

## The Knibbs – A Family of Clockmakers

Compiled by Don Siviter in collaboration with Eric Bates

The baptismal register of St James's Church, Claydon indicates that several Knibb households lived in the village of Claydon during the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The well worn flagged floor of the church also bears testimony to the interment of members of the family within the church grounds. One memorial tribute is close to the church font and another forms part of the floor of the central aisle.

John Knibb (1595 – 1663) and his brother Thomas Knibb (1600 – 1672) both produced sons who were to become renowned clockmakers. These sons made notable clocks for Charles II, Prince Rupert's night lantern; the turret clocks for Wadham College and for the state entrance to Windsor Castle and became men of fame and considerable wealth.

**Samuel Knibb (1625 – 1674)** was the third son of John Knibb and was the first of eight Knibbs to be admitted to the Clockmakers' Company, a form of guild approved by Charles I. He moved from Claydon and started a business in Newport Pagnell before establishing himself in London in 1662. It is probable that he passed his skills and expertise to his cousin Joseph. Unfortunately Samuel's career was cut short by ill-health and he died in London around 1674.

**Joseph Knibb (1640 -1711)** was probably the most famous of the Knibb family of clockmakers. It is thought that he joined Samuel around 1655 at Newport Pagnell and probably served some kind of apprenticeship. He acquired fame and fortune by supplying clocks to the nobility. He developed a link with Italy, invented the 'Roman Striking' technique for his clocks, and gained international recognition of his skills. This technique reduced the number of blows by the hammer necessary during a single winding of the clock.

Joseph moved from Claydon with his younger brother John to set up an enterprise in St Clements, Oxford in 1664. Joseph was aged 25 and his young brother John only 15. Two years later they moved to Holywell Street where a variety of tradesmen leased their workshops from Merton College. At this time plague was raging in London and Charles II, his court and his Cavalier Parliament moved to Oxford. Patronage of the wealthy was much sought after by the freemen traders of the city and they resented any intrusion of their business by newcomers. Joseph applied for the freedom to trade but this was refused. However as Joseph occupied a scheduled University shop and was a sub-tenant of a University property he claimed to be a privileged University tradesman. His matriculation entry to nearby Trinity College reads: "*Jophesus Knibb an.n.27 fil Tho. Knibb de Claydon in par. Cropredy Oxon pl.Hortulanus Coll Trin.*". Joseph was now apparently a gardener employed by Trinity College.

The perpetual disputes between "Town and Gown" produced more objections from the Clockmakers and Watchmakers of the city and the matter was further debated at some length. In 1668, Council minutes record that "*Mr Mayor acquainted this house that Joseph Nibb Clockmaker who formerly sett upp shop in this parish of Holywell in the Suburbs of this Citty upon Accmpt of being a Gardener to Trinity Colledge did now make his application to this Citty for a freedome waveing the power of the University who formerly endeavored to Maynteyn him to keepe shopp upon this accmpt*"

In other words Joseph withdrew his claim to be a privileged tradesman of the University in return for being accepted as a freeman of the city on payment of a fine. The fine of 20 nobles (£6.65) and a leather bucket was duly paid.

Now aged 28 and business prospering Joseph took on Peter Knibb and Thomas Smith of Bloxham as apprentices and in January 1670 Joseph joined the London Clockmakers Company. In 1684 he was elected as Steward of the group. It was about 1670 that Joseph moved to London leaving his brother John in charge at Oxford. It may well be that Samuel Knibb was ill around this date and Joseph's move to London was in order to administer his affairs and perhaps take over his business. There appears to be some doubt of the exact date of Samuel's death and it could well be that it was preceded by a debilitating illness.

It is thought that Joseph was married to Elizabeth West in 1658 but there appears to be no trace of the event and some doubt of Elizabeth's surname. Only one son, Thomas, has been recorded. He died, unmarried, in 1703.

In April 1697 Joseph sold up his London business and retired to Hanslope, Bucks. It was at this date that he made his will, possibly suggesting that illness may have been one cause of his retirement. He continued to make clocks at Hanslope and on his death in 1711 he was buried there. Joseph Knibb was a wealthy man owning considerable property. He settled an annuity on his wife, legacies to his brothers, George and John, to all the children of his three sisters and the daughters of John. The landed estate passed to John and then to John's eldest son.

**John Knibb (1650 -1722)** was the youngest son of Thomas and Elizabeth Knibb and baptised in St James's Church, Claydon on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1649 and was 10 years younger than Joseph. He assisted Joseph at the Oxford premises, which he later took over, and collaborated with his brother Joseph throughout their careers. It was not until 1672 that John applied for the freedom of Oxford. He had none of the required qualifications but the Mayor agreed to admit him on the payment of a fine of £30. John considered this excessive and this was reduced later and he became a freeman by Act of Council in 1673. He was now legally entitled to sign his clocks, although there exists a small clock inscribed "*Johannes Knibb Oxon fecit 1669*"

After Joseph's departure to London, John continued to live in the University tenements and as he became more prosperous he leased further tenements from the City. This gave him a frontage to the highway of 102 feet on a site that was originally the City Ditch near Smith Gate. The rent was £20 annually plus "*one couple of good Fatt capons*" to be presented to the Mayor. John's rise in public affairs began in 1686 when he was appointed as a member of the City Council and in 1688 he was elected Bailiff, whose duty was to collect rents and act as a treasurer. When appointed they paid a fee of £5 which entitled them to some profits of the Northgate Hundred. Twelve days after John's election, William of Orange landed at Torbay, having agreed to accept the throne of England. At the coronation of William and Mary in 1689 the City of Oxford exercised its right to participate in the ceremony. John Knibb was one of the six officials in attendance on the Mayor at Westminster. He was to become Bailiff again from 1690 to 1696.

In 1697 he was one of eight assistants to the Mayor and a year later was elected as Mayor of Oxford himself. In 1700 he was Keykeeper and member of the Mayor's Council and served again as Mayor in 1710. John continued to be active in civic affairs and in 1716 he became an Alderman. He was probably the most prolific of the clockmakers in Oxford, having a virtual monopoly of the more expensive trade. It would seem that most of his best work was produced in collaboration with his brother Joseph. John had the opportunity to acquire much stock when Joseph closed his London business in 1697, and later when he managed Joseph's estate in Hanslope in 1712, after the death of his brother.

John and his wife Elizabeth attended St Cross Church, Holywell and were buried there. Their three sons and five daughters were all baptised in the church at Holywell. John died in 1722 and

his death is recorded by the antiquarian Thomas Hearne, "1722 July 19. Last night, about 8 Clock, died suddenly Mr. Alderman Knibb of Oxford an old, quiet, harmless Man abt. 4 score years of age...." His eldest child, Elizabeth and his three sons, John, George and Joseph survived him. In his will he made little provision for his children as they had benefited from his brother Joseph's estate. All his estate was left to his wife except one tenement to his eldest son John from which an annuity was to be paid to Elizabeth.

What motivation and circumstances led the Knibb cousins to fame and fortune is open to speculation. They left the relative obscurity of a small village in North Oxfordshire where opportunities, other than farming, were few and far between. Their fathers are described as yeomen bringing up large families (see appendix A) and probably lived in humble circumstances. Claydon would seem to have been a village of a number of yeoman farmers with small landholdings and offering few inheritance prospects for their offspring. There is some evidence that the Knibb family had some connection with Leys Farm and possibly lived there. Thomas Love Knibb left part of Leys Farm to his nephews John and Martin Buswell in his 1752 will. Certainly Oxford seems to have had a remarkable attraction for young men desiring an apprenticeship to the five master clockmakers in the City, during the last half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Knibbs themselves employed a large number of apprentices during their careers as their reputations grew.

During the lifetimes of the three Knibb clockmakers from Claydon there were momentous changes in the governing of England and one wonders what effect this had on their careers. The disastrous and divisive Civil War and the execution of Charles I in 1649 resulted in the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a Council of State. In 1658 (Joseph would be 19 years old) Oliver Cromwell's Protectorates were to govern England until in 1660 the monarchy was restored when Charles II was crowned King. His son James II reigned from 1685 until 1688 but proved to be unpopular because of his pro-catholic decrees and was forced to flee England. The throne was offered to William of Orange and it was at this coronation, of William and Mary that John Knibb acted in a minor role for the City of Oxford.

There is some local belief that the church clock housed in St James' Church, Claydon may have a connection with the Knibb clockmakers. It is a small clock of uncommon design built on a wrought iron frame measuring about 24" x 22". It has no dial and is housed in the bell tower of the church. Churchwardens' Accounts record that numerous repairs have been carried out on the clock. The oldest of the three bells in the church is dated 1609 and it is possible that the clock was built at this time. There is some speculation that the Claydon church clock may have been transferred from the Church of St Mary, Cropredy at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In this case the clock may well be that commissioned by the Vicar of Cropredy, Roger Lupton in 1512. Local folklore that the church clock was built by the Knibb clockmakers is probably incorrect. It would seem that the clock almost certainly predates the careers of the Knibbs.

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*Sources:*

Claydon Church parish records

**Beeson, CFC.** Clockmaking in Oxfordshire

## Appendix A

### Extracts from the baptismal register, St James the Great, Claydon.

Thomas Knibb x Elizabeth Wise, married 1629.

<u>Siblings</u>	<u>baptismal date</u>
Mary	12/12/30
Richard	02/04/32
Thomas	29/06/34
George	07/02/35
Samuel	26/12/37
<b>Joseph</b>	02/02/40
Martha	30/01/41
<b>John</b>	25/01/50

John Knibb x Warboro ?, married 1621.

<u>Siblings</u>	<u>baptismal date</u>
Richard	03/04/20
Thomas	27/01/21
Temperance	14/04/24
<b>Samuel</b>	16/12/25
Simon	27/10/27
George	28/02/29
David	19/02/31
Solomon	29/05/34
John	19/02/35

The clockmakers born in Claydon are shown in bold