

THE TYTES (and Warminster)

To most horologists Wells in Somerset is associated with the very important astronomical clock in the cathedral, said to have been made about 1390 and one of the earliest clocks in Britain. The original movement is now on display in the Science Museum, London, having been on loan there since 1884.

I became interested in a much more recent Wells clock, signed by Cornelius Tyte, which was acquired many years ago. Nineteenth-century clocks and watches are known signed by Cornelius Tyte of Wells and they are also known signed with the same name, but at Swansea in South Wales. With such a distinctive name it was reasonable to expect this to be the same man who moved from Wells to Swansea. On looking at the information published in *THE CLOCKMAKERS OF SOMERSET 1650-1900* by A J Moore (1998), *WATCHMAKERS AND CLOCKMAKERS OF THE WORLD, COMPLETE 21ST CENTURY EDITION* by Brian Loomes (2006) and *WALES, CLOCKS & CLOCKMAKERS* by W Linnard (2003) it was difficult to reconcile the various dates and it was concluded that they were different men. Much of this reasoning was influenced by Moore's assertion—now known to be incorrect—that there were two Cornelius Tytes, father and son. In fact it turns out that there were three men of this name, two of them clockmakers, who were uncle and nephew, while the third was a nonconformist minister.

A complication is that Tyte clockmakers, as well as working in Wells and Swansea, are also recorded at Wookey and Yeovil in Somerset as well as Warminster in Wiltshire. Books listing the clockmakers of these counties have suggested that some of the people concerned may have moved from place to place or were related, but with little firm evidence. It was this confusion of information that prompted a reassessment of the whole Tyte family of clockmakers and watchmakers, as the facts behind the Cornelius Tyte mystery could not be discovered without untangling some of the other Tyte genealogy.

Research was not made easy by both the Wells and Wookey parish registers not being included in the International Genealogical Index (IGI), which is the first port of call for any genealogical study. Fortunately Eve Mills, who is a direct descendant of the Tyte clockmakers, has done a good deal of investigation, which has enabled the rather complex story to be unravelled.



Figure 1 (above). Mahogany round-dial clock by Cornelius Tyte I of Wells, Somerset, about 1830.

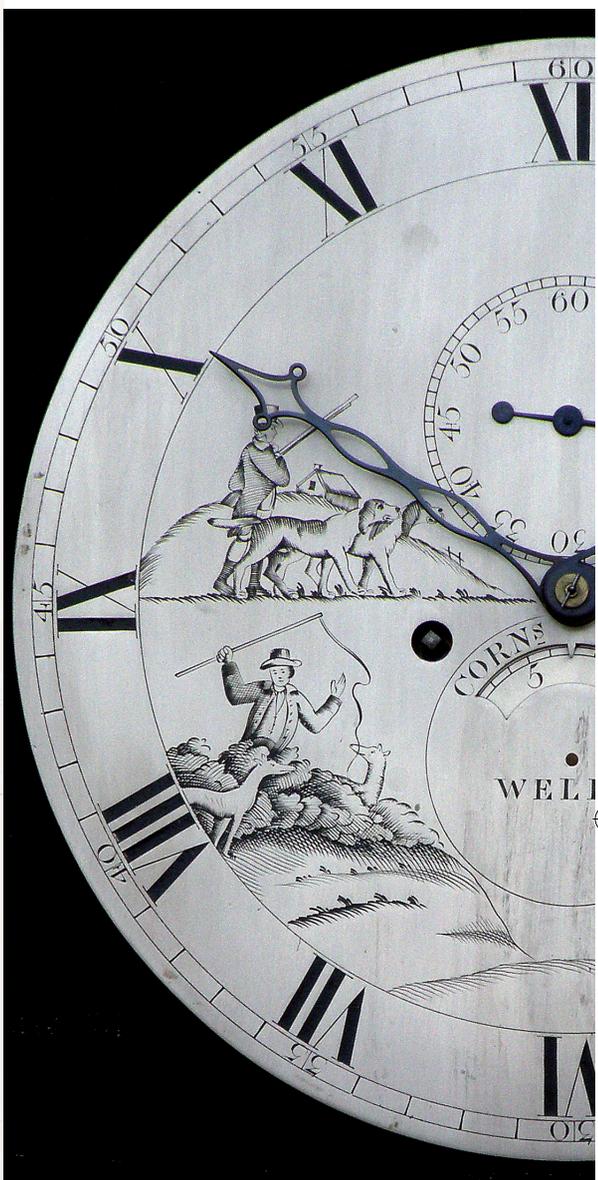


Figure 2 (far right). The back of the case is panelled, rather than a single timber board.

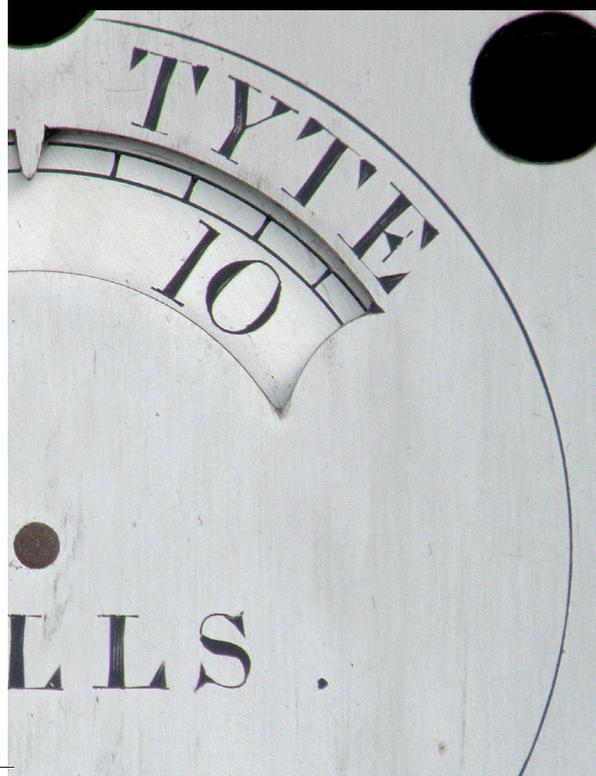
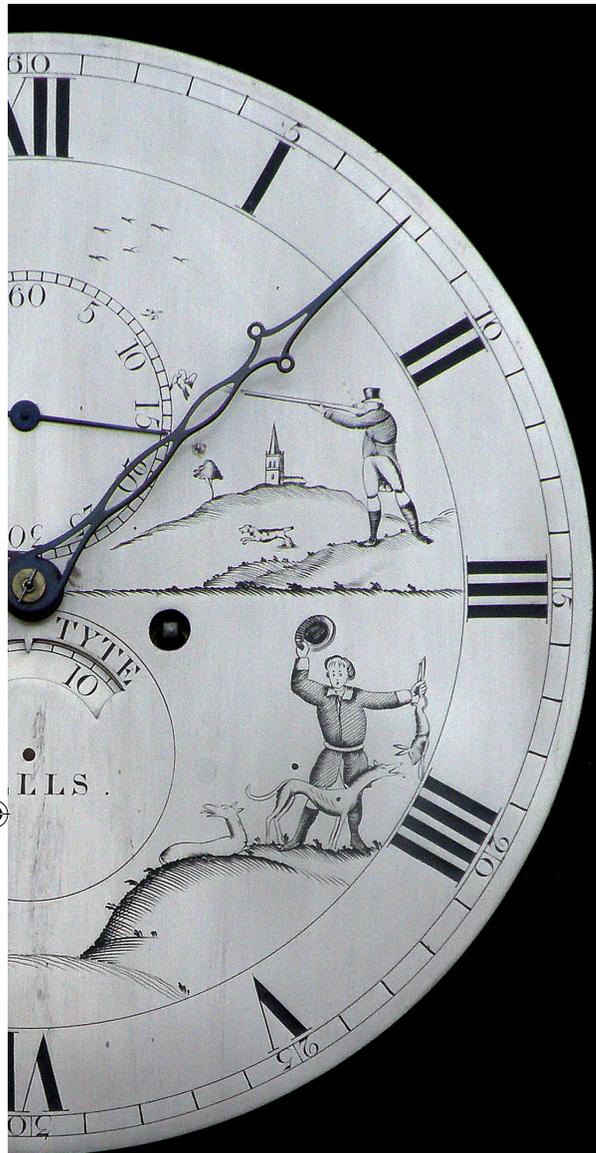


Figure 3 (above right). The single-sheet silvered round dial.

Figure 4 (right). Detail of the signature.

S OF WELLS

er and Swansea)



The result is that the Wells and Swansea men were indeed one and the same person. It is often very tempting to assume that a distinctive name is unique, but very often it was a family tradition to use the same Christian name for several generations. It is only when there is an almost unique name, such as Thomas Hadley Osborne, the Birmingham dialmaker, can you be absolutely sure that he was indeed the boy born in 1754 and hence

only 19 at the time of the well-known Osborne & Wilson advertisement in September 1772 announcing the first painted clock dials.

The clock that sparked off my interest is shown in **figures 1 to 8**. It is signed by Cornelius Tyte, Wells, can be dated to about 1830 and shows all the characteristics of having been made in Bristol. It is probably by the man known here as Cornelius Tyte I.

The mahogany case, **figure 1**, has a dome top, a short trunk door and a tall base. It would have originally been a little taller than its present 6ft 6in (just under 2m), as originally there would have been tall 'French' feet rather than the present bracket feet. The hood has an opening brass bezel, which appeared later than on earlier round-dial clocks, which have a door that opens. An unusual feature is that the back of the pine carcass is framed and panelled, **figure 2**, rather than comprising of the usual single timber board.

The 13in diameter single-sheet silvered brass round dial is engraved with typical Bristol figures, in this instance four scenes showing men with dogs shooting birds and rabbits. No doubt it was commissioned by a country sports enthusiast. Bristol dials often include similar figures with oval faces and pork-pie hats, or as in this example tall top hats. Once seen this engraver's work is instantly recognisable and it is of good quality with a rustic charm.

The movement, **figure 9**, has no special features except that the strikework is rather lightly made as are the wheels. A very similar movement, also signed by a Somerset retailer, is known and both were probably made by one of the several movement manufacturers who worked in Bristol in the early 19th century. The most likely candidates are either Wasbrough or Hale.

The earliest known clockmaking Tyte is Samuel, who was born about 1764 and died in 1832. He does not appear in the Wookey parish registers and may have come from Devon as a Samuel Tyte was baptised at Chittlehampton near Barnstaple in September 1764, son of Robert Tyte (occupation not known) and Elenor.

There is no record of when, where and from whom Samuel Tyte learned his clockmaking skills. He was living in Somerset in 1788, aged about 24, when he married Ann Curtis of Wookey, just 2½ miles from Wells, the ceremony taking place at the church of St Cuthbert Wells. She is said to have been born in 1748, which if correct would have made her about 39 when she married and 45 when she had her third child, which was quite old to be bearing children at that

time. Ann Curtis was the daughter of Cornelius Curtis and Ann Plenty.

These details about Samuel Tyte's in-laws would not normally concern us, but they do account for the name Cornelius which runs through later generations, and for the long-winded name given to their first child. Of their children, all born at Wookey, two of them became clockmakers: the eldest John William Plenty Curtis Tyte, born in 1789, and Cornelius Tyte born two years later. A daughter, Elizabeth, was born in 1793.

Cornelius Curtis and his son, also Cornelius, were millers at the Burcott corn mill, powered by the infant River Axe. The river forms the eastern boundary between the parishes of Wookey and St Cuthbert Wells. Wookey village is not in the centre of the parish, but is quite close to this boundary. The mill was (and still is) actually just in Wells parish despite being quite close to Wookey village. This explains why baptisms took place at Wookey, but a important ceremony, such as

Although individual bills for 1806 and 1808 exist, exactly what was done is not known.

the wedding took place in the more prestigious church at Wells. At this period the rules governing at which church these events took place were less rigorously adhered to than in earlier years.

Samuel Tyte probably lived and worked for several years in premises associated with the Burcott mill (there were few other buildings in Burcott), but in 1796 he leased a narrow strip of land and erected a dwelling on it and it is probably here where he continued his clockmaking. A couple of longcase clocks from the 1790s are known signed by Samuel Tyte of Wookey. He looked after the clock at St Cuthbert's Church, Wells, from 1802 to 1822, and



he repaired the church clock and dial at Meare near Glastonbury in 1809.

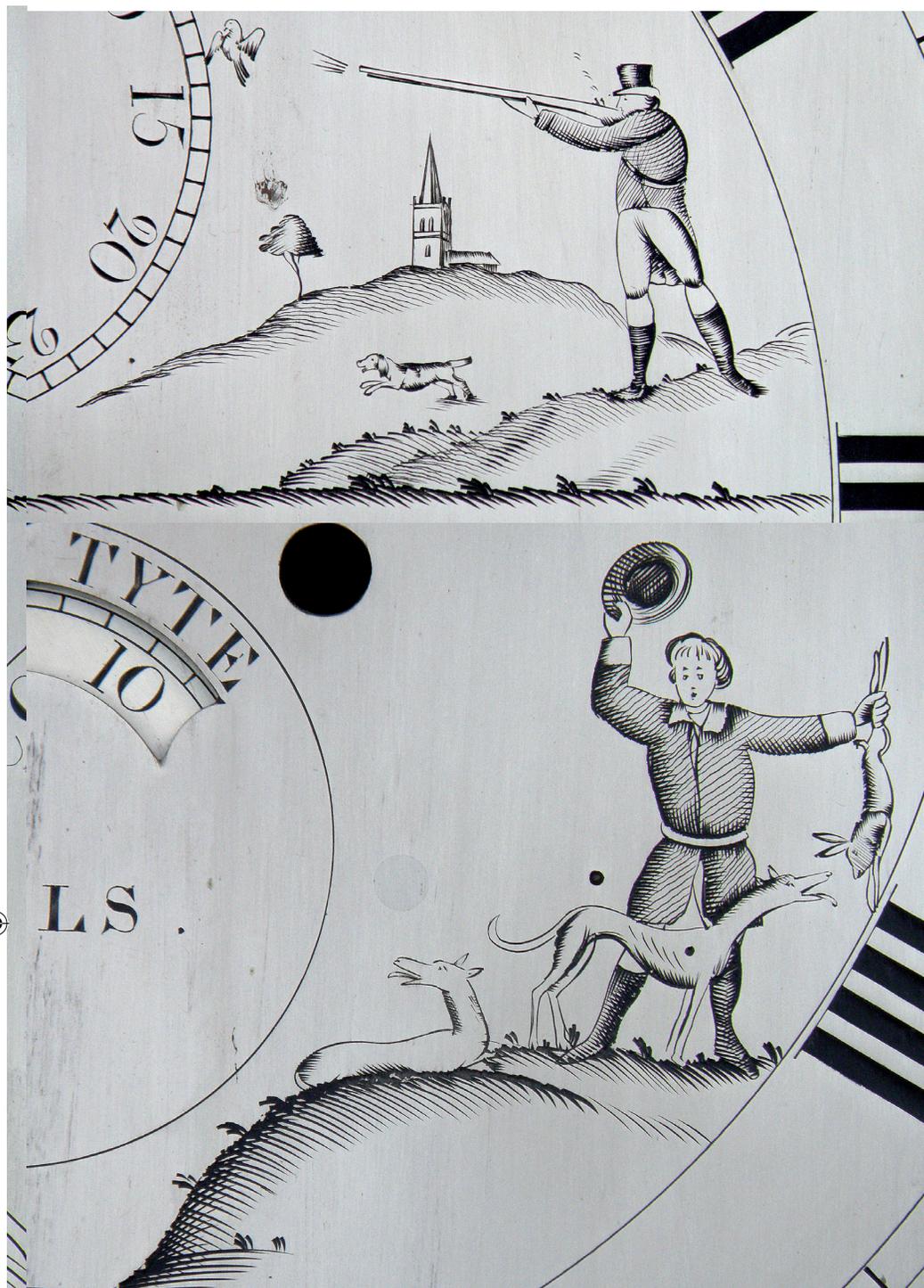
Figures 10 and 11 show a mahogany clock by Samuel Tyte of Wookey, made around the end of the 18th century. The single-sheet brass dial has a moon phase in the arch. Both dial and case were probably made in Bristol.

Samuel worked on the Wells Cathedral clock, probably fitting a new escape wheel, as a previously undiscovered inscription 'Samuel Tyte Burcott July 1807' has recently been found on the clock. The Cathedral Archives include a bill relating to the clock from a 'Wm. Tyte' for £35 8s, but there is no record of such a person at this date and this may be a clerk's error. Although individual bills for 1806 and

1808 survive only the main entries for 1807 exist, so exactly what was done is not known. It is a large amount for an overhaul or even replacing the escape wheel, so there might have been a major rebuilt, although it is unlikely that the original foliot escapement survived long enough for it to be replaced in the early nineteenth century.

Samuel Tyte's first wife Ann died in 1802 and so in 1807 he married again, this time to Sarah Stones at Walcot, Bath—presumably where her parents lived. They had two daughters, both baptised at Wookey, in 1809 and 1811.

At some date after 1811 Samuel Tyte must have decided that there were limited opportunities in Wookey, so he looked to Warminster, 25 miles



Wells after the Tyte & Son partnership was dissolved. As might be expected, the premises at Burcott (leased from the Bishop of Bath and Wells) and the furniture and household effects were left to his second wife Sarah, or if she should die then it was to be shared by his three daughters. He left £5 for mourning to his son Cornelius and similarly to his other son John William Plenty Curtis Tyte, provided that John paid back a loan of an unspecified amount.

All his working tools he left to his wife so she could continue the clock and watchmaking business, presumably in Warminster. If she discontinued the business then the tools were to be left to the two sons equally, but if any

Figures 5 to 8. The dial centre has four engraved scenes of men with dogs.

of his daughters married a clock or watchmaker 'or any other tradesman that such tools would be useful to them' then they also could have an equal share. One half of the rest of his estate was to go to his wife the other half divided equally between the three daughters. There is no mention of property in either Warminster or Wells, so the clock and watchmaking businesses there may have been run from rented premises. It is not known if Samuel Tyte had retained an interest in the Sadler Street shop in Wells, or if it was under the sole direction of his son Cornelius.

The two sons received very little from the will, just the tools of the trade, and even then the daughters could also claim a share of them. The lease to the Burcott premises went to his wife, then his daughters, as did the rest of his estate. Apart from the tools, anything that John and Cornelius received from their father would have to come via their stepmother. Was this a deliberate attempt by Samuel to sideline his sons? If so it might go some way to explaining why, as we will see, Cornelius Tyte worked as a grocer and then a miller before moving to Wales, but we will probably never know the truth of the matter. It may be significant that Cornelius temporarily left the trade just at the time that his stepmother died in 1839, aged 70.

Cornelius Tyte's children included Cornelius Curtis Tyte, born 1819 and Samuel III, born 1828, both in Wells and baptised at the Baptist Church. Cornelius's wife died in 1835 and about 1837 he then married Elizabeth Parker, 15 years his junior. They had a daughter in 1838 and a son William in 1840, 

east in Wiltshire, where he moved with his family, working in the Market Place. When his son Cornelius, clock and watchmaker, married Elizabeth Scammell in 1817 at Warminster, the *SALISBURY & WINCHESTER JOURNAL* stated that they were 'both of that town'. Presumably at that date Cornelius was working with his father.

By 1820 Samuel Tyte had opened a branch in Wells—presumably the shop in Sadler Street that the family had into the 20th century. There he traded with his second son Cornelius as Tyte & Son, and a clock so signed has been reported. In practice Samuel probably worked primarily at Warminster, with Cornelius running the business in Wells (Cornelius was certainly living in the

town in 1819 when his first son was born).

The Tyte & Son partnership was dissolved in June 1820 with Cornelius continuing alone at Wells, where is he recorded in a trade directory of 1822. Samuel Tyte, clockmaker and silversmith, continued at Warminster, where he died in 1832, aged 68. An eight-day longcase clock, a 30-hour longcase clock and a bracket clock by Samuel Tyte of Warminster, all from the 1820s, are shown in David Pollard's book on Warminster clockmakers.

Samuel Tyte made his will in 1824, eight years before he died and so this was a premeditated act not done on his deathbed. The will gives no real clues as to what was really happening at

both born in Wells. Cornelius continued as a clock and watchmaker for a while in Wells but about this time some unexplained changes took place.

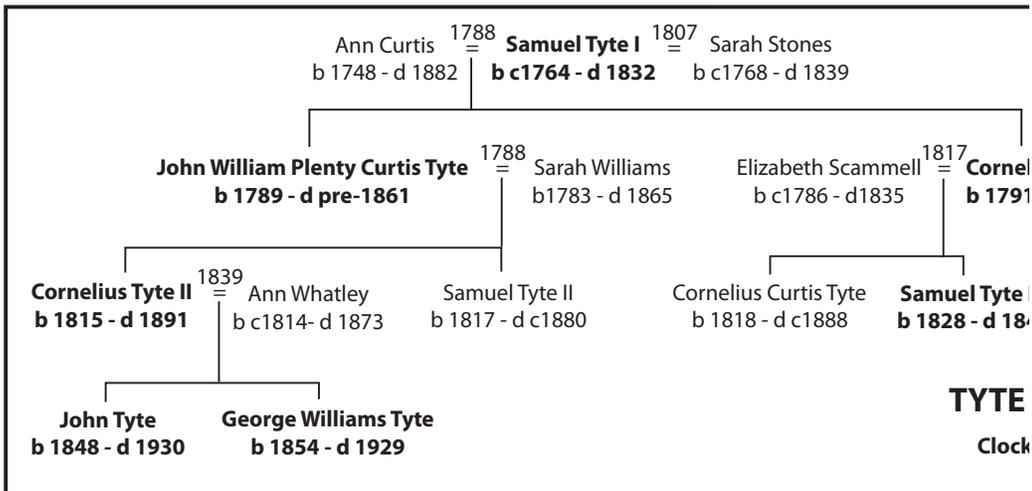
ROBSON'S DIRECTORY OF THE WESTERN COUNTIES, published in 1839 lists Cornelius Tyte as a grocer and tea dealer in Shepton Mallet. There is also another entry as a watchmaker, silversmith and jeweller in Sadler Street, Wells, but this is likely to have been his nephew, Cornelius II, who married in that year. In 1841 Cornelius Tyte I was living with his family at Dahlia Cottage, Wookey, as a miller, while the Sadler Street shop was occupied by his nephew.

Why Cornelius I left Wells and took up a completely different occupation is not known, but in June 1843 he moved to South Wales where he took over the watch and clockmaking business of the recently retired Robert Moseley of Wind Street, Swansea. He traded there for 24 years until his second wife died in September 1867 and two months later his household effects were put up for sale by auction 'in consequence of him leaving the district'. A year later he was in London where his third marriage took place, this time to Frances Parker, the younger sister of his second wife. In the 1871 Census he was living in Marylebone, London, where he was a retired watchmaker, and he died there in 1879, aged 88.

Of Cornelius's sons, William helped in the Swansea business, but died of diphtheria in 1846, aged just 23. Samuel III emigrated to Adelaide, Australia, some time after 1841 where he died in 1849, aged 20. The eldest son, Cornelius Curtis Tyte, did not follow the family trade, for in 1881 he was living at Eccleshall, Sheffield, being a Congregational Minister and also a Hebrew scholar at Rotherham College. He died in 1889 at Martley, Worcestershire.

We will now look at the other branch of the family. Samuel Tyte took his eldest son John W P C Tyte as an apprentice in 1807 at Wells at the relatively late age of 18 for just four years. No doubt he had been working and learning the trade for several years before this and the indenture may have been just a formal confirmation of John's training. It is probable that the younger son Cornelius I was also apprenticed to his father, but there is no record of this and the formal agreement may have been after 1810 when apprenticeships were no longer recorded for tax purposes.

In 1812 John Tyte married Sarah Williams in Bristol and he may have worked in Bath for a while as a daughter was born there in 1813 and his eldest



son Cornelius II in 1815, who was not baptised until 1830 at Warminster. By 1816 he had moved to London, where his second son Samuel II was born in 1817 and a daughter in 1820. Despite being born in Bath his first two children, as well as Samuel II, born in London, were recorded at the Keppel Street, Russell Square, Baptist Church, Holborn.

Two letters survive from John Tyte in London to his uncle William Curtis back in Wookey. The first was dated 15th November 1816 when John and his family were living in Coppice Row, Clerkenwell. He was probably working in the watch and clock trade, but this is not

specifically mentioned, nor the name of his employer. What *is* clear is that John Tyte and his father Samuel had had a disagreement, although the details are not known. John told his uncle:

'... my Father and me have not been on friendly terms ... [but] ... I have seen my Father and I trust that we are reconciled, never more to disagree. I can assure you that I have often regretted that such a strangeness should exist between me and my relations. I am well aware of having numerous faults but I never considered myself as altogether in fault ...'



goods for exportation, which if not done correctly I am responsible, and for these respective duties I receive only 30/- per week—while many younger men than I know receive 40/- and some 50/- or 60/- per week and nothing near the work to do which I have.'

Little is known of John Tyte's later activities except that in about 1826, when he would have been aged 37, he is said to have deserted his wife and family, ran off with some jewellery and watches and was not heard of by them again. Some of this is confirmed by a deed drawn up in 1836 relating to the property at Burcott, when it states that there were 'doubts that John William Plenty Curtis Tyte be now alive or dead he not having been seen or heard of for more than ten years now last past'. There is no record of where and when he died, although this must have been before 1861 as Sarah Tyte was a widow in the census of that year, unless not having heard from him for so long she assumed that he was dead for all practical purposes.

As recounted earlier, in 1839 John Tyte's eldest son Cornelius II, aged 24, was back in Wells when he married the daughter of a local cabinetmaker, and a couple of years later the Census records him as a clock and watchmaker in Sadler Street, his uncle Cornelius I having temporarily left the trade. In the 1841 Census Cornelius II's younger brother Samuel II was also at Sadler Street as a watchmaker's apprentice at the rather mature age of 25. By the time of the 1851 Census Samuel had left the clock and watchmaking trade to become a grocer in the High Street, Wells, an occupation he retained until he died in 1880.

In 1851 Cornelius Tyte II was a watch and clockmaker and silversmith employing one man, and in 1861 also living with the family in Sadler Street were Thomas Eades, watchmaker's assistant, and Thomas Drayton, watchmaker's apprentice. Ten years later he was still employing an assistant and an apprentice. Cornelius Tyte II remained there until he died in 1891, aged 76.

Two photographs exist of Cornelius II. One shows a respectable bearded Victorian gentleman sitting at a table, **figure 13**. The other, **figure 14**, shows him standing, holding a rifle and dressed in what is probably the uniform of the 3rd Somerset Rifle Volunteer Corps, which had its headquarters in Wells. He would have enlisted in this local militia at a time of strained relations with France in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

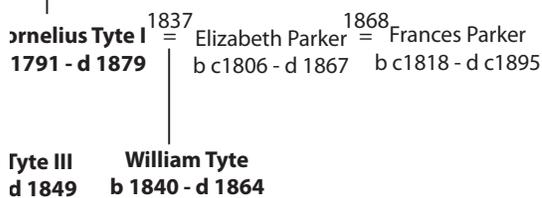
Cornelius II had two sons who

Figure 9 (above right). The movement used by Cornelius Tyte was probably made in Bristol.

Figure 10 (above centre). Mahogany eight-day longcase clock by Samuel Tyte of Wookey, about 1790-1800.

Figure 11 (above). The hood of the Samuel Tyte clock has slender swan necks and shaped backspalts, the latter a feature of the simple type of Bristol cases.

Figure 12 (left). A simplified family tree of the Tyte family of clockmakers.



THE FAMILY TREE (simplified)

Clock & watchmakers are shown in bold

He then talks of the 'great slackness of trade and scarcity of money ... There are thousands of able mechanics that cannot get a stroke of work to do ...', although he was fortunate in having constant employment. He also mentions that on that very day several thousand people met in nearby Spa Fields to protest at prices. This was the first of several such mass gatherings that became known as the Spa Fields Riots, although John Tyte does not appear to have attended.

The second letter to his uncle, written 11 months later, sheds no further light

on the disagreement with his father, but complains about the continuing poor state of trade and how little he is paid for the responsibilities he undertakes. His employer was away travelling for nine months of the year, during which time John had 'the principle management of the business', although yet again it is not stated what this was. He continues:

'I have in his absence to execute all orders, pack up goods and see they are safely delivered, the respective dues for conveyance, keep accts both pro and con and frequently to ship



Figure 13 (left). Portrait of Cornelius Tyte II, clockmaker and watchmaker of 3 Sadler Street, Wells.



Figure 14 (right). Cornelius Tyte II in the uniform of the 3rd Somerset Rifle Volunteer Corps.

worked as clock and watchmakers. John was born in 1849 and became a watchmaker in Yeovil, and 'made' or more likely installed clocks in several Somerset churches, mainly near Yeovil: Odcombe 1887, West Coker 1888, West Pennard 1897 and Preston Plucknet in 1898. He became bankrupt in 1899, when he was described as a jeweller, and died in 1930 at Battersea, London.

The younger son, George Williams Tyte, was born in 1855 and in 1881 he was working with his father Cornelius II and took over the Wells business after the latter's death in 1891. Unfortunately George Williams Tyte, watchmaker and jeweller of 3 Sadler Street, Wells, was also bankrupt in 1899, the same year as his elder brother. He died at Wells in 1929, aged 75.

The succession of the Wells business can be summarised as follows. Before 1820 Samuel Tyte and his son Cornelius I trading as Tyte & Son, then Cornelius Tyte ran the shop at Wells with Samuel Tyte working in Warminster. Eventually it was Cornelius's nephew, Cornelius Tyte II, who took over the Wells shop, some time before Cornelius Tyte I and his family moved to Swansea. Thereafter

the Wells business was run by Cornelius II then his son George William Tyte.

It should be emphasised that during this period the Tytes would have been repairers and retailers of clocks, watches, silverware, jewellery, and so on, rather than actual makers of clocks. They could certainly put their hand to making new parts for turret clocks and undertaking repairs to them, but it is unlikely that they made their own longcase or bracket clock movements which were readily available from trade suppliers. In this part of the country Bristol was the main centre for clock movements, brass dials and cases. In this respect they were no different from many other tradesmen in the clock and watch trade during the 19th century.

Having owned a clock by Cornelius Tyte of Wells for many years, I have been keen to untangle this rather

confusing family. Despite the fact that they were not significant names in the world of clockmaking I am now pleased that at last the record has been put straight. ☺

Acknowledgements

These details could not have been written without the assistance of Eve Mills, who has generously provided much of the family's history and the two portraits of Cornelius Tyte II. Peter Watkinson supplied information on the inscriptions discovered on the Wells Cathedral clock.

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