

NINETEENTH CENTURY CLOCK AND WATCHMAKERS IN SOUTHGATE STREET, GLOUCESTER: A PRELIMINARY ENQUIRY

By Alan Sparkes

In 1998 the author of this article located numerous primary sources in Gloucester Local Studies Library which related to Joseph Neining, a distant relative who worked as a watch and clock maker in Southgate Street, Gloucester from 1852.¹ Although that study was initiated by extant family records, it was significantly assisted by Graham Dowler's book *Gloucestershire Clock and Watch Makers*² Dowler has identified approximately one hundred and thirty individuals associated with the construction, servicing or retail of chronometers in or near the centre of Gloucester from 1616 onwards.³ The majority of these tradesmen operated during the nineteenth century, often from established premises, and this period represents the zenith of chronometrical activity in Gloucester.⁴ At present, one of the few businesses which has continued to trade since the nineteenth century can be found at the centre of the city in Southgate Street, just a few yards from the remains of St. Michael's church. G.A. Baker (& Son) was established in 1882 on its present site and occupies a listed building.⁵ The premises often attracts interest from locals and tourists alike, as the Niehus Brothers clock rings the hours.⁶



Niehus Brothers clock

Despite the presence of notable if not outstanding watch and clock makers in nineteenth century Gloucester, little seems to be written about their activities. Dowler's book is an absorbing read which discusses prominent clock and watch

makers such as members of the Washbourne and Honeybone families.⁷ It identifies numerous primary sources for the chronometrical trade and craftsmen such as trade directories, almanacs and local press reports.⁸ Yet the book is essentially a horological study as many of the entries reveal, such as that for Edward and John Gouldar of Southgate Street in 1841.

Longcase clock in fine mahogany case, 7ft. high, with circular white painted dial marked 'E. & J. Gouldar, Glo'ter.' Brass hands, non original except possibly that for the calendar. Normal two-train movement. Very unlikely to have been made by the firm, probably merely retailed by them.⁹

For the local historian Dowler's work whets the appetite, but leaves the reader wanting more. Dowler's book, G.A. Baker's business and the evidence pertaining to Joseph Neining have all provided the stimulus to address the apparent lack of works on this aspect of Gloucester's local history.

Southgate Street has a long if somewhat obscure association with chronometry. It was on the site of the Cross in 1371 that permission was given by King Edward III to construct a bell tower for the purpose of marking the hours for the local population.¹⁰ According to Dowler this royal patent represents the first known written reference in English to the word clock.

(O)ur well-beloved the Burgesses of the town of Gloucester (are granted) a certain piece of land...called 'Seynt Martyn Place' to make a tower in the same place for fixing and maintaining in the same tower a bell to denote the hours of the day and night for ever, commonly called 'clok'.¹¹

Whether the clock was ever constructed is not known, but close by on the junction of Southgate Street and Eastgate Street, the Saxon church of St. Michael incorporated a clock from at least 1546. Records for that year reveal that the sum of eight shillings was paid as the annual remuneration for its maintenance.¹² Furthermore, it was in St.

Michael's church that George Washbourne, son of John and Elizabeth was christened in 1698. The Washbourne family were closely associated with watch and clock making in Gloucestershire, with at least thirteen members being engaged in the occupation.¹³ However, George is the first clock maker with established premises so far identified as working in Southgate Street, sometime after 1721.¹⁴

Nevertheless, it was not until the nineteenth century that Gloucester started to see significant numbers of watch and clock makers at work. Of the one hundred and thirty individuals identified by Dowler, almost ninety were in business between 1800 and 1900.¹⁵ This growth coincides with the economic development of Gloucester and its population increase. Between 1743 and 1801 the number of people in the city only rose from 4,990 to 7,579.¹⁶ Yet by 1831 the population was almost twelve thousand and by 1871 had increased to over eighteen thousand.¹⁷ Carolyn Heighway ascribes this rapid growth to the canal and railway links and consequent industrial opportunities.¹⁸ 'In the nineteenth century Gloucester exploded, both in size and prosperity'.¹⁹ N.M. Herbert is more specific about the changes which Gloucester experienced, claiming that it was not until the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 that economic progress was established.²⁰ Like Heighway, A.R.J. Jurica notes the importance of the Gloucester and Berkeley canal which opened in 1827 and the city's various railway links, but concludes that the rapid population growth was related to commercial as well as industrial expansion.²¹ Consequently, by the 1850s

*Gloucester's growing population and commerce increased the demand for shops and services, and professions and businesses catering for the wealthier classes flourished... Cabinet makers and upholsterers, jewellers, clock and watch makers, and wine and spirit merchants were recorded in the mid nineteenth century.*²²

Yet despite this economic and commercial activity which included the manufacture and sale of time pieces, little seems to have been written about watch and clock makers in Gloucester. The general trends are well known, but, as John Benson *et al* argue, there have been very few detailed studies of particular trades or particular

places.²³ Despite plentiful local evidence about shops and traders who worked from established premises, the 'historical profession has shown remarkably little interest...' in the development of these businesses.²⁴ Benson *et al* argue that the nineteenth century marked an important shift from small numbers of specialised businesses, which catered to the wealthier members of society.²⁵ Increasingly the wider population, instead of patronising markets and itinerant traders began to use fixed shops offering an increased range of services at more competitive prices.²⁶ This appears to be the case with watch and clock makers in Gloucester. Their numbers increased and there is evidence to suggest that they catered for a diverse and more modest clientele.²⁷ To demonstrate the increase in established businesses, Dowler has identified only one such craftsman in Southgate Street during the eighteenth century; George Washbourne who worked from premises close to the Tolsey.²⁸ Yet during the nineteenth century at least twelve businesses are known to have operated from established shops in Southgate Street and Westgate Street is known to have had at least seventeen watch and clock makers during the same period.²⁹ However, caution should be exercised in trying to draw conclusions from these figures. Jurica notes that by the mid-nineteenth century over eight thousand people were employed in the city, with 1,473 of them working in small businesses.³⁰

A potentially useful avenue for further investigation is the Gloucester Traders' Association records, some of which are in Gloucester Local Studies Library.³¹

Gloucester Traders' Association.

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GEORGE A. BAKER, J.P.	1900-1901
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JOHN JENNINGS	1902-1903
JOHN JENNINGS	1903-1904
JOHN A. FISHER	1904-1908
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J. O. VICKER	1906-1907
F. W. FISHER	1907-1908
O. F. DAVIES	1908-1909
DAVID JONES, J.P.	1909-1910
WILLIAM DANCEY	1910-1911
WILLIAM DANCEY	1911-1912
SYDNEY S. STARR	1912-1913
HARRY A. DANCEY	1913-1914
GEORGE H. BLAND	1914-1915

THE ABOVE, WITH THE PRESIDENT AND OFFICERS OF THE YEAR, FORM THE FINANCE AND EMERGENCY COMMITTEE.

Gloucester Traders' Association by kind permission of Gloucestershire Collection, Gloucester Library N13.6

'Where records of such associations survive, they too can reveal detailed evidence of trading

conditions and the political activities of established retailers'.³² Unfortunately the only surviving Gloucester records date from the early twentieth century, but they do demonstrate the growth of traders in Gloucester and the involvement of the purveyors of chronometers. For example, the 1906-7³³ report of the Gloucester Traders' Association reveals that its membership had increased to two hundred and by 1911 reached two hundred and thirty.³⁴ All the reports list G.A. Baker of Southgate Street, as an Alderman, a subscriber and member of the association and its past president from 1900 to 1901.³⁵ If earlier records could be located then the comprehensive lists of members contained therein might reveal the presence of other watch and clock makers. Furthermore, as the reports engage in issues of concern to its members, such as the implications of the 1904 Shop Hours Bill, careful enquiry might reveal alternative sources of information such as reports in the local press.³⁶ In the absence of such records, the local press has produced much detailed evidence. For example, Joseph Neininger's obituary appears in the Gloucester Journal. News items may reveal relevant information, such as the names of other individuals who have had a connection with the subject in some way.³⁷ The *Gloucester Journal* of May 1742 reports:

STOLEN out of the House of Mrs Adams, of Stone-bench near Gloucester, before Ten o'Clock on Wednesday Night last,

A CLOCK

*made by George Washbourne, Gloucester. Whoever gives Notice of the said Clock, so that it may be had again, shall have Half-a-Guinea Reward, paid by the said Mrs Adams.*³⁸

A search for Mrs Adams or further reports about the incident might provide additional information about the activities of George Washbourne. This type of approach may be time consuming and often unproductive but thorough enquiries are important. 'It cannot be emphasised too strongly that your search must be methodical and systematic'.³⁹ W.B. Stephens also acknowledges the value of newspapers, but in addition refers to other potential evidence. 'More primary printed material for the local historian exists in the form of...other periodicals, guide books and directories...and these will often prove a mine of

information'.⁴⁰

Directories prove particularly useful in the study of Gloucester's chronometer makers, especially in exploring the second point raised by Benson *et al*; that of nineteenth century shops offering diverse services to wider and less affluent sections of the population. Two advertisements in a local trade directory are cases in point. The first relates to the business of John Gouldar who occupied 95 Southgate Street from 1849 to 1880, the same site later held by G.A. Baker.

TIME IS MONEY

WATCHES ARE NECESSARY ARTICLES OF LIFE

What serious consequences follow being without a good watch ..

*It is absolutely necessary, from the Sovereign down to the Agricultural Labourer, to have the time of Day, which may be obtained at GOULDARS. Useful and Cheap Establishment, opposite the Corn Exchange, Gloucester.*⁴¹

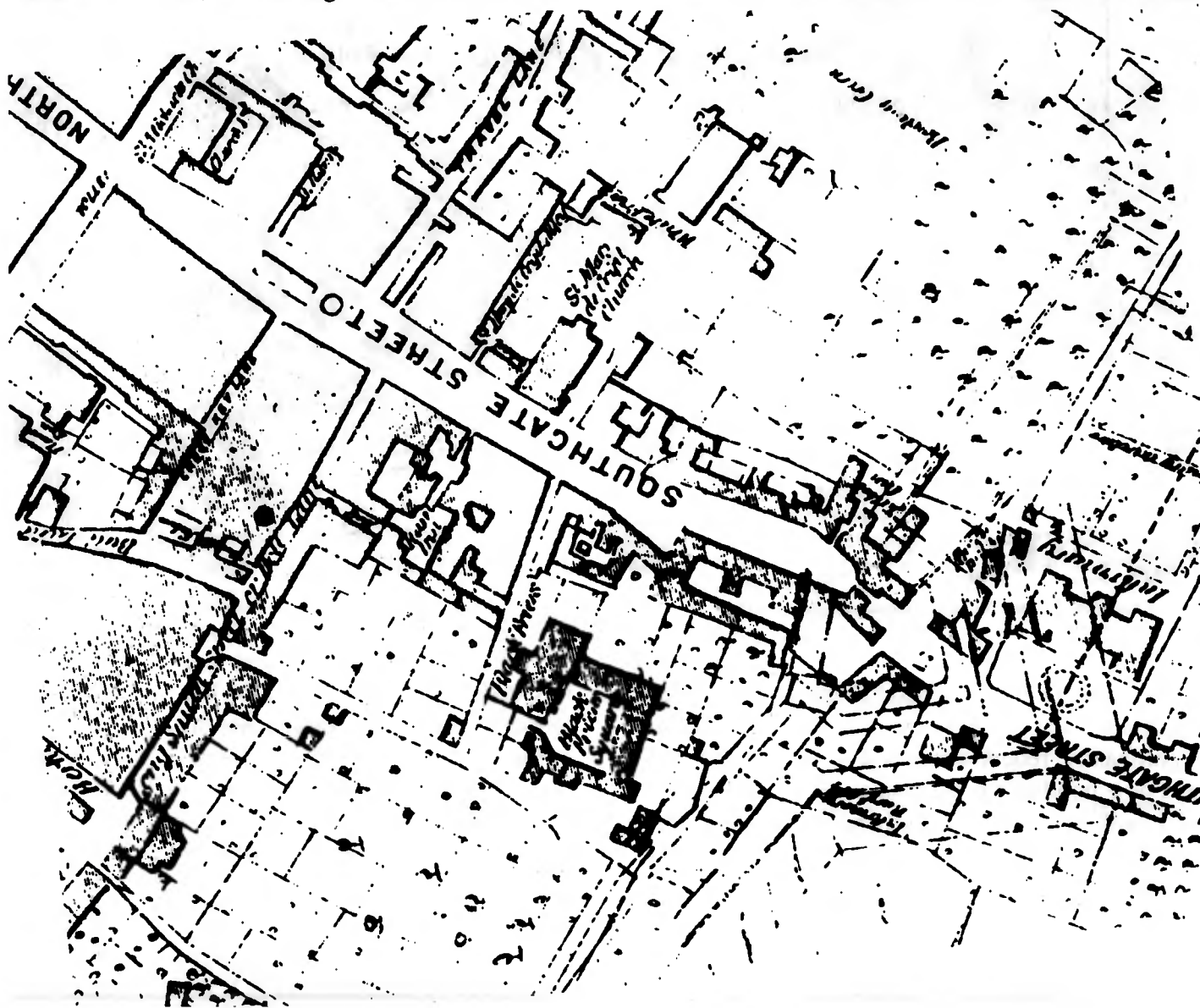
This source clearly demonstrates an appeal to a broad section of society. The second advertisement refers to a tradesman in Northgate Street, who is also identified as working from premises in Southgate Street after 1859.⁴² The variety of services offered are most diverse.

*Whoever wants a Clock or Bottle Jack repaired well, in a Short Time, and at a MODERATE CHARGE, should apply to J. GARDENER, 43 Northgate Street, Gloucester...J.G. is also a practical Herbalist, and with the Herbs of the Fields, he undertakes to Cure Complaints in human bodies. He also applies Medical Galvanism for Tic-Doloureux...and Rheumatism generally. The best Pills for indigestion ever made. J.G. has also on sale a new and simple kind of Truss...Mrs G. provides Tea and Coffee - good, clean, cheap and cheerful - beds.*⁴³

In this fascinating and perhaps amusing source; at least to the twenty-first century reader, the majority of the text refers to services which have nothing to do with the chronometrical trade. However, this diversity might represent financial necessity as according to Benson *et al*, small retailers and traders increasingly struggled to

compete with bigger firms.⁴⁴ Certainly the large numbers of watch and clock makers in nineteenth century Gloucester suggests that competition was lively. Even in present Gloucester, with its greatly increased population, it is hard to imagine twelve separate chronometrical traders; the number recorded in 1859, flourishing in the centre of the

unemployment and 'many businesses...closed'.⁴⁸ If trade from the docks was so drastically affected, then it seems likely that businesses close by, especially non-essential ones such as chronometer purveyors, might also lose trade as local people restricted their spending accordingly to the economic climate. These events do warrant

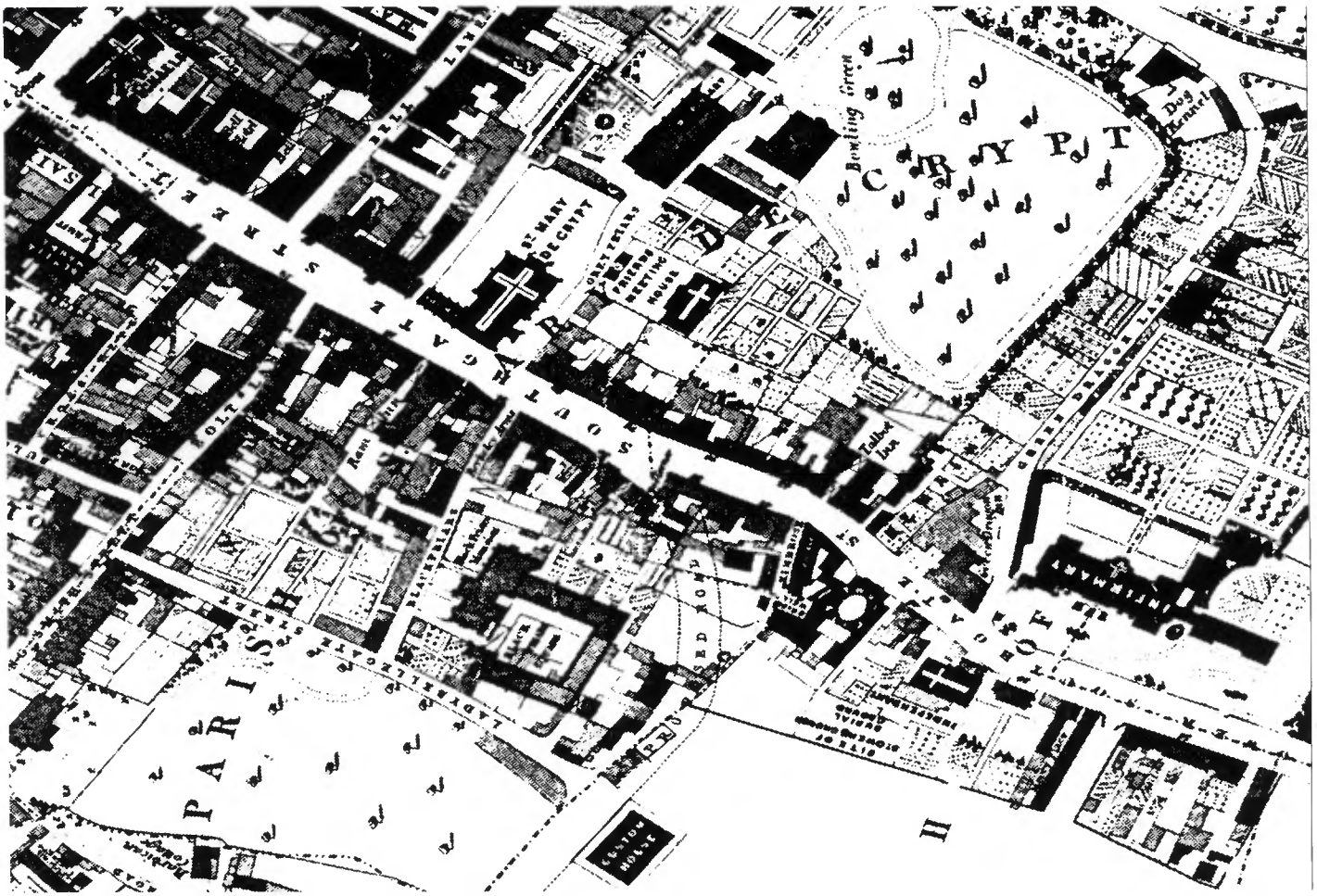


A plan of the City of Gloucester surveyed and delineated 1780, by R. Hall and T. Pinnell by kind permission of Gloucestershire Collection, Gloucester Library.

city.⁴⁵ Furthermore, businesses closed or moved premises on a regular basis during this period, with fourteen either closing, leaving the area or moving locations within the city, spending less than five years at one address, which might suggest strong competition.⁴⁶ Indeed Jurica describes the mid-nineteenth century as a period of economic depression in Gloucester.⁴⁷ Trade restrictions arising from the Crimean war and competition from the railways, severely affected trade from Gloucester docks. 'Canal traffic plummeted from 634,520 tons in 1852...to 418,470 tons in 1857...', increasing

further investigation which might prove productive in the study of local watch and clock makers, particularly as Southgate Street ran down to the docks.

As a conclusion to this study, a field survey was undertaken to discover if any evidence for this flourishing nineteenth century trade now survives. Consequently, a walk along Southgate Street was undertaken. However, before setting out, maps from 1780 onwards were consulted to establish the consistency in the route of Southgate Street from the nineteenth century onwards, and this raised a number of interesting points.⁴⁹



A map of the City and Borough of Gloucester, from an actual survey made in 1843 by Arthur Causton by kind permission of Gloucestershire Collection, Gloucester Library GL65.51(2)

Setting out from the Cross, it quickly becomes apparent that Southgate Street has been significantly redeveloped and a mixture of old and new buildings now remain. Examples of this can easily be found by studying old photographs of the city.⁵⁰ Where the Bell Hotel once stood just a few yards from G.A. Baker's business, the site is now occupied by a modern shopping complex,⁵¹ whilst nearby across the street, stands the impressive structure of Robert Raikes' House, which has 'little changed since the 16th century...'.⁵² The redevelopments make it difficult to identify the sites of the nineteenth century watch and clock makers. Yet whilst an exhaustive search was not conducted, some locations were identified. The location of G.A. Baker's premises was a straightforward task, as the business still exists. Its present address No.5 does not correspond with that of 1882 which was No.95. A hand drawn street plan made by Anthony Done lists the street numbers before and after 1920. From this plan it was established that No.95 became No.5, which corresponds with the other evidence used.⁵³

Enthused with a new confidence, another site was

located. According to Dowler, one Edmund Simpson occupied No.122 Southgate Street from 1867 until 1885.⁵⁴ Using Done's plan, it was quickly established that this site is now No.59, occupied by the Oasis Café. It was noted with interest that on the front face of the building at first floor height, a somewhat dilapidated double



The clock over Oasis Café at No. 59 Southgate Street

faced clock is mounted. It is situated so that pedestrians walking from either direction along Southgate Street can read the time. Constructed of a black metal frame, the white faces are marked with Roman numerals. However, there is nothing inscribed or written on the clock to indicate who constructed it.

This chronometer could be a relatively recent electric clock having nothing to do with Simpson's business. Nevertheless, it is perhaps more than coincidence that this timepiece is situated on the former premises of a nineteenth century watch and clock maker and does offer a potential avenue for further investigation. An initial approach into trying to identify the origin of this clock might best be served by consulting horological literature such as the work of G.H. Ballie.⁵⁵

Having made progress with two sites in Southgate Street, it was decided to try and locate a building which had previously played host to three separate watch and clock makers. Dowler has identified what had previously been No.58 as the premises of Albert Glave from 1867 to 1875, Frederick Osmond from 1875 to 1876 and finally William Watts from 1877 to 1879.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, a large area where this building stood has been demolished, so there is little to be gained from fieldwork at this site.⁵⁷ Done's street plan indicates that No.58 became No.120 some time after 1920.⁵⁸ Therefore, by searching for this address in sources such as local trade directories, more might be learned about the site, especially whether it was used by any more watch and clock makers after William Watts. Although the fieldwork conducted in Southgate Street was rudimentary and of a limited nature, it does demonstrate the potential of this method of enquiry in any further investigations of this subject.

This study has drawn heavily on the work of Graham Dowler. Although extremely useful as a point of departure, Dowler's book remains essentially a horological study. Yet it represents the only identified study to focus on the local history of nineteenth century watch and clock makers in Gloucester. However, it is clear that numerous primary and secondary sources are available to the local historian, to assist in addressing this gap in Gloucester's local history. By focusing on those who worked in Southgate Street during the 1800s, it is possible to argue that their activities were related to the social and

economic changes in the city. It is hoped that this short, preliminary enquiry will provide the impetus for an as yet unwritten local history of Gloucester watch and clock makers.

Notes

¹ Joseph Neiningger was born in Germany in 1819 and died in Gloucester in 1885. In his obituary he was described as a 'well known Gloucester tradesman'. 'Obituaries', *Gloucester Journal*, 21 March 1885. p.5.

² Dowler, G. *Gloucestershire Clock and Watch makers* (Phillimore: Chichester, 1984)

³ Dowler claims that the distinction between those who made chronometers and those who merely assembled them is notoriously difficult to define. Therefore, for the purpose of this study the terms maker, tradesman and craftsman will be used in a general sense. *Ibid* p.xvi and pp.114-144.

⁴ Not all the watch and clock makers traded in timepieces and Dowler identifies a number who were journeymen, servicing instruments as they passed through Gloucester. This study will focus on those who worked from established premises in Southgate Street. Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers*. p.4.

⁵ 'City of Gloucester: County of Gloucestershire', in Department For Culture Media and Sport: Revised List of Buildings of Special or Historical Interest (1973) p.343.

⁶ Moss, P. *Historic Gloucester: An Illustrated Guide to the City, its Buildings, the Cathedral and the Docks* (Windrush: Moreton-in-Marsh, 1993) p.15.

⁷ Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers*. pp.27-44.

⁸ *Ibid*. pp.xix-xxi.

⁹ *Ibid*. p.119.

¹⁰ Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers*. p.7.

¹¹ Stevenson, W. *Calendar of the Records of the Corporation of Gloucester* (Bellows: Gloucester, 1893)

¹² Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers*. p.14.

¹³ *Ibid*. p.27.

¹⁴ Twenty individuals were listed as clock makers working in Gloucester during the eighteenth century including George Washbourne, but none with specific addresses. Buckley, F. and Buckley, G. 'Clock and Watch Makers of the 18th Century in Gloucestershire and Bristol', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society for 1929*, Vol.51, 1929. However, Dowler lists Washbourne as in Southgate Street after 1721. Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers*. p.32.

¹⁵ Dowler *Gloucestershire Makers*. pp.114-144.

¹⁶ Herbert, N. 'Gloucester 1720-1835' in Elrington, C. (ed) *The Victoria County History of Gloucester* (V.C.H. Glos) Volume IV, *The City of Gloucester*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988) p.124.

¹⁷ Jurica, A. 'Gloucester 1835-1985', in Elrington, C. (ed) *The Victoria County History of Gloucester* (V.C.H. Glos): Volume IV, *The City of Gloucester*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988) p.171.

¹⁸ Heighway, C. *Gloucester: A History and Guide*, (Alan Sutton: Gloucester, 1985) p.150.

¹⁹ *Ibid* p.150.

²⁰ Herbert V.C.H. Glos. p.124

²¹ Jurica. V.C.H. Glos. p.170.

²² *Ibid* p.176.

²³ Benson, J., Alexander, A., Hodson, D., Jones, J. and Shaw, G. 'Sources for the Study of Urban Retailing, 1800-1950, with Particular Reference to Wolverhampton', in Bonney, M., ed., *The Local Historian*. pp.167-182.

²⁴ *Ibid* p.167.

²⁵ *Ibid* p.167.

²⁶ *Ibid* p.167.

²⁷ Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers*.

²⁸ *Ibid* p.32. p.140.

²⁹ *Ibid* pp.114-144.

- ³⁰ Jurica. *V.C.H. Glos.* p.172.
- ³¹ Gloucester Traders' Association(GTA), 1906-7, 1911-12, 1915-16. John Jennings. Pr. Gloucester. Gloucestershire Collection. Ref. N13.6.
- ³² Benson. *Urban Retailing.* p.174.
- ³³ GTA 1906-7. p.6.
- ³⁴ GTA 1911-12. p.6.
- ³⁵ GTA 1906-7. p.13. GTA 1911-12. p.3. GTA. 1915-16. No page number.
- ³⁶ GTA 1911-12. p.6.
- ³⁷ *Gloucester Journal.* 21 March 1885. p.5.
- ³⁸ *Gloucester Journal.* 4 May 1742, cited in Dowler.
- Gloucestershire Makers.* p.140.
- ³⁹ Richards, M. *Gloucestershire Family History* (Gloucestershire County Council, 3rd edn, 1993)
- ⁴⁰ Stephens, W. *Sources for English Local History* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1973)
- ⁴¹ Gell, R. and Bradshaw, T. *Gloucestershire Directory 1870* (Roberts: Gloucester, 1870) cited in Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers.* p.120.
- ⁴² *Ibid* p.119.
- ⁴³ Gell, R. and Bradshaw, T. *Gloucestershire Directory 1875* (Roberts: Gloucester, 1875) cited in Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers.* p.119.
- ⁴⁴ Benson. *Urban Retailing.* p.174.
- ⁴⁵ Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers.* p.114-144.
- ⁴⁶ These figures refer only to those recorded premises situated on the Cross and its four main arterial Streets or those close by such as Longsmith Street.
- ⁴⁷ Jurica. *V.C.H. Glos.* p.177.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid* p.177.
- ⁴⁹ Photocopies, reproduced by kind permission of Gloucestershire Collection, Gloucester Library.
A Plan of the City of Gloucester. Surveyed and Delineated 1780, by R. Hall and T. Pinnell.
Map of the City and Borough of Gloucester, from an Actual Survey Made in 1843 by Arthur Causton. GL65.51(2)
- ⁵⁰ Voyce, J. *Gloucester in Old Photographs.* (Alan Sutton: Gloucester, 1985) pp.37-52.
- ⁵¹ Sutton, A. *Around Gloucester in Old Photographs* (Alan Sutton: Gloucester, 1987) p.41.
- ⁵² Heighway. *Guide.* p.115.
- ⁵³ Gloucester City Street Names, Anthony Done, 1985. Gloucester Local Studies Library. 41328
- ⁵⁴ Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers.* p.138.
- ⁵⁵ Ballie, G.H. *Watch and Clock Makers of the World* (N.A.G. Press: London. 3rd edn, 1974).
- ⁵⁶ Dowler. *Gloucestershire Makers.* pp.114-144.
- ⁵⁷ Gloucester City Street Names, Anthony Done, 1985.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid*

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