OSBORNE & WILSO

The earliest make

by **John Robey**, UK

Before we look at some of the dials made by Osborne & Wilson, there is still more of interest in the employment agreement between Osborne & Wilson and Benjamin Salt and his wife. This document includes a very intriguing entry that is unfortunately close to a 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 for his efforts in obtaining more income for the business.

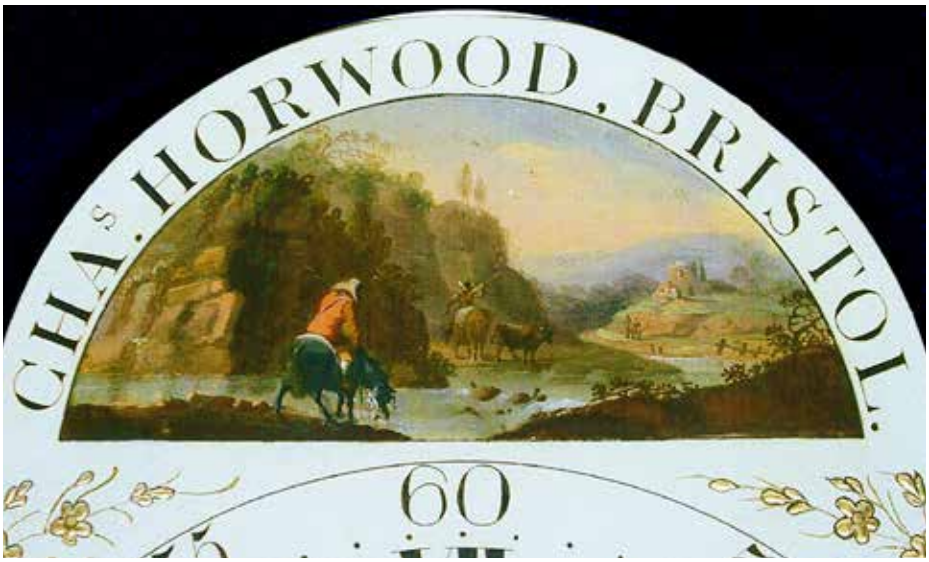
In the eighteenth century British military gun barrels were generally burnished bright, but in 1817 the East India Company records japanning of gun barrels, where it meant 'browned'. At this period the final stage of browning a barrel was to lacquer it and this might have been what the Osborne & Wilson document refers to. The Birmingham Proof House Museum knows of no references to japanned gun barrels. Alternatively the reference might be for cheap guns sold to the Native 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. This reference may have been an early attempt by the firm to develop a method of protecting cheap guns destined for export markets from rust by applying a layer of lacquer or japanning, in the form of a coating of heat-resistant black paint, rather than being just a decorative finish. There is no evidence that Osborne & Wilson ever developed this process any further, whatever it was, but it does show that the partners were keen to exploit any potential new market. This may have been at the instigation of James Wilson, for we will see in Part 4 that he was involved in other enterprises, not solely clock dials.

The agreement is a draft, not signed and only dated 1772 without a day or month, 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 themselves. These would have been used as the medium to which pigments were added to produce paints, as well as being

Figure 12 (above). The arch of a dial attributed to Osborne & Wilson, signed for Jesse Torkington, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, with a monument inscribed 'Et in Arcadia Ego', inspired by a Nicholas Poussin's painting, but in an eighteenth-century style. Photograph by Hugh Cockwill.

Figures 13 and 14 (right and below). A dial signed for Charles Horwood, Bristol, round the arch, with the very early type of square calendar aperture and a silvered date ring. No falseplate or winding-hole collets. Photographs by Ian Pritchard.



N OF BIRMINGHAM

rs of painted dials

Part 2 of 4

used as a clear coating.

It is likely that Benjamin Salt *was* actually employed to make the necessary paints and varnishes, as it was 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. He had been 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 died in January 1822.

As well as eventually perfecting the art of producing a smooth white dial sheet that imitated enamel, Osborne & Wilson introduced two other innovations on their new type of dial. The 1772 announcement also states

> What are now known as 'falseplates' were known as 'backplates' in the early nineteenth century.

that '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'. These 'such Methods' were what are now known as falseplates, but were called 'back-plates' in the early nineteenth century. Dial feet could not be hidden behind a chapter ring, as on a traditional brass dial, but had to be riveted to the dial plate before the front was painted.

Without an accurate template it was not easy for the clockmaker to drill the holes in the correct position on the front movement plate. A falseplate made the clockmaker's life much easier, though not all dials had

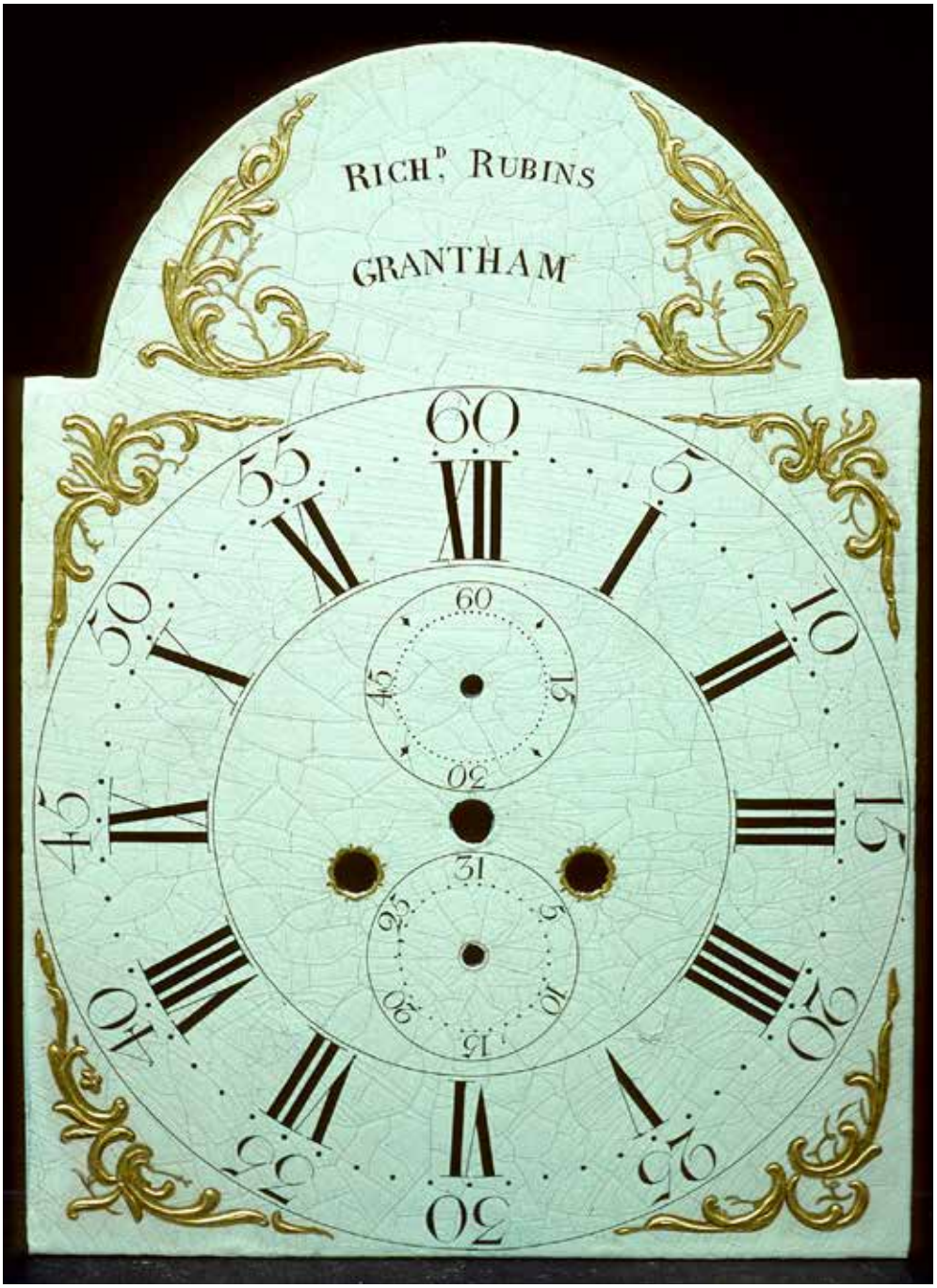


Figure 15. Dial attributed to Osborne & Wilson without a falseplate, made for Richard Rubins of Grantham. The gilt-gesso decoration simulates the rococo-style spandrels used on brass dials. Photograph by M F Tennant.

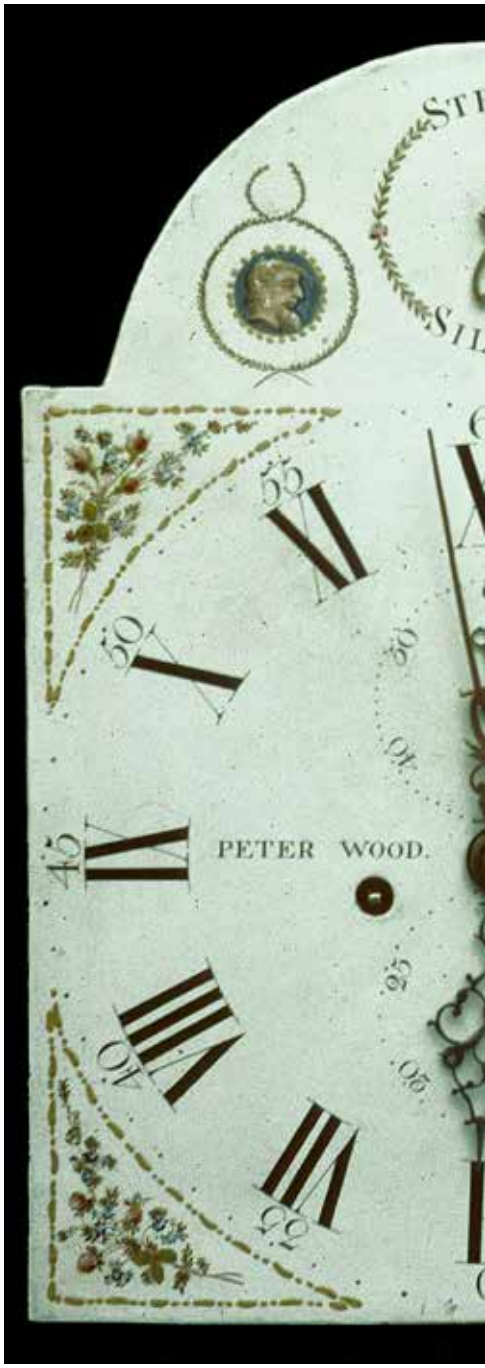


Figure 16. Dial attributed to Osborne & Wilson, made for Peter Wood of London, and fitted with an unmarked cast-iron falseplate. Strike / silent in the arch is very rare on painted dials. The roundels contain profiles of Plato and Socrates. Photograph by M F Tennant,

a falseplate. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century some measure of standardisation meant that falseplates were not as essential as on early painted dials.

Osborne & Wilson's other new feature, though not mentioned in the 1772 announcement, was the use of transfers of the eastern and western hemispheres to decorate the 'humps' of moon-phase dials. This was the era of Captain James Cook's voyages to the Pacific and Australia and there was a great deal of public interest in exploration and maps of the newly discovered lands. Osborne & Wilson exploited this marketing opportunity, and while hemisphere maps had been used on brass dials, they were very basic with virtually no recognisable details. The first transfer maps were relatively simple, and initially only half maps, but later maps became more detailed, culminating in the extremely detailed maps on dials produced by Thomas Ashwin.

Transfers had been developed in the pottery industry and involved printing the design, using engraved copper plates, on to a thin tissue paper, which was then transferred to the dial. It is quite different to modern water-slide transfers and each transfer had to be applied before the thick ink dried. This means that each dialmaking firm had to have its own printing plates, and the

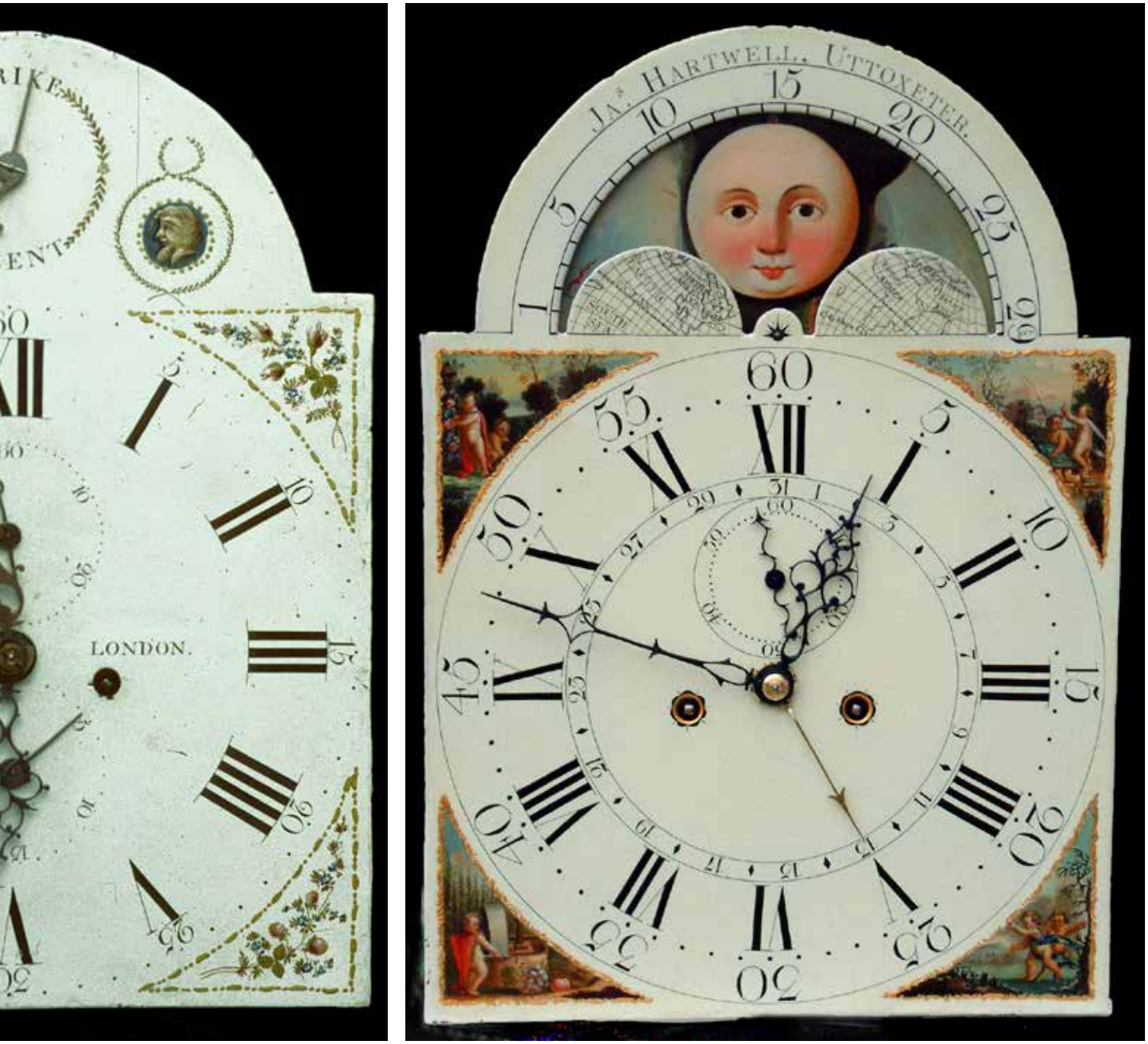


Figure 17. An exceptional dial attributed to Osborne & Wilson, made for James Hartwell, Uttoxeter, with an unmarked falseplate, a centre calendar, early half maps, and unique cherub Four Season corners. Photograph by J Robey.

different map designs can be used to identify the actual maker of a dial.

How can Osborne & Wilson dials be recognised? If a dial has some of the early features discussed here it is likely to be by the Osborne & Wilson partnership, even if there is not a marked falseplate, simply because there were no other makers of painted dials in Britain in the 1770s. The only other dialmakers in the early period were the partners working separately after they had split up, and they usually used marked falseplates on their eight-day clocks. These later Osborne or Wilson dials are also likely to have stamped names on moon or calendar discs, something the Osborne & Wilson partnership did not do. However, there are no hard and fast rules regarding Osborne & Wilson dials and there is no strict chronology of constructional or stylistic features.

Initially plain white dials were made, often with some gilt or only modest coloured decoration, and the only large area of colour is found on a moon disc, usually painted to a high standard. But soon painted arches appeared and these were also of a high standard. Some were even eighteenth-century interpretations of Old Master paintings, **figure 12**, and it is tempting to attribute these to someone like Thomas Osborne, who would have been familiar with these during his training as an artist. These early pained dials often have the clockmaker's name in large capital letter round the top of the arch, **figures 13** to **14**, though this was occasionally also used later.

Some very early painted dials have





Figures 18 to 21. The corners of the Hartwell dial, with raised gilt gesso borders, show cherubs representing the four seasons. Anticlockwise from top right: Spring, two cherubs, one with a white cloak, fishing; Summer, two cherubs, one with a red cloak, with flowers; Autumn, one cherub, also with a red clock, crushing grapes in a rotary wine press; Winter, a cherub with a blue cloak skating on ice being chased by a devil with horns and cloven feet. Photographs by J Robey.

long dial feet instead of a falseplate, **figure 15**, and these are likely to have been made by Osborne & Wilson before the new method of attaching the dial to the movement had been devised. A number of early painted dials have cast-iron falseplates without any maker's name, **figure 16**.

Figures 17 to **21** show a dial of exceptional quality with an unmarked falseplate, made for James Hartwell of Uttoxeter, Staffordshire. Hartwell was a watchmaker and watch finisher, so he is clearly only the retailer, not the maker of the movement, case or dial. The corners have the earliest known instance of Four Seasons on a painted dial, but instead of young girls or women, as used later, these show chubby cherubs, naked apart from cloaks, and is the only known example of their use on a clock dial. They are works of art in their own right.

These dials with unmarked falseplates are likely to have been by Osborne & Wilson before they had realised that they were missing a marketing opportunity to promote the business and its innovations. But—and there is always a but in horology—the situation is not always so straightforward. Some dials are known with unmarked falseplates but with the type of hemisphere maps used later by either Osborne or Wilson when they were working separately. We can only assume that after the partnership was dissolved the stock of falseplates was divided up and some of the old unmarked were used by the newly formed concerns.

Falseplates with Osborne & Wilson's

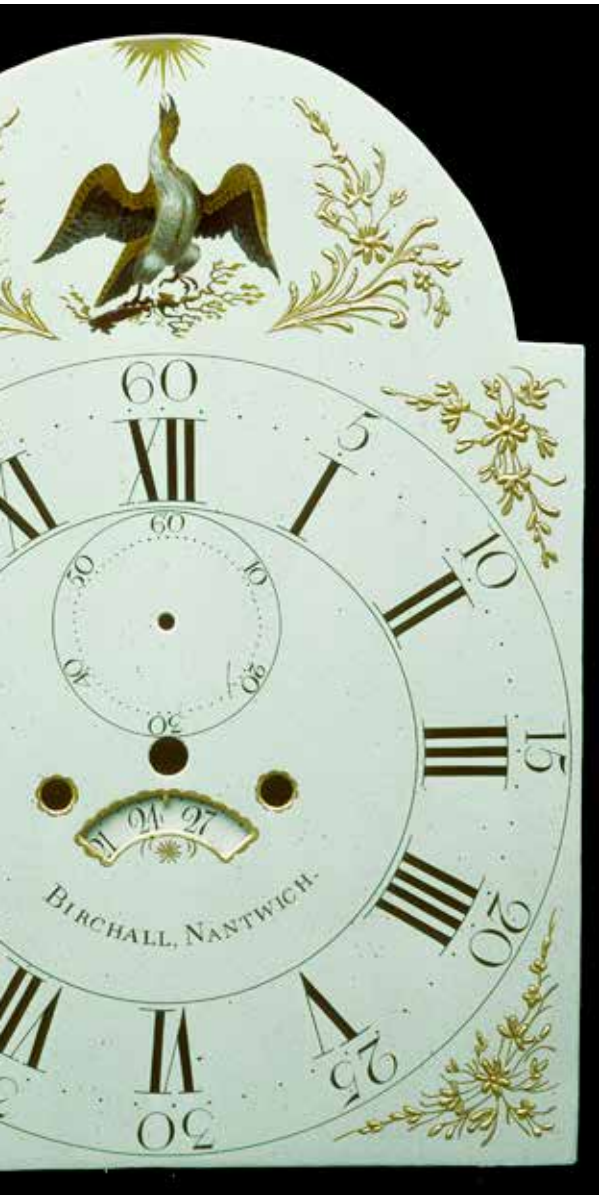


Figure 22. Dial made for Birchall of Nantwich, Cheshire, with a falseplate signed 'OSBORNE & WILSON'. Gilt gesso in the corners and arch, no winding collets and the early type of curved date aperture. Photograph by M F Tennant.

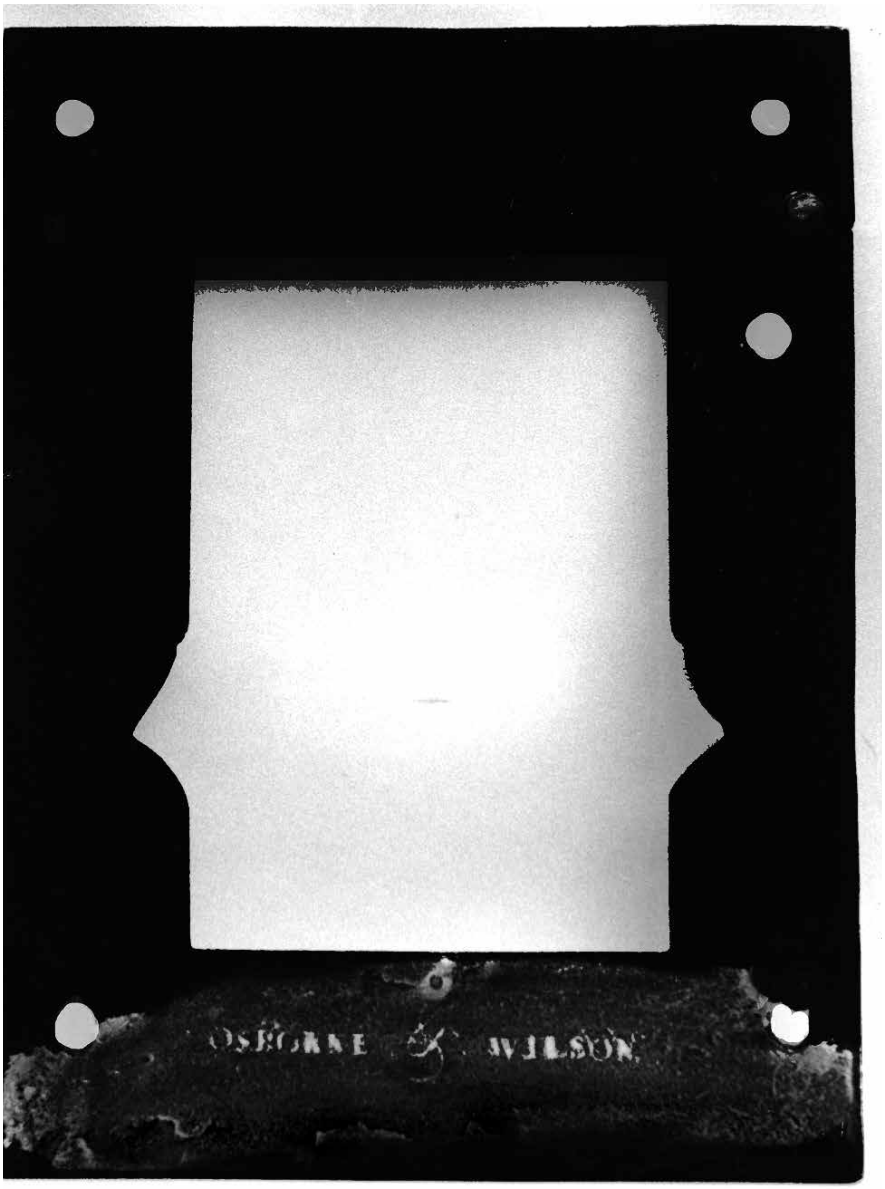


Figure 23. Falseplate marked 'OSBORNE & WILSON'. Photograph by M F Tennant.

name cast into the metal, **figure 23**, are quite scarce and were probably introduced fairly late in the firm's relatively short existence. As a result they are likely to date from about 1774/5 to 1777. The name is small, but later dialmakers made full use of the advertising potential and used as large a name as possible.

As illustrated in Part 1, **figures 7** to **8,** some very early Osborne & Wilson dials have repoussé spandrels, stamped out from thin brass sheet and riveted in place—another of the partners' innovations on clock dials. Since the dies necessary for the spandrels to be made on a fly press would have been expensive, it would be most cost-effective to use them as often as possible to absorb these initial costs, but they are extremely scarce. These repoussé spandrels were soon replaced by gilt-gesso corner and arch decoration mimicking the cast-brass spandrels used on brass dials, **figure 15**. Another feature of early dials is the use of silvered brass date rings visible through a square aperture, as were usually used on London brass dials. On painted dials these were soon replaced by a calendar disc seen through a curved aperture, as favoured by clockmakers from the Midlands and northern England, or by a pointer calendar.

The Osborne & Wilson partnership in Colmore Row only lasted for five years, when it was dissolved in September 1777 and the former partners set up their own businesses. Their story is continued in Part 3, which recounts the activities of the Osborne Manufactory.