

ACCOUNT BOOK OF THOMAS SHARP AND THOMAS GIBBS OF STRATFORD

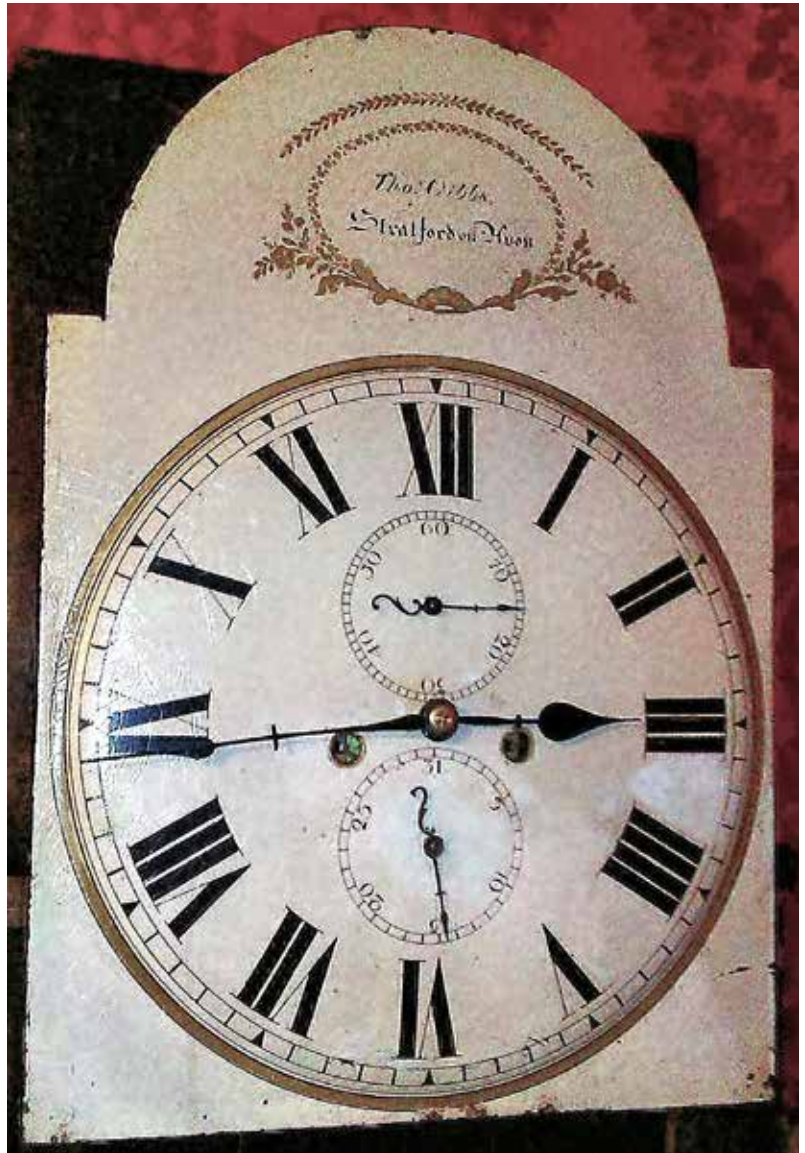
Part 2 of 2: The entries of Thomas Gibbs

by Brian Loomes, UK

Figure 1. An eight-day clock and case by Thomas Gibbs. This clock dates a little later but is the same kind of clock he made for William Cole in 1815 'new 8 day Clock & Case January 6 1815 £8. 14s. 6d' (£8.72.5p). Photograph by Colin Hodgson.



Figure 2. An eight-day clock by Thomas Gibbs, which was unusual as he made mostly 30-hour examples. Most of his clocks were supplied without a case, which the client would have had to order direct from a clock casemaker. Photograph by Colin Hodgson.



Thomas Gibbs is traditionally said to have been employed by Thomas Sharp and to have succeeded him on his retirement in 1795 or on his death in 1799. But when I discovered later that Thomas Gibbs was born in 1782 these dates did not make any sense. Gibbs was only 13 years old in 1795 and only seventeen in 1799.

When Thomas Gibbs took over the Sharp clockmaking business the account book had already been used

as far as page 101, with occasional gaps. So we might expect the entries written by Gibbs would naturally follow on from there. But both Sharp and Gibbs were prone to sticking little notes here and there, wherever any old space offered itself. This means that items are sometimes out of sequence and undated and can be impossible to set in context.

But a note on page 86 was evidently entered in later by Thomas Gibbs,

squeezed in between two different and no doubt very useful recipes for medication for treating a dog with mange. This states:

'January 9th 1806 John Sharp died aged 55 yrs.'

Then below:

'January 11 1807 Mrs. Sharp died, 56.'
'Left me all shop of tools & som goods.'

The last we had heard previously about John Sharp was his father's note in 1769 that he had run away to enlist in the army at the age of 17. From this it now appears that John had returned home, presumably with a wife, and had become reconciled with his father. Whether John made clocks in the period 1795 to 1805 or just ran the shop selling goods we don't know. But it is apparent that it must have been John, the son, who took on Thomas Gibbs and not Thomas, the father. In 1806/07 Gibbs was 24/25. He may have taken over the business in that year.

wrote: 'the Club Began 10 october 1812', never being too finicky about when he used capital letters. Clock clubs were probably invented as a method of selling clocks (or watches either) when times were bad. Basically, it was a method of buying a clock by instalments.

We know of the existence of a handful of such clubs, though the only way we have any knowledge of how they worked practically is through records such as this account book. I wrote about a few examples in *CLOCKS* in March 1991. James Upjohn was familiar with this practice as early as the 1740s. Samuel

met us respecting the Clock and Watch Club, but he did not come; so we left him four jugs of ale to pay for'.

If enough members could be enrolled at one meeting for their combined payments to cover the cost of a clock at say £5.00, then they would draw lots as to which member went home with a clock. Next month they all paid again and another member would take home a clock. This system had the inbuilt defect that the group as a whole had to ensure that those who had already got their clock kept on paying till they all got one. A further problem arose if some members failed to turn up at a meeting,

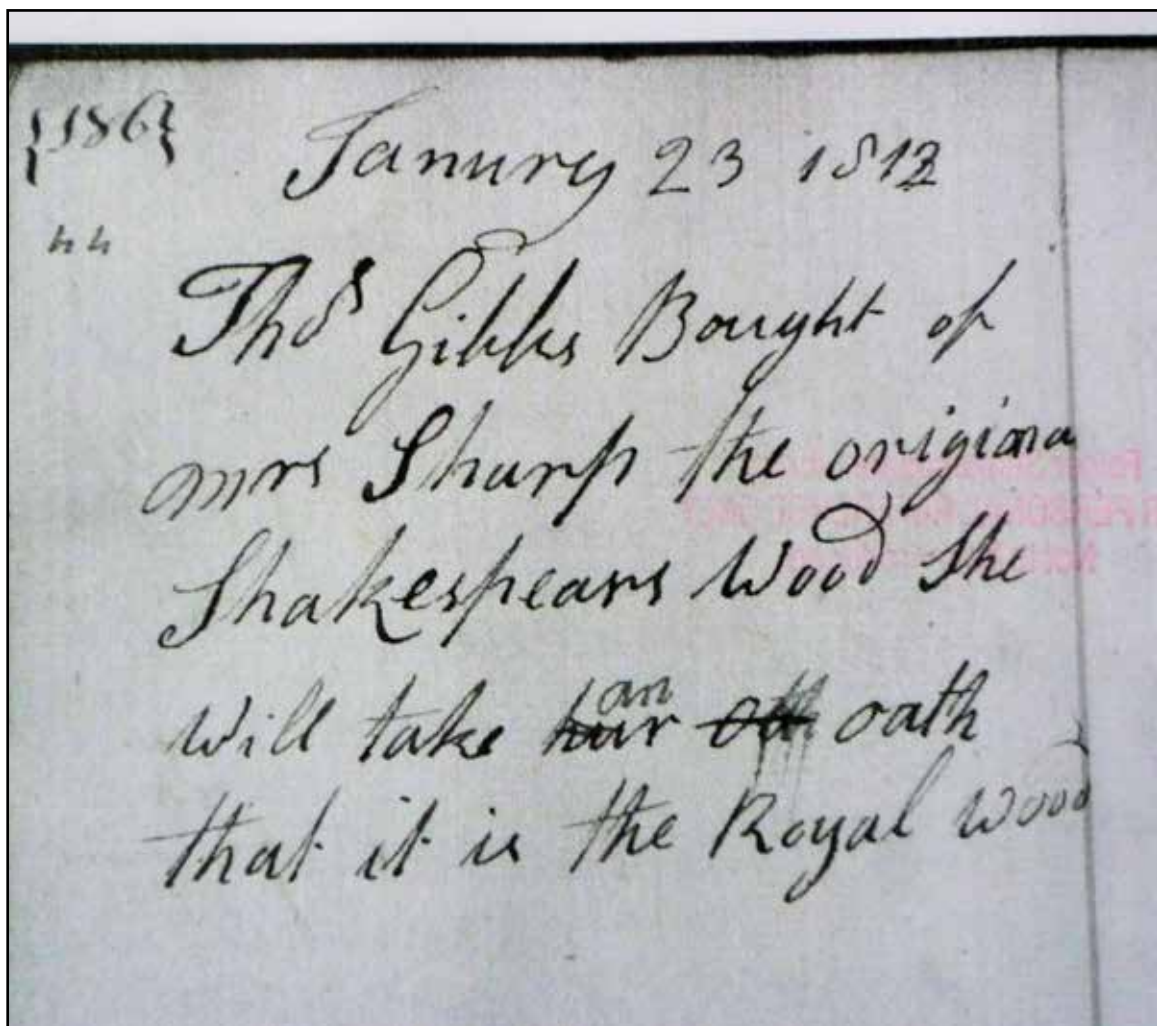


Figure 3. In 1812 Thomas Gibbs bought the last remnants of the Royal Wood from the widow of Thomas Sharp, who had bought some of the mulberry tree wood from Shakespeare's garden when it was first sold off in the mid eighteenth century. Reproduced by courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, USA, where the manuscript is held.

Thomas Sharp's widow, of unknown name, was still alive in 1812, in which year she appears to have sold the remnants of the 'Royal Wood' to Gibbs and to have testified as to its genuineness. It might even be that it was not until 1812 that Gibbs acquired the business as his own

Apart from the death entries Thomas Gibbs does not seem to have used the book till 1812. In October 1812 he began a clock club and started the section he called his 'Club Book'. The

Roberts ran one between 1771 and 1773.

There were two ways of running such a club, which would usually meet in a tavern once a month, each member paying a subscription of maybe five or ten shillings. It seems the clockmaker paid for the drinks. An entry from an old diary of 1811 concerning a club run by Henry Rowley of Shrewsbury suggests this: 'Went with Roberts, blacksmith, and George Roberts to the Talbot, where Rowley, the watchmaker, was to have

when the required sum would fall short.

For these obvious reasons another system was often preferred whereby each member paid for his own individual clock by monthly instalments, totting up his payments till the appropriate sum was saved. It was a sort of savings club, which ensured the money was put into the hands of the clockmaker before the customer could spend it on alcohol or even waste it. Members sometimes changed their minds and opted instead for an alternative purchase. Several of

Thomas Gibbs's customers changed to a watch or a set of silver spoons.

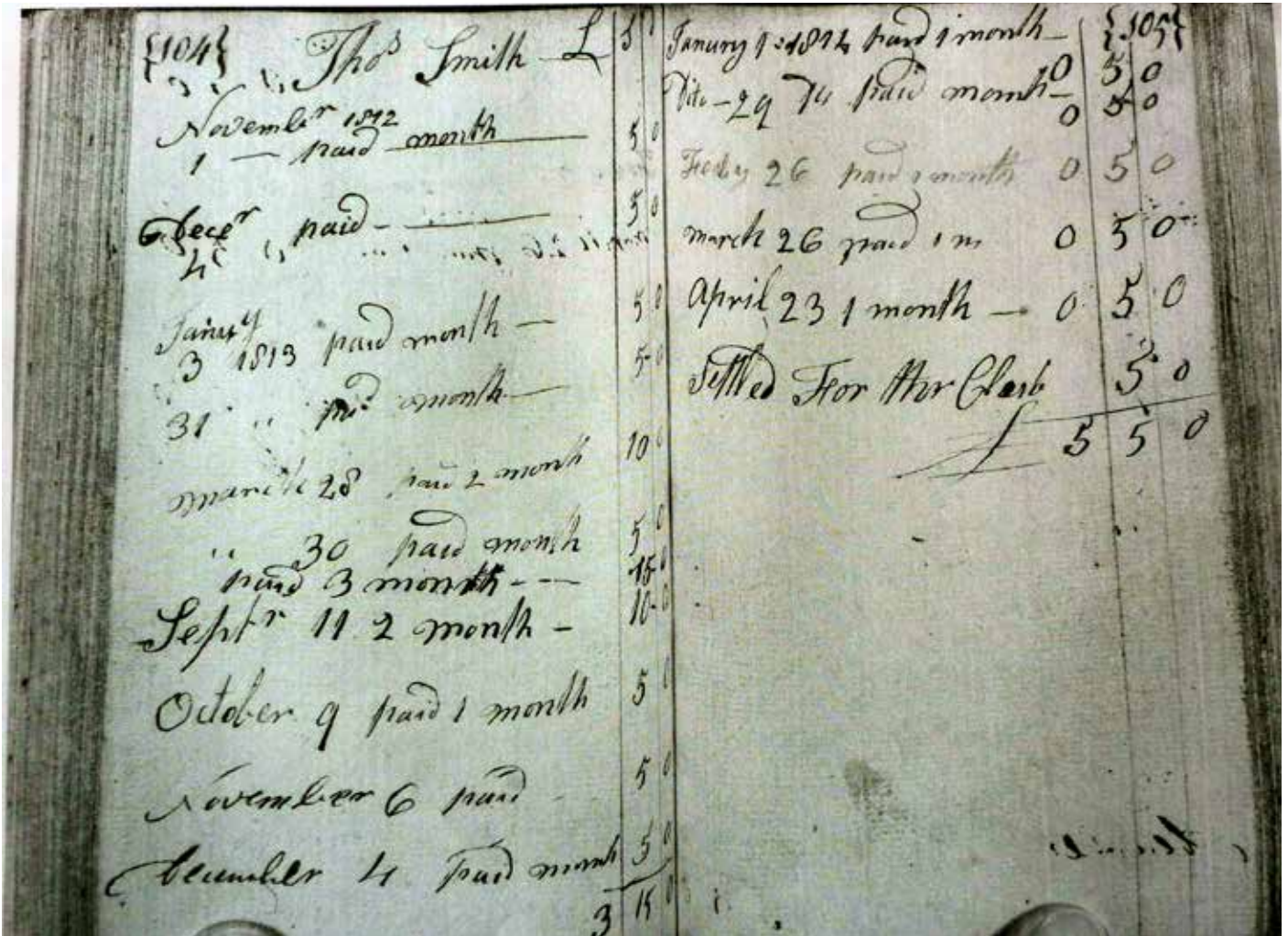
Thomas Gibbs enrolled almost 30 members over time, but some soon fell by the wayside, their payments perhaps stopped by some 'inconvenience' such as death. His first member for example, William Busbey, paid his first five shillings and was never heard from again. Mrs Privey on the other hand paid her regular five shillings from November 1812 till June 1814, when she received her £5 5s 0d (£5.25p) clock. This seems to have been the regular price for a 30-hour clock *without* the case. No doubt the case would be bought separately

0d. (£8.70p).

The matter of the 'Royal Wood' requires explanation. In the gardens of New Place, today the home of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, was a mulberry tree, which traditionally was said to have been planted by Shakespeare himself. So many visitors came to admire the tree that by the 1750s they had become a nuisance to the then owner of the garden, the Reverend Francis Gastrell, who had it cut down. Mulberry wood was useless for furniture making.

But Thomas Sharp saw an opening and he (and others) bought some of

the wood, from which he made many small memorial objects, the type of thing we today call 'treen', being such items as goblets, snuff boxes and caddies. It became known as the Royal Wood. The most famous item was a casket presented to David Garrick by Stratford Town Council reputedly in 1769. Thomas Sharp does not mention this wood in his account books, which perhaps implies he bought it before they begin, that is before 1744. So many mulberry objects in the Royal Wood abounded that their authenticity became doubtful, which is why Thomas Gibbs got Sharp's widow to certify the authenticity of the wood.



from a joiner.

Mrs Ford, on the other hand, bought a 30-hour clock *and* case in 1814 at £6 6s 0d. (£6.30p). We know that a simple case could be bought for around £1. These 30-hour clocks were the type Thomas Gibbs usually supplied, as we would expect in a rural area, but he would make an occasional eight-day example when he could get the order. He normally supplied them without cases. In 1815 he supplied Mr Cole with an eight-day clock *and* case at £8 14s

Figure 4. One of the more legible entries in the Club Book shows how Thomas Smith paid his regular instalments of five shillings (£0.25p) from November 1812 till he finally got his 30-hour clock (without case) in May 1814 at a total cost of £5 5s 0d. (£5.25p). Reproduced by courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, USA, where the manuscript is held.

All this is a long way from clockmaking. But it is all a part of the events in the daily lives of clockmakers and their families. Employees taking over the master's business, sons running away to join the army, ventures into the timber business, starting up a clock club, curing a dog of the mange. We would know about none of these business and personal aspects of a clockmaker's life but for the rare preservation of such workbooks as these. ■