

# OSBORNE & WILSON

## The earliest make

by **John Robey**, UK

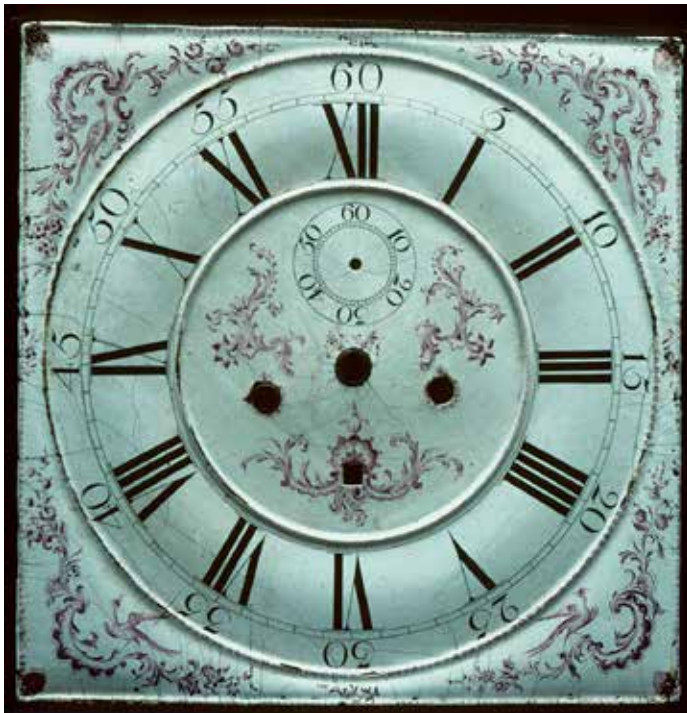


Figure 2. Unsigned square vitreous-enamel longcase clock dial, about 1770. Note the ribs and convex chapter ring to minimise flexing and avoid cracking. Photograph M F Tennant.

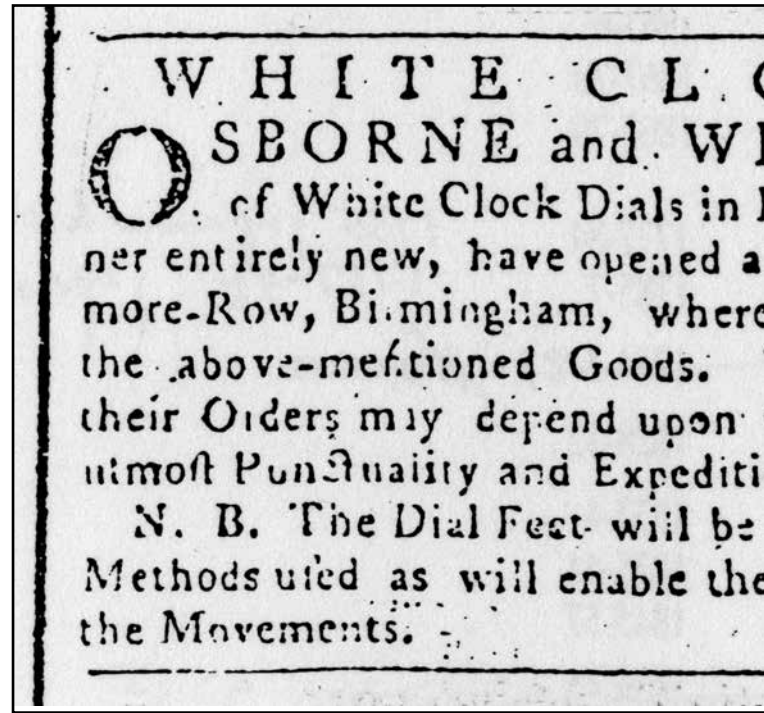


Figure 1. Osborne and Wilson's advertisement.

Most readers will know that the first painted dials for British longcase clocks were made in Birmingham about 1772 by Osborne & Wilson. A detailed article about Birmingham dialmakers was published in the July 2007 issue of *ANTIQUARIAN HOROLOGY* with further information in June 2018, which corrected a case of mistaken identity. While this series of articles is based on these previous ones, it also includes recent research that rectifies another mistaken identity, and at long last provides the origins of James Wilson, and it is not what anyone expected.

Until recently our knowledge about the origin of the earliest painted dials was confined to a few advertisements in *ARIS'S BIRMINGHAM GAZETTE* and entries in trade directories. The most

important was the announcement in September 1772 of the opening of a warehouse at 3 Colemore Row in Birmingham by 'Osborne and Wilson, Manufacturers of White Clock Dials, in Imitation of Enamel, in a Manner entirely new', **figure 1**. In their directory entries of 1776-77 the firm is again only referred to as 'Osborne and Wilson', with no first names. Then 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.

To appreciate the full significance of this and the newly discovered document we first need to look at the origins of the two partners who had decided to go their separate ways. Thomas Osborne was born in Sutton Coldfield (about

seven miles north-east of the centre of Birmingham), son of Samuel Osborne, and his wife Ann. Apart from being called a 'gent' when a couple of his children were baptised and also in his will, the only information known about Samuel Osborne is that in 1758 he was elected to the town's governing council known as the 'Warden and Society'.

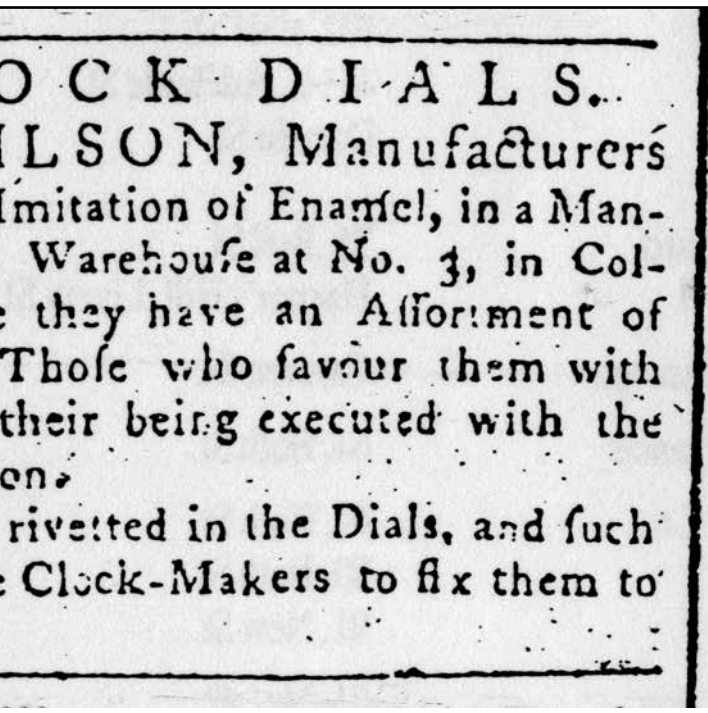
Osborne was clearly of some standing in the community, but if he had a profession or trade, or if he relied on income from rents, is not known. He must have been reasonably prosperous as when he died he had Bank of England annuities of £530 (equivalent to a purchasing power of about £46,000 today).

Samuel and Ann Osborne's children were: Samuel Goodwin, born 1750; Charles, born 1752, who only survived for

# N OF BIRMINGHAM

## rs of painted dials

Part 1 of 4



Advertisement, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1772.

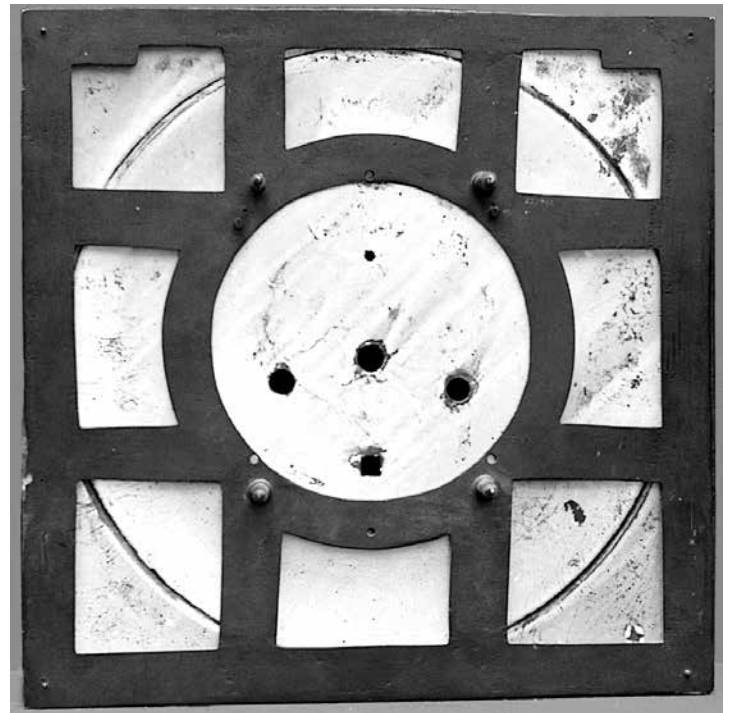


Figure 3. The back of the dial supported by a brass framework. Photograph M F Tennant.

five months; Thomas Hadley, born 1753; then four daughters; and finally James, born 1762.

Thomas Hadley Osborne's middle name seemed a clear link to Ann Hadley, born in 1733, daughter of Humphrey Hadley, the third of a dynasty of noted Birmingham clockmakers of that name, but it now seems that she died in 1797, aged 63, and apparently unmarried. It is the first child, Samuel Goodwin Osborne that provides the correct clue for the identity of Ann Osborne. It is now apparent that she was Ann Goodwin living in the parish of St Stephen, Coleman Street, London, when she had a clandestine marriage at St George's Chapel, Mayfair, to Samuel Osborne. This was one of the few places where such marriages could take place, when banns or a licence were not necessary.

There are several reasons for these clandestine marriages, such as considerations of cost or a quick wedding due to the imminent birth of a child, but neither of these applies here, so the reason remains unknown. The records of clandestine marriages are often more detailed than a regular wedding at a parish church, and can include age, occupation and status, but for this marriage only the basic names and the date are recorded, and the origin of Ann Goodwin has not been established.

So why was Samuel and Ann Osborne's third child's middle name Hadley? There were Hadleys in Sutton Coldfield throughout the eighteenth century, including a gentry family. It is likely that Samuel's father had married a local Hadley woman, but this is not confirmed.

When Samuel Osborne died in 1766, his widow had a young family of seven surviving children, aged from four to 16. There is no further record of Ann Osborne or any of her children in Sutton Coldfield, nor is she known to have remarried. With no husband or other family ties to keep her in Sutton Coldfield, Ann Osborne took her children to Birmingham, where she and her sons became involved in making painted clock dials. However, apart from entries in trade directories and a newspaper report of what is probably her death (see Part 3 of this article), there are no further records of Ann Osborne in Birmingham.

While Thomas Osborne's origins were quite easy to establish (though not those of his parents), it is only recently that the origins of James Wilson have been established. Again it is a middle name



Figure 4. A vitreous enamel dial with a separate arch, made for Thomas Andrews of Sheffield. Photograph M F Tennant.

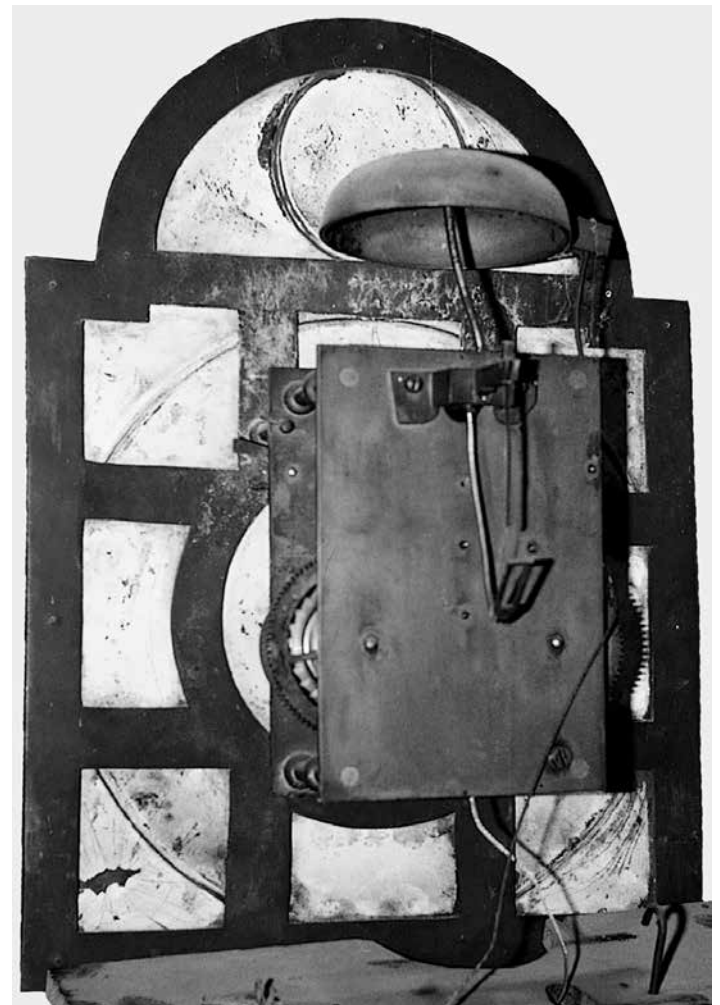


Figure 5. The brass framework on the rear of the Andrews dial. Photograph M F Tennant.

that has provided the vital clue. James Wilson married twice and three of the children from his second marriage have a middle name of Caswell. This is not the maiden name of either of his wives, and it is most likely to be that of his mother. While Wilson is a not uncommon name, Caswell is, and the only Wilson-Caswell marriage that I have been able to find is in Arbroath on the west coast of Scotland, more than 370 miles north of Birmingham. In August 1751, Moses Wilson, a sailor, married Susan Caswell, and their son James was baptised on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1752. By then Moses was 31 years old and had become a ship's master, which implies that he was more than the skipper of a fishing boat.

When or why James Wilson left Scotland is not known, but clearly a life on the ocean was not for him, for by September 1772, almost 20 years old,

he had made the long journey south, probably by ship and then road, to Birmingham, just about as far from the sea that is possible in Britain. Why or how he became involved in the clock trade will remain a mystery until further new evidence comes to light. There is no indication of a connection in Scotland; it might have been a chance meeting between a Scots youth and a local man who was looking for someone to help set up a new enterprise.

It would be useful to have confirmation of his age when he died, but this is not given in his short newspaper obituary. Even his gravestone, which survived long enough for it to be documented in the late twentieth century, had weathered so that his age was illegible. Nor has the birth of his brother Richard been found.

The natural assumption has been made by all previous researchers,

including myself, that the partnership that announced the new painted clock dials in 1772, was between the same people who split up five years later. However, an employment agreement has now been deposited in the Birmingham Archives that shows this is not the case. 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.

Thomas Osborne was only 19 years old at that time and probably still training as an artist, as he is said to have been apprenticed to John James Barnes, who is variously described as a japanner and a miniature painter.

In this document Samuel Osborne and James Wilson are described as 'clockmakers jappers and copartners' and it is significant that 'jappers' has



Figure 6. One of the earliest Birmingham painted dials, made for J Haley of Wrexham, with a calendar ring, but no falseplate. The crazing due to the top layers 'floating' on the bituminous base layer is not visible in this image. Photograph J Robey.



Figure 7. Painted dial made for William Wilson of Kendal (not related to James Wilson) in a case dated 1774. Repoussé brass spandrels, silvered date ring, early half hemisphere maps, and no brass collets round the winding holes. The moon has a small track of Roman numerals with two pointers to indicate high tide at two different ports. Photograph J Betts.

been inserted as an afterthought. It appears that these two young men, probably began a clockmaking business, but once Thomas Osborne's artistic abilities developed the three of them decided to develop a new type of clock dial. Samuel Osborne may have been apprenticed in the clock trade, but since Birmingham apprentice records are very sparse and the town's prosperity was aided and encouraged by the lack of control by trade guilds and formal apprenticeships, the evidence is lacking. With Thomas Osborne still to complete his apprenticeship it was his elder brother who formed the initial partnership with James Wilson.

Samuel Goodwin Osborne appears to have handed over control of the business to his brother as soon as Thomas had finished his apprenticeship, likely to have been about 1774. Samuel Goodwin

Osborne may have worked in the later Osborne dial manufactory, but nothing more is heard of him until newspapers reported the death on 'Saturday last [30<sup>th</sup> December 1809], in St Mary's-square, Birmingham, Mr. Samuel Osborne, of that town, after a confinement of ten years, from a paralytic stroke'. Samuel Goodwin Osborne was buried five days later at St Mary's Whittall Street, just a short distance from the Osborne clock-dial manufactory.

One of the most significant parts of the 1772 announcement was that the new dials were made 'in Imitation of Enamel, in a Manner entirely new'. It is not painted dials that were new (they had been made for several centuries on the Continent, but these had a very uneven surface and were not used on British clocks), but that they were claimed to look like real or 'vitreous' enamel. The

traditional brass clock dial with a separate silvered chapter ring and cast ornaments was looking dated, and something new was sought. Initially one-piece silvered brass dials were introduced and also vitreous enamel dials were tried, but with only limited results. Enamel dials were successful for the small dials of bracket clocks, but production difficulties limited their use for longcase dials. Vitreous enamel is a slurry of ground glass applied to a copper sheet and fired until it melts. Differences in thermal expansion cause the copper sheet to distort, cracking the enamel. Applying a counter-layer on the back reduces the problem, but doesn't entirely eliminate it. Large dials had to be made with separate arches and centres, held together with an iron or brass framework on which the dial feet could be attached (figures 2 to 5). A few were produced but they would



Figure 8 (above left). Repoussé brass spandrels riveted to the iron dial sheet. Photograph J Betts.

Figure 9 (above). The silvered calendar ring, visible through a square aperture with gilt decoration. Note the crazing of the white paint. Photograph J Betts.

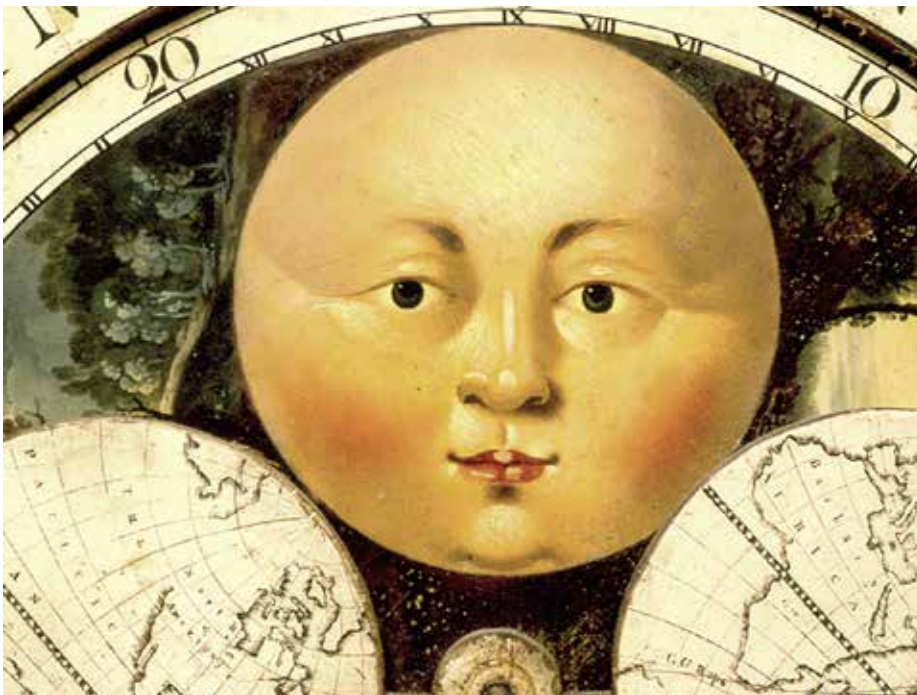


Figure 10 (left). The high quality moon disc was probably painted by Thomas Osborne himself. Photograph J Betts.

Figure 11 (below left). The scene between the moons shows animals being taken over a packhorse bridge with a romantic castle nearby. Photograph J Betts.



have been extremely expensive. This was the market that Osborne & Wilson wanted to break into, with its potential for a much more practical and affordable product for the customer and a lucrative business for the manufacturer.

The intention was to use the technique of japanning, which was well established in Birmingham for decorating wooden and metal objects, to produce a smooth white surface on a flat sheet of iron. This involved applying numerous base layers, each one laboriously smoothed using brick dust or pumice. In an attempt to simplify the process Osborne & Wilson tried some type of bituminous compound on the very earliest painted dials. But this base layer never really sets and the white