsession, to ensure that the business he had founded continued to trade using his own name and under the control of his brother and his (William's) sons. It is the will of someone we would now term a 'control freak'. Although it was estimated that the estate would not exceed £600, the impression is that William Whitaker was leaving a thriving and prosperous dial-making business which he was keen to ensure continued after his death, and what he had built up was not squandered by the next generation.

William's will and his relatively early death



Figure 3. Falseplate, moon and calendar of the Fisher dial with stamped 'SP133'. Photograph by John Robey.

helps to explain previous misconceptions about the business in the early nineteenth century, which continued to produce dials under to founder's name long after his death. Despite being only given a passing mention it was his oldest child, Leah, who continued the Whitaker clock-dial business for the longest in Halifax, though not solely in the name of the firm's founder. John became a clock-dial painter in his own right after he moved to Leeds.

William and his brother Henry, younger by 11 years, had, presumably, worked together

as clock-dial manufacturers, with Henry continuing as the main proprietor after 1800. Henry's involvement with dial-making has only recently become apparent, but when he died in 1823, aged almost 64, the *LEEDS MERCURY* declared him to be an 'eminent clock-face painter'. He had probably been trained by his older brother and he may even have been the one who concentrated on the painting of clock dials. While William Whitaker may have run the business, attending to sales, ordering the blank iron dial sheets, falseplates and the like.



Figure 4. Arched moon-dial made about 1800 for Holdsworth of Halifax. The rural scene in the centre includes a similar cottage to that between the moons in the arch. Typical Whitaker hemisphere maps, but with the latitude numbers cut off to suit a smaller dial and cut down to make half maps. Photograph by John Robey.

Henry had three children who we can be confident were his and not born to one of the other Henry Whitakers in the area. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1822 the *YORKSHIRE GAZETTE* reported the marriage 'at Halifax Mr Joseph Thackrah of Leeds, surgical mechanist, to Ann, daughter of Mr Henry Whitaker of Halifax, enameller', the wedding taking place at the parish church of St John on 20<sup>th</sup> July. She is likely to have been the girl baptised on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1791 at Sowerby Bridge, daughter of Henry and Hannah Whitaker.

Henry's occupation was also given as a painter when a son William was baptised on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1794 and a daughter Carolina on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1798. This William may have originally worked with his father, but not as a dial painter, since when he married in 1834 (long after the death of both his father and uncle) he was 'late of Aked's-road [the location of the dial-making business], but now of Lee Bridge House, near Halifax', while in the 1851 census he was an accountant living in the High Street.

Figure 4 shows a dial made around

the turn of the nineteenth century, either when William Whitaker was still alive or when Henry was in charge. Though it is reasonable to suppose that clock dials had been made by the Whitakers since at least the 1790s, the earliest actual record as a dialmaker was not until 1809 when 'Whitaker, Wm., japanner and clock-dial manufacturer, Aked's road' appears in a list of painters in *HOLDEN'S TRIENNIAL DIRECTORY*, which is almost the earliest trade directory that includes Halifax. The only earlier directory for Halifax, *BAILEY'S NORTHERN DIRECTORY* published in 1781, has no reference to Whitaker painters or dialmakers.

At the date of the earliest mention of clock-dial makers in 1809, the firm was still trading as William Whitaker, as stipulated in his will, but the business was being run by Henry Whitaker. This is the only instance of the firm being recorded in directories under William Whitaker's name, and it is also the earliest record of Aked's Road as the address of the clock-dial business, but it had probably been located there much earlier and continued to the end of clock-dial manufacture by the Whitakers. Aked's Road once formed the western boundary of the town and was demolished in 1969.

About this time the firm took on a new partner and a new name appears, that of William Shreeve, who had probably applied for one of the posts advertised by William Whitaker in 1796 for additional skilled workers. He was from Birmingham, aged 21, possibly having just finished an apprenticeship with one of the established Birmingham manufacturers of painted clock dials. He was certainly in Halifax by 1802 when (as William Shrieves) he was a private in the Halifax Volunteer Corps of Infantry, along with Henry Whitaker, who was a member of the band. This was one of the many volunteer military units formed throughout England at this time, when there was widespread concern about an invasion by Napoleon Bonaparte's French army. This implies that William Shreeve had lived in the town long enough for him to have become an accepted member of the local community, and adds credibility to the suggestion that he had moved there as a result of William Whitaker's search for painters.

The surname Shreeve (sometimes Shrieve, Shrieves or Shreive) is quite uncommon, with the greatest concentration being in Norfolk, and since it is known from the reports of his death that William Shreeve came from Birmingham, this makes researching his background much easier than the Whitakers. He was baptised on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1774, the eldest son of William Shreeve, a Birmingham toymaker who traded as Smith & Shreeve until the partnership was dissolved in 1791 and

then under his own name until he died in 1812. Toys were not children's playthings, but small decorative metal item, such as buckles, for which Birmingham was renowned.

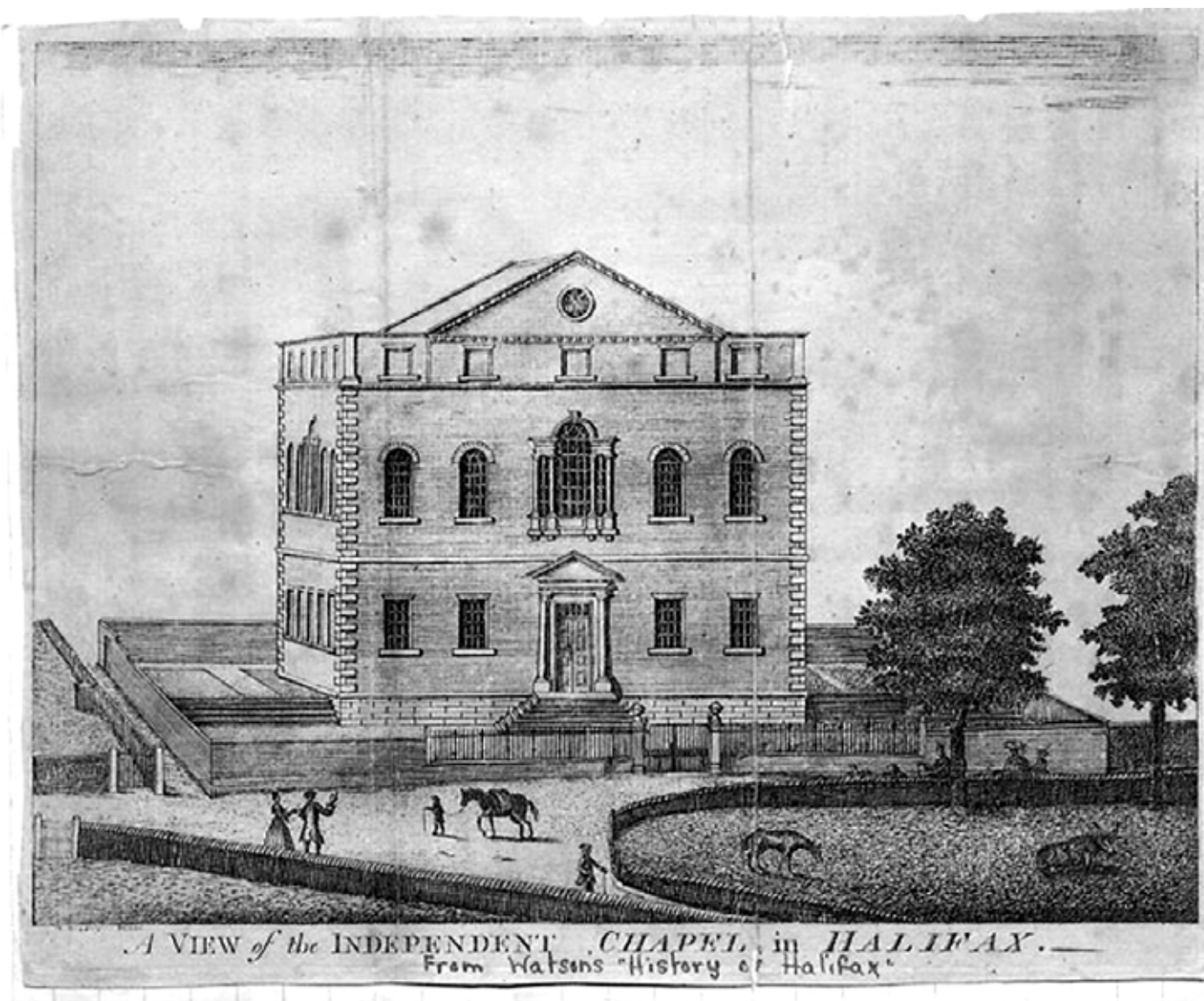
When William Shreeve senior of Birmingham died his simple will left all the 'ready money, book debts, stock in trade, both finished and unfinished goods, all the working tools &c.' to 'my second son Barlee Shreeve'. Since Barlee or Barley was a not uncommon Norfolk first name this reinforces the likely origin of the family. All the household furniture was to go to his

the business (which he and his son did until the 1830s)? Or had William Shreeve junior been provided for earlier, as was sometimes the case with the eldest son, or was he prospering sufficiently in Halifax not to need a legacy?

From this will we learn that William Shreeve senior was actually a watch-seal maker, a trade that would be encompassed by the term 'toy maker'. Watch seals were used to impress a cypher on to wax to seal a letter and were carried on the chain of a pocket watch. They were often made of gold inset with a semi-precious stone into

daughter Leah on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1806, when he was 32 and she was 30 years of age. The marriage was by licence as their first daughter was already on its way, baptised on 18<sup>th</sup> September of that year, but she probably died young. They had three more daughters, born in 1809, 1810 and 1815, and a son born in 1813.

William and Leah Shreeve were married in the parish church of St John, and their first two children were baptised there, William being described as a painter and an enameller. But their other three children were baptised at the Square Independent



widow Mary, then after her death to Barlee, and if he should die without issue only then was the estate to be divided equally among the surviving brothers and sisters.

We can only speculate as to why William, the eldest son, was not mentioned and did not receive even a token sum. Did his departure from Birmingham disenfranchise him from the family and William senior was rewarding the son who would continue

Figure 5. The Square Independent Chapel, Halifax, where William and Leah Shreeve were buried and three of their children were baptised.

which the cypher was engraved. Perhaps William junior realised that his talents lay in painting rather than working with metals.

Having settled in Halifax William Shreeve junior married William Whitaker's

Chapel in Halifax, **figure 5**, and this is where William Shreeve and his wife were buried. When it opened in 1772 it was the largest nonconformist chapel in the country; in 1992 it was converted into an arts centre.

William Shreeve then became a partner in the business, which thereafter traded as Whitaker & Shreeve. The story, including William Shreeve's horrific death, is continued in Part Two. 📖