

THE ENIGMA OF MR THORP by JA Lane. (Mr Lane has wound the Stourport Town Clock for 15 years)

Abberley village, in the early nineteenth century, must have been a very remote and isolated place. Worcester, Kidderminster and Bridgnorth were the nearest sizeable towns; Stourport had only recently begun to grow out of Lower Mitton, with the arrival of the canal.

It was a most unlikely place, you would think, to set up a clockmaking and selling business. Samuel Thorp, however, dealt in horological items from large tower clocks down to pocket watches, also making sundials and at least one spinning wheel.

The large tower clocks must be his most lasting monuments to a remarkable career; he seems to have made them all himself, in his own unique style. Four are known and all are local:

1803	Rock church	Striking	1 dial
1804	Gt Witley church	$\frac{1}{4}$ chimes	3 dials
1813	Glasshampton	Striking	4 dials
1813	Stourport Basins	$\frac{1}{4}$ chimes	4 dials

Unfortunately the Witley clock no longer runs on its original Thorp works, which were replaced in about 1862. The first three clocks are all still in working order.

Visitors to Shrawley church will have seen the magnificently engraved sundial in the churchyard there, inscribed with the name Samuel Thorp.

There used to be coal mines in Abberley, and there is in private hands a small compass, made specially for use in mines, again signed S Thorp. More unusually still, Sulgrave Manor possesses an exquisitely crafted small spinning wheel which is "Made and Invented by S Thorp, Abberley".

Grandfather (longcase) clocks bearing Thorp's name are by no means uncommon in the area. Mainly these are mass-produced Birmingham-made clocks which were retailed by Thorp, and no doubt made him a steady income. They differ greatly in quality from the clocks which Samuel made himself, which show him to have been a craftsman of the first order. High quality hand-finished clocks still in existence include bracket clocks, wall clocks and longcases.

To check our timekeepers, this generation is accustomed to hearing the "six pips". Before that, there was "Railway Time", disseminated daily from the London termini, and before that only sundials. Carefully calculated and exactly set for a particular latitude, these are remarkably exact. But a clockmaker needed to have in his workshop a very reliable timekeeper, by which to check the performance of other timekeepers.

The "Regulator", as it was called, was a precision-built weight-driven longcase clock. The building of one of these would be the "masterpiece" by which the fully trained apprentice could prove his ability. It might then be used throughout the freeman clockmaker's career as his workshop regulator.

Such a clock by Mr Thorp is certainly in existence, but we may never know if it once kept time in the Abberley workshop. The workmanship is superb, and the same typical Thorp features can be seen in it as in his larger clocks. A full illustrated description of it appeared in "Antiquarian Horology" some years ago.

A silver pair-cased watch signed Saml. Thorp, Abberley, No 405, belonged to the late Mr Edward Robinson. The case has the 1816 hallmark, and it is a typical watch of that period. Although Mr Thorp may have added the finishing touches to this piece, it is doubtful if it was actually made by him. Its finely chased and pierced balance cock can be seen in the illustration.

The incomplete knowlege I have of Samuel Thorp leaves tantalising questions unanswered. Most of the information given here comes from the research of the late Mr James Johnson of Martley, and also the late Mr Tom Baylis, Stourport local historian.

Sam died on Feb 15, 1836, aged 73. His son, Thomas, had died in the previous year, aged 39. There were also 5 daughters, one of whom died in infancy. In his will, dated 1824, he leaves all his working tools to son Thomas (who in the event pre-deceased him), and all else to his wife Mary, who subsequently moved to Leamington.

Like everyone else, Sam's life had its ups and downs. Although he had made the Stourport Basins Clock 10 years previously, a Parish Council Vestry meeting in 1823 reported as follows: "A competent person accustomed to making clocks for churches was sought to examine the Town Clock and report on the present state, with an account of what will be necessary to make it perfect. Samuel Thorp, the Clock Keeper, was dismissed for negligence. Messrs Whitehurst and Son, of Derby were called in, and estimated the cost at £26"

There had also been problems in 1808. Berrows Worcester Herald, Thursday May 12 1808, carried the followig advertisement: "Whereas Samuel Bowen, Apprentice to Samuel Thorp Clockmaker of Abberley left his masters service on Sunday last and has not since been heard of. All persons are cautioned against employing or detaining the said Samuel Bowen and any person giving information to his said master so that he may be brought again to his duty shall be rewarded for their trouble. The said S Bowen is about 5 feet 6 inches high, thick made with a dark complexion and dark hair; had on when he left a dark blue coat, pink waist-coat and dark velveteen breeches"

As now, facilities existed for ordinary people to make easy payments for their purchases. Samuel used to advertise his "Club" where "members may depend on being supplied with goods of the best workmanship, and at a lower price than can be produced by those who do not manufacture them". Monthly payments were collected from all members, one timepiece being issued each month by the luck of the draw.

As to where he lived , there is some local tradition that he resided at 36 The Village, Abberley and also that his workshop was in the cellar of "The Jaylands" I would be interested to hear further evidence in favour or otherwise of this.

The quality of work which Thorp could execute was far superior to that of the average country clocksmith, perhaps suggesting experience with one of the leading London men.

It was noted earlier that Thorp left his own characteristic trade mark in certain design features in the clockwork. One of these is a very unusual method of linking the escapement to the pendulum on his clocks. He apparently did not invent it, as it can be found in the work of John Leroux (1744-1808), a London maker working at Charing Cross. This maker is just sufficiently earlier than Thorp to make one wonder if that was where Sam trained.

Worcester Herald March 10 1838: DEATHS:
"Lately Mr S Thorp of Abberley, Clock and Watch Maker. He was a good husband, a tender father, and an honest man."

