

# OSBORNE & WILSON

## James

by **John Robey**, UK

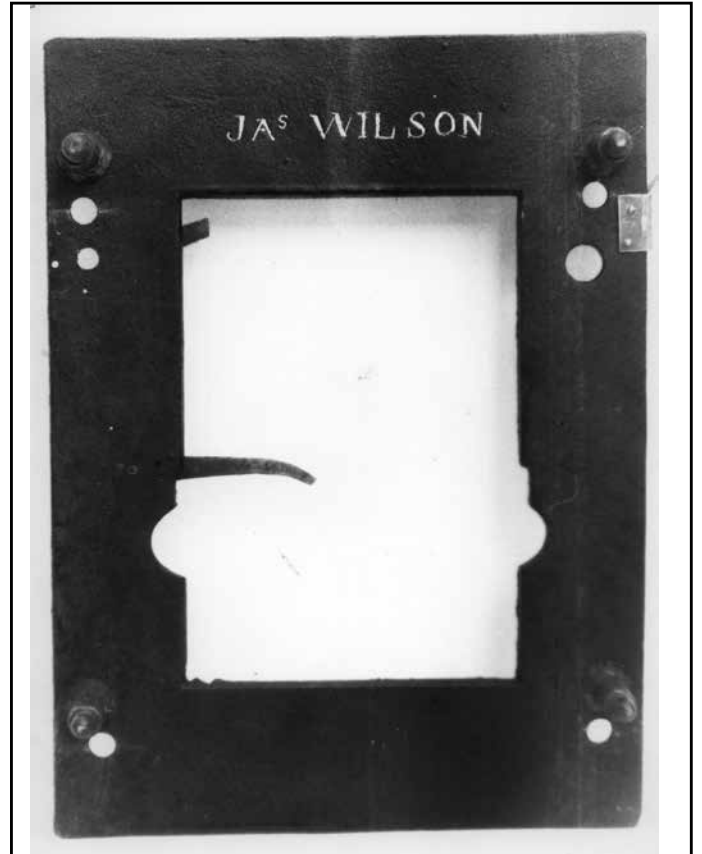
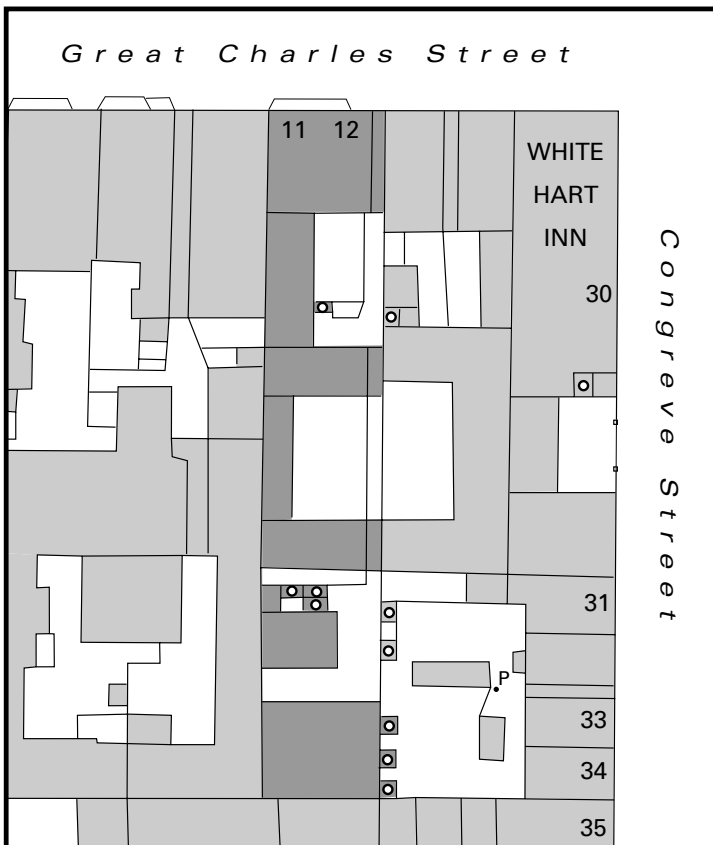


Figure 38. A plan of the western end of Great Charles Street based on rating surveys of 1850-55 and 1870-71. James Wilson's premises were numbers 11-12.

Figure 39. James Wilson's first style of falseplate. Photograph by M F Tennant.

While there is very little information available about the Osborne Manufactory, apart from entries in trade directories, we are better served with James Wilson, as there are more family records and newspaper entries, and even the layout of his premises is known. He turns out to have been more than just a dialmaker, not only having other business interests, but was also an inventor.

Within three months of his split with Thomas Osborne in September 1777, James Wilson announced that he 'continues the Clock Dial manufactory (late Osborne & Wilson's) at No. 11 Great-Charles-Street'. His premises were

at the western end of the street, not far from the junction with Congreve Street, in a building previously occupied by a buckle maker, and James Wilson lived and worked there for the rest of his life.

The buildings on this street were large family houses of three stories, plus a basement, typically with 17 rooms (excluding closets, pantries and smaller rooms), as well as a brew house and other outhouses in a courtyard. Clearly there was plenty of space for running a business as well as for living accommodation. A rating plan of the area in 1870 includes house numbers, so the property can be identified, while an earlier survey at a larger scale shows it to be

essentially the same building in 1850-55, and no doubt little altered since Wilson had lived and worked there, **figure 38**.

At the time of these surveys, numbers 11 and 12 Great Charles Street appear to be combined as one property, and this may have occurred in Wilson's time. Up to 1788, 12 Great Charles Street had been occupied by a buckle maker, but thereafter, at least during the period that Wilson was at number 11, there are no separate directory entries for number 12. The very large number of Wilson dials that survives from the 1790s indicates that additional space would have been needed. After expanding into the next-door property there may have

# N OF BIRMINGHAM

## Wilson

Part 4 of 4



Figure 40. One of the two later styles of Wilson falseplate. Photograph by J Robey.

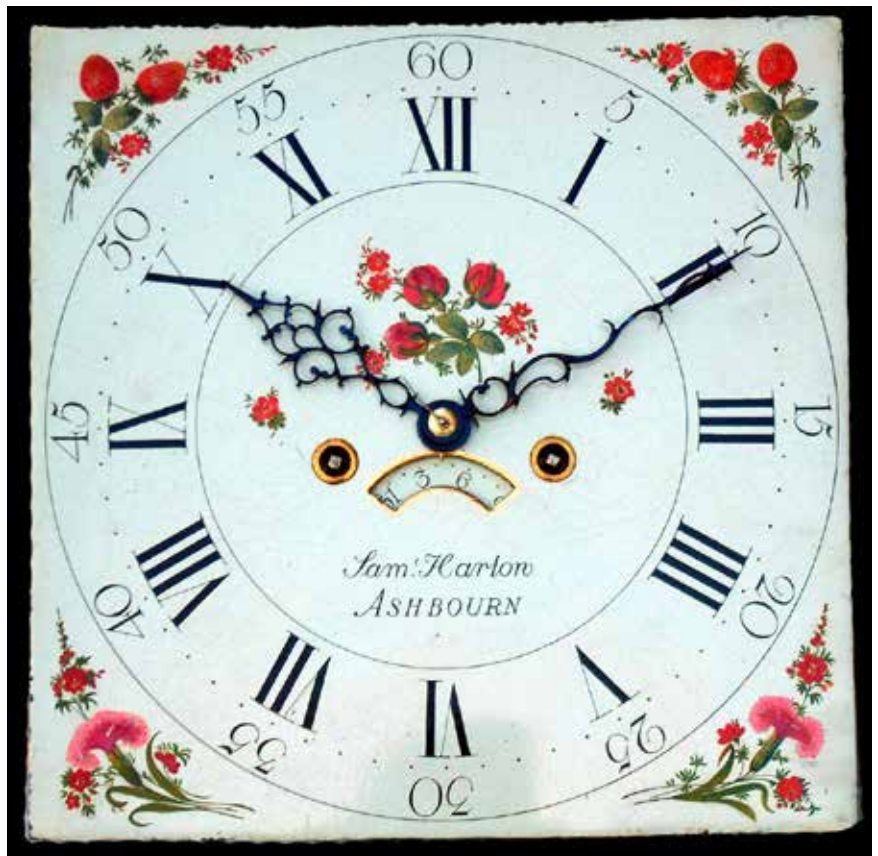


Figure 41. A pretty square Wilson dial, made about 1780 for Samuel Harlow of Ashbourne, decorated with red carnations and roses. It is a 30-hour dial with the early short calendar aperture, but used on an eight-day clock. Photograph by J Robey.

been enough rooms to rent out a few of them. In 1800-1801 not only was his brother Richard, portrait painter, listed in directories at 11 Great Charles Street, but also John Thomason, attorney. In 1815, after Wilson's death, this address was occupied by a firm of merchants.

James Wilson appears to have inherited at least some of the patterns used when casting the Osborne & Wilson falseplates, as examples are known with the partnership names on one side and Wilson's added on the other. The earliest falseplates with only his name are marked 'JA<sup>s</sup> WILSON', with no placename, **figure 39**, and one of these is known with a movement by Samuel

Deacon, dated July 1778, only 10 months after Wilson began trading on his own. These early falseplates are not common, and those he used later were marked either 'WILSON, Birm' or just 'WILSON', **figure 40**, in contrast to Osborne's array of different falseplate styles. Usually the brass moon and calendar discs are similarly stamped, which helps to identify 30-hour dials without falseplates. James Wilson became the most prolific of the early dialmakers, and, apart from those by Osborne & Wilson and the very earliest Osborne dials, his manufactory produced the finest examples.

But the question arises: was James Wilson an actual dial painter, or more of


a businessman? My opinion is that he was the proprietor of the business, rather than a painter, in the same way that Thomas Tompion (apart from during his early career) supervised a workforce that actually made the clocks and watches bearing his name. Otherwise it is difficult to explain the various markings painted or stamped on the back of Wilson dials (and perhaps significantly, not generally used by other dialmakers), as well as the enigmatic job labels or tickets sometimes found. This is too complex a subject to include here, but there is little consistency, and these markings and labels are not found on every Wilson dial. Even the Wilson 'trademark' 





Figure 42. A Wilson dial made for Walter Urie of Dundee, about 1790, with an automaton shipbuilding scene in the arch. Photograph by J Robey.

white paint splotch with scribed lines is sometimes missing from dials clearly identified with his name. Neither the white splotch nor scratched lines are to be found on dials from any other manufacturer.

His output may have been so great that there had to be some means of identification. Even if Wilson was using a number of different outworkers, he would have needed quite a sizeable area for warehousing as well as some means of quality control, and the various marks may be part of such a system.

James Wilson's first marriage was to Sarah Porter, aged 24, in 1776, and took place when he was a partner in Osborne & Wilson. Their son, Thomas Porter Wilson, was baptised at St Philip's Church in 1777, but died young. Another child was 'James Wilson jun., son of — Wilson, clock dial maker of Great Charles St. died 26 May 1801'. He was baptised at St Philip's in February 1779,

so would have been 22 when he died. No doubt he had worked with his father, but did not live long enough to continue the business. A gravestone at St Mary Whittall Street, recorded: 'Sarah wife of James Wilson, died March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1788, aged 36'.

A couple of years after the death of his first wife, James Wilson, japanner and widower, married again, on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1790, to Sarah Jordan, spinster, aged 24 and 11 years his junior, of Kinfare (now known as Kinver), south Staffordshire, at St Martin's Church, Birmingham. In 1793 a daughter Frances Elizabeth Wilson was baptised, followed by Eleanor Caswell Wilson, Jeremiah Caswell Wilson in 1795 and Frederick, born in 1800, but died in 1802. Sarah, born in 1792 is not mentioned in James Wilson's will and probably died young. Caswell was possibly his mother's maiden name. The second Sarah Wilson died on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1804, aged 39.

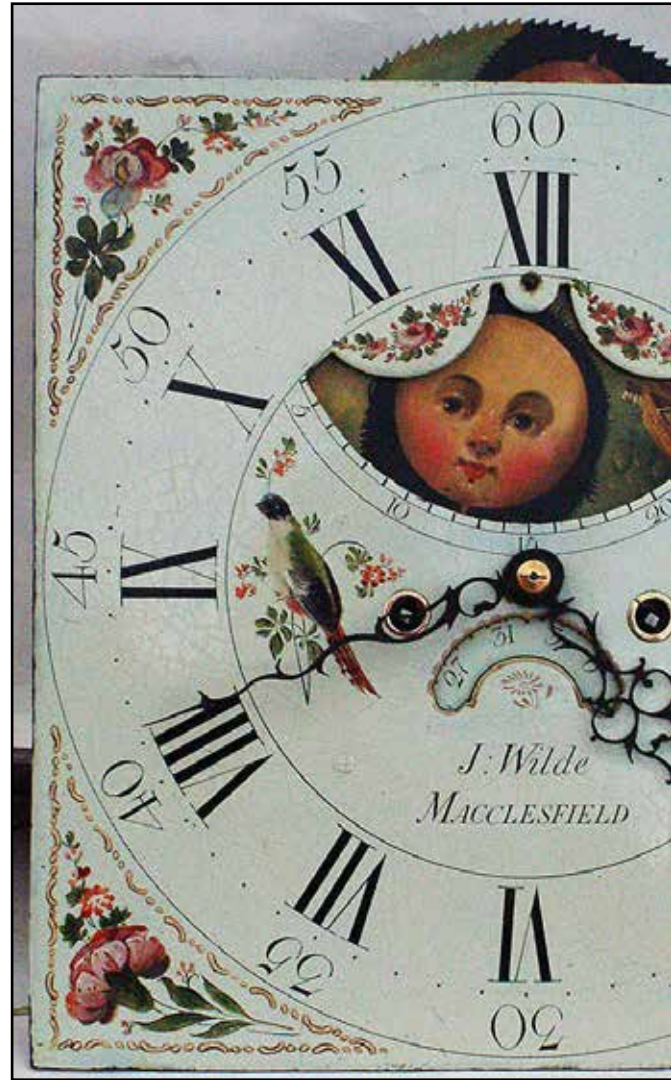


Figure 43. Square Wilson dial with a centre moon, made about 1790 for Joseph Wilde of Macclesfield, decorated with roses and exotic birds in the centre. Floral swags in the moon humps instead of maps. Photograph by J Robey.

Examples of James Wilson's prodigious output of high-quality painted dials are shown in **figures 41 to 45**, while many more are illustrated in *THE LONGCASE CLOCK REFERENCE BOOK*, revised and enlarged second edition 2013, Volume 2, Chapter 10, and M F Tennant's book *THE ART OF THE PAINTED DIAL*.

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<sup>nd</sup> September 1802 a partnership between James Wilson, Richard Jordan and Walter Jordan, 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 Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter.





Figure 44. The moon disc of the Wilde dial has typical 'home and away' scenes of a rural thatched cottage and a sailing ship. Photograph by J Robey.

This firm is not listed in trade 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, 14 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. So 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 £1000, worth £56,000 in present-day values, to which

Richard and Walter Jorden were entitled. On 25<sup>th</sup> September 1802, just three days after the dissolution of Jordens & 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 invested £1000 in Richard and Walter Jorden's business in 1788 as a sleeping partner. When the partnership broke up 14 years later he was legally 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 Jordens & Wilson partnership in 1802 and its omission from trade directories, it probably continued in business in one form or another until the *BIRMINGHAM GAZETTE* announced on 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>

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 is little known. 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.

In November 1808 a dramatic event occurred when fire broke out at James Wilson's manufactory: 🔥



Figure 45. A later Wilson dial, made for Samuel Deacon of Barton-in-the-Beans, Leicestershire. The 30-hour movement is dated 1800 and the case has an invoice dated December 1799. Photograph by J Robey.

'Thursday morning, the shop belonging to Mr. James Wilson, clock-dial manufacturer, of Great Charles Street, Birmingham, was 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.'

This must have spelled the end of the most prolific dialmaking 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. While the 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, and with the presence of stoves for drying the wares there was always the risk of a conflagration. 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<sup>rd</sup> April 1809 aged 54.

The beneficiaries of his will, written on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1809, were his three surviving children (all from his second marriage): Frances Elizabeth Wilson (aged 15), Eleanor Caswell Wilson and Jeremiah

Caswell Wilson (both aged almost 14), who were to receive their inheritance when they reached 21 years of age. If they died before reaching 21 the estate was to be divided between the surviving unnamed children of his late brother Richard.

It is significant that the will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury rather than locally at Lichfield. This implies that either he had property in more than one archdeaconry (for which there is no evidence), or that his estate was substantial and he chose the prestige of the Canterbury Court. All the indications are that his dialmaking business had been very successful, and he was quite prosperous when he died.

The business was continued for a while





Figure 46. Falseplate with 'WILSON' on one side and 'N. PORTER - Late - WILSON' on the reverse. Photograph by M F Tennant.



Figure 47. A dial signed 'W. Knight, Stafford', with a Porter / Wilson falseplate. The quality of the painting is much inferior to those on dials made when James Wilson was running the business. The hemisphere maps confirm that the dial came from the former Wilson manufactory. Photograph by M F Tennant.

by Nathaniel Porter, who produced clock dials with falseplates showing 'WILSON' on one side and 'N. PORTER - Late - WILSON' on the reverse, **figure 46**. Porter was a factor at 57 Bartholomew Row in 1800-11, and had been in partnership with Charles Welch as factors, until it was dissolved in March 1807. After James Wilson's death Porter took over what remained of the dialmaking business after the fire, and he is listed in trade directories as a clock-dial maker at Great Charles Street in 1812. He was almost certainly related by marriage (maybe a brother-in-law) as James Wilson's first wife was a Porter. The later directory entries were out of date by the time they appeared in print, for Nathaniel Porter, 'Factor and Clock Dial Maker,

Birmingham', was declared bankrupt in May 1811, after only two years as proprietor of Wilson's former business. He does not appear in the 1815 or later directories.

The scarcity of these 'Porter late Wilson' dials is not only due to the short life of the business, but also because Nathaniel Porter was not able to continue Wilson's success. A major reason may have been that he could not produce dials of sufficient quality, as one of the few dials known by him is naively painted, **figure 47**. He was not a dial painter, but a merchant who would have initially sold off any remaining stock that had not been damaged in the fire, before getting new falseplates cast and attempting to make dials, either employing some

of the workers that had not left, hired new ones, or maybe used the services of outworkers. Whatever his course of action, he had clearly not appreciated that customers desired high quality clock dials, which were being supplied by other firms springing up to fill the gap left by the demise of the Osborne and Wilson businesses.

Other Wilson falseplates are known also bearing the names of W Francis or Walker & Hughes, both of Birmingham, as well as Hawthorne of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (whose dials were actually made by Whitaker & Shreeve of Halifax). The patterns (probably of brass) used for casting Wilson's iron falseplates

*continued on page 49*

would have been disposed of after either the closure of his business or after his successor, Nathaniel Porter, abandoned dialmaking. They were then re-used by adding the new names, and perhaps it was due to its prestige that the Wilson name was retained instead of being completely obliterated, in an attempt to imply a continuing connection with a well known and respected business.

This article has recounted the origins of the painted clock dial in Birmingham, the problems of that arose when trying to make dials that looked like enamel, and the true identities of the first partners in the firm of Osborne & Wilson have been discovered. It also reveals that Ann Osborne was Thomas Hadley Osborne's mother, not his widow, while James Wilson had interests outside dialmaking and was also an inventor.

## Notes

This article is partly based on two articles that first appeared in *ANTIQUARIAN HOROLOGY*: 'Birmingham Dialmakers, Some Biographical Notes' (June 2007, pp209-22), and 'New Light on Osborne and Wilson' (June 2018, pp251-8). These include other biographical information not given here, as well as details of sources and references. These are available as free downloads from academia.edu; just search for 'john robey'.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to those credited in the captions for the use of illustrations, to Joseph McKenna for local information and to Brian Loomes for assistance with genealogy.