



The Gunmakers of Oxford

Part 2

by John Evans & Brian Godwin

Introduction

In our previous article we examined the development and growth of the gun trade in Oxford during the 17th and 18th centuries. In terms of activity and the number of people involved, it appears that the gun trade continued to flourish in Oxford throughout the 19th and into the early part of the 20th century. A total of 27 names are listed but these are concentrated mainly in three or four businesses, often involving more than one generation of the same family. Other names appear briefly and then disappear from view. The main sources of information are the registers of apprentices and freemen but the trade directories such as those published by Pigot yield useful some information about the locations of their premises. Generally, these were located in the centre of the city, on High Street, Broad Street or St Aldates.

The Brown family (sometimes spelt Browne)

This dynasty spanned a period of nearly 100 years. The first Martin Brown, son of John Brown, barber of Oxford University, was apprenticed to Thomas Barnett in 1766 and made free in 1773/4. Subsequent generations of the family followed in the business until 1868. All the family members are recorded as trading in the High Street.

- Martin Brown, High Street, 1804, & son 1823 – 52
- Martin Brown (eldest son of Martin Brown), apprenticed in 1794, free in 1799
- Martin Brown, Senior & Junior, St Peters in the East (1802 Freemans Poll)
- Richard Brown (second son of Martin Brown), free in 1806
- Brown & Son (gunmakers) High Street (Underhill's Directory 1816)
- Brown, Richard, 68, High Street (Pigot's Directory 1823 -1830, Robson's Commercial Directory 1839, Vincent's Oxford Directory 1835 and Hunt & Co's Oxford Directory 1846)
- William Brown (eldest son of Martin Brown Junior), free in 1826
- John Brown (second son of Martin Brown Junior), free in 1826
- Charles Brown (third son of Martin Brown Junior), free in 1826
- Turner Crockett Brown (eldest son of Richard Brown), free in 1830
- Henry Brown (sixth son of Richard Brown), free in 1868
- Richard Brown, gunmaker, St Peters in the East (1802 Freemans Poll and 1834 HFO*)

The Sykes family

Several Sykes gunmakers are recorded as working in Oxford in the 19th century, spanning two or three generations; they were active from 1804 to 1830. Samuel Sykes is listed in 1804, but it is not clear what his relationship was to James Sykes, who succeeded him. James was trading in the High Street from 1810 to 1816 and as James Sykes & Son from 1823 to 1830, according to the Trade Directory (James Sykes, gunsmith, St Mary the Virgin -1802 Freemans Poll).

James Sykes Junior was apprenticed to his father in 1817. James Sykes Senior died and his will was proved in 1824. Pigot's New Commercial Directory for 1823 and 1830 lists James Sykes in the High Street. The Oriel Plan of Oxford for 1814 shows No 94 High Street as "**being occupied by a Mr Sykes**". The business continued at least until 1839, when James Sykes, gunmaker, is mentioned in a lease.



Examples of Sykes's work



Figure 1 – Trade label of Sykes, gunmaker, High Street, Oxford.



Figure 2 – A three barrelled tap action pistol with brass body and barrels, 7³/₈" overall with muzzles cut for a key, signed Sykes, Oxford, c1800 (US auction sale).



Figure 3 - A cased pair of half-stocked flintlock duelling pistols with octagonal 22 bore barrels signed Sykes, Oxford in gold and struck with Irish registration marks DC 4909 & 4910 for Dublin City, signed locks with French cocks, roller frizzens and waterproof pans (courtesy of Dominic Vincent of Garth Vincent, also illustrated in *Guns Review* July 1991).



Figure 4



Figure 5 - An 18 bore flintlock pistol with folding bayonet, c1815, half-stocked, octagonal barrel with gold line and platinum touch hole, signed Oxford, detented lock signed Sykes with rainproof pan and roller frizzen, Birmingham proof marks (Bonhams 18 April 2012, lot 232).



Figures 6-8 - A pair of "top-hat" percussion pistols of fine quality, iron frames signed Sykes, Oxford, c1825, each nipple with sprung cap retainer, finely chequered grips with silver lion-mask butt caps, Birmingham proof marks (courtesy of Scotney Castle, National Trust).





Thomas Beckley

Thomas Beckley, who was apprenticed to James Sykes, was made free in 1831 and had a shop in the High Street in 1835 (Vincent's Oxford Directory 1835). He may have taken over the Sykes premises. Thomas Beckley, gunmaker, St Peters in the East (Householders and Freemen of Oxford 1834).



Figure 9 - Trade label of Beckley, High St, Oxford (courtesy of Henry Krank).

John & James Forrest

- James Forrest is listed in the High Street, 1804 - 16, Magpie Lane 1823 (Pigot) and Oriel Lane in 1829 - 30 (Pigot)
- James Forrest, gunsmith, St Peter-le-Bailey (1802 Freemans Poll)
- John Forrest, Senior, gunmaker, Holywell (1802 Freemans Poll and 1834 HFO)
- John Forrest was involved in a trial in 1803 (said to be living at the same address as John Collis Junior and William Dupe).
- John Forrest had three sons made free in 1818, 1820 and 1841. All were identified as "son of John Forrest, gunsmith".
- James Forrest had four sons made free, one in 1830 and three in 1850. All were identified as "son of James Forrest, gunsmith".
- James Charles Forrest, gunmaker, Oriel Lane (Vincent's Oxford Directory 1835) and Magpie Lane (1834 HCO)



William Dupe, St Aldates, 1810 - 33

William Dupe was rather different from his peers since he came to Oxford already established as a gunmaker and inventor. He appears to have led a particularly eventful and somewhat troubled life. Born in Somerset in 1749, he first came to notice in the gun trade in London in July 1798 when he patented a new method of manufacturing iron and steel for gun barrels. This venture soon failed, massive debts accumulated and an announcement in the London Gazette confirmed the dissolution of his partnership with Henry Peter Stacy by mutual consent.

By 1803 he had moved to Oxford and is mentioned in an account of a trial at the Oxford Quarter Sessions together with John Collis Junior and James Forrest (*see above*). He became a Freeman of the city in 1805, thus being allowed to set up his own business. In 1812 he was declared bankrupt and imprisoned. However, undeterred, he continued in business and Underhill's Directory for 1816 records him as trading at St Aldates. Pigot's New Commercial Directory for 1823 and 1830 shows him at the same address.

His business apparently prospered and he took on an apprentice, William Pether, who became free in 1827. Dupe was granted a patent in 1831, together with William Bingham, "**for certain improvements to firearms of different descriptions**". Another invention was advertised in the Oxford Journal of 1833 for "**a newly invented gunlock so constructed as to prevent the possibility of all accidents whatever**". His address was given as St Clements. According to an article in the Gentleman's Magazine at the time of his death at the age of 95 years in 1843, he was involved in many other aspects of 19th century activities, such as ballooning, railways and the Temperance movement.

Many examples of Dupe's work have been recorded, the best known being the 14 barrelled gun for Colonel Thornton (*see Blackmore page 85*). In the early 19th century he used Birmingham barrels struck with the "tombstone" mark. It was suggested (wrongly) by Pollard, and others, that this was Dupe's own personal mark, an error which is continually cited today (see B Godwin & J Evans, "Why the Tombstone? - unusual marks on Birmingham guns" RPL 002 - <http://researchpress.blogspot.co.uk/p/library.html>).

Examples of Dupe's work



Figure 10



Figures 10 & 11 - A flintlock duelling pistol, c1810, with octagonal Damascus twist barrel signed Wm Dupe in an oval gold cartouche, engraved bolted lock with roller frizzen, engraved iron furniture and set trigger, full-stocked with silver ovals to the barrel wedges and ramrod with powder charger. (Private Collection).



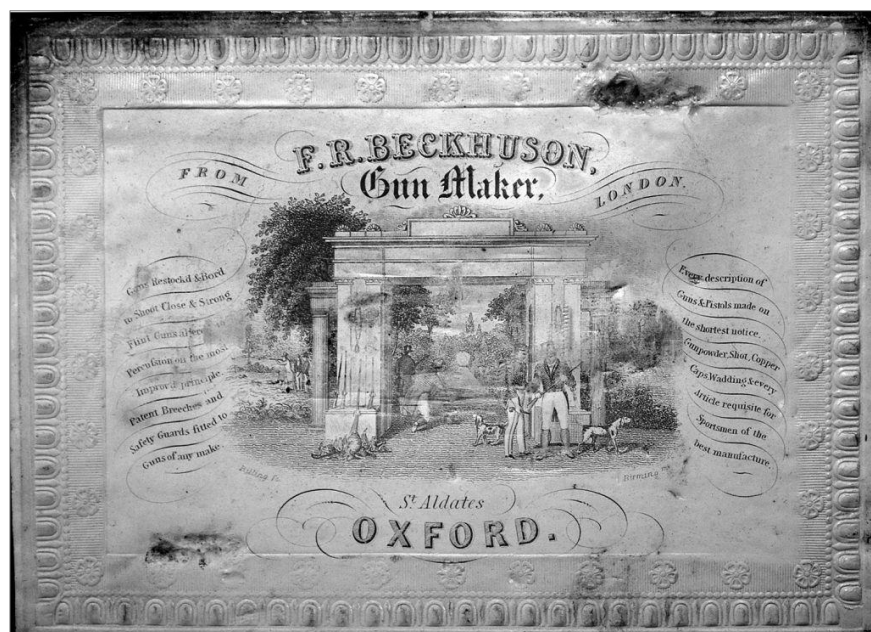
Figure 12 - A cased pair of 32 bore percussion duelling pistols, c1829, octagonal barrels signed in gold on the top flat and Birmingham proof marks, detented signed locks and silver furniture hallmarked for 1829 by Freeth & Jones (Bonhams 30 November 2011, Lot 530).



The Beckhusens

Frederick Rudolph Beckhusan, son of Frederick Rudolph & Sarah Beckhusen, sugar refiner, was baptised on 27 April 1817 at the church of St James in Bristol. He set up in business at 6 St Aldate Street, Oxford in 1841, later going into partnership with his brother, William Alfred Beckhausen in 1846 (Hunt & Co's Oxford Directory 1846). The partnership was dissolved by mutual consent in 1849. Frederick Beckhusan remained in business until 1852.

Examples of Beckhusan's work



Figures 13 & 14 – A cased pair of percussion overcoat or travelling pistols (courtesy of John Slough of London). These are boxlock, side-hammer pistols, fitted with spring bayonets (on left side of pistol) and cast silver butt caps, complete with a full set of accessories.



Figure 15 – A pair of target or duelling pistols (courtesy of West Street Antiques).
These are half stocked, with raked butts and no provision for ramrods, very much in the style of Purdey.

The Venables Family

John Venables was at 21 St Aldates from 1846 to 1853 (Hunt & Co's Oxford Directory 1846), and in partnership with his son (Sidney?) in 1868. The company traded as Venables & Son at 99, St Aldates Street until 1985 when the business closed. According to the Oxford Record Office, the business began in 1790. An article in the Oxford Journal, circa 1960, quoted a member of the Venables family as saying that "his grandfather had founded the business".

Figure 16 – A cased pair of percussion pocket pistols, c1840, Birmingham proved and signed by Venables of Oxford but almost certainly made in Birmingham (Rock Island Auctions USA December 2010, Lot 27).





Examples of other Oxford Gunmakers' work

Field



Figure 17 - A percussion pocket pistol with folding bayonet c1840, Birmingham proved and signed by Field of Oxford (Skinner Auctions USA 2008).

Pether



Figure 18 - A pair of percussion pocket pistols, c1840, turn-off Birmingham proved barrels signed Pether, Oxford, bag shaped grips with silver oval escutcheons (courtesy of Gun & Sports Shop, Exeter).



Webb

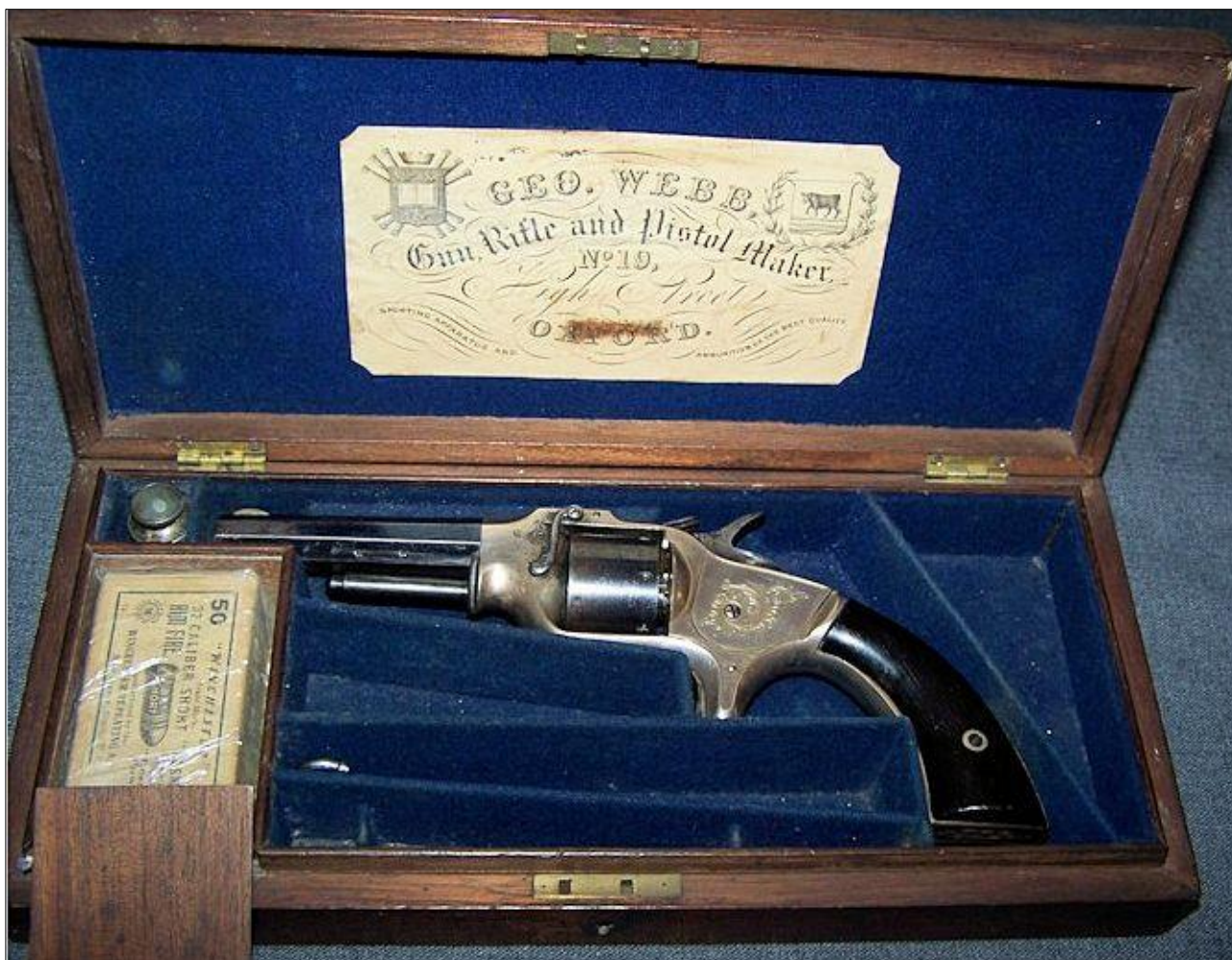


Figure 19 – A cased revolver in .32 RF calibre, c1865, nickel plated and engraved frame, blued barrel and cylinder with Birmingham proof marks, the case label with the name and address of George Webb, Oxford (courtesy of James Francis Antiques, USA).

For a list of other 19th century makers see Appendix 1

Conclusion

The city of Oxford continued to grow and flourish in the 19th century, with the development of canal and rail communications, local industries such as printing and, of course, the prestige and influence of the University. With the resulting increase in trade and wealth in the city, it is not surprising that the local gunsmiths shared in this prosperity. However, the gun trade was concentrated in a few families, located mainly in the commercial centre. An admittedly limited examination of some of their surviving products suggests that the emphasis had shifted from bespoke production for relatively wealthy clients in the 17th and 18th centuries to a broadening of the market and the finishing, retailing and repairing of guns and pistols that originated for the most part in Birmingham.



Some of the examples seen are of high quality but this is reflected more in the degree of finishing applied to a fairly standardised range of products rather than in the individual “house style” of a particular maker. This is particularly marked in the case of pocket pistols, which appear to follow a few basic formats; these were embellished or refined to suit the needs and pocket of the customer, e.g. the quality and extent of the engraving or the inclusion of special features such as safety catches, spring bayonets, decorative butt caps etc.

The transition from flintlock to percussion meant that serviceable arms could be produced more cheaply since the skills requirement was reduced. In the second half of the century, the demand for single and double barrelled pistols declined rapidly with the availability of percussion and later breech-loading revolvers, manufactured by a few specialised British makers, e.g. Adams, Tranter, Webley or copies of American arms such as Smith & Wesson. These of course were signed with the name of the “gunsmith” or rather the retailer who had placed the order. Thus, the individual “house style” of the earlier makers had given way to the need to supply a reliable product at a competitive price. Indeed, this was typical of the development and eventual decline of the British gun trade as a whole in provincial centres in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Appendix 1

Other 19th century gunmakers in Oxford

- W & S Rooke, gunmakers 1831; bill of sale advertising carbines, cartridge boxes and police swords
- William Field, Bear Lane, 1841 – 44 (Robson’ Commercial Directory 1839)
- Thomas Sayer, gunsmith, St Peter-le-Bailey, 1802 Freemans Poll
- Thomas Sawyer, gunsmith, Queen Street Oxford, will proved in 1831
- Thomas Sides, St Aldates Street 1829, listed in Pigot’s 1830 Directory, also William Sides
- William Pether, apprenticed to William Dupe, free in 1826, at St Aldates Street, 1829 – 52 (Vincent’s Oxford Directory 1835, Robson’s Commercial Directory 1839 and Hunt & Co’s Oxford Directory 1846)
- George Metcalfe, Headington, Oxford
- William Fidler, gunsmith 1856, declaration of £50 mortgage payment
- George Walter Webb, 19, High Street, 1862 – 69 and at 16, High Street c1870 to c1886 (then moved to Hull). Frank Edward Webb (probably his son) continued at the same address until c1897
- Charles Quinn Hamshaw, 15 Grove Street, c1878
- Robert Scragg, is listed in the 1881 census as a “gunmaker”, born 1817
- Joseph Titley Palmer, gunmaker, Pembroke Street, St Ebbes (1834 HFO)

Sources

- Bailey, D. W. & Nie, D, *English Gunmakers*, London, 1978
- Blackmore, Howard, *Dictionary of London Gunmakers 1350 – 1850*, London, 1986
- Brown, Nigel, *British Gunmakers Volume 2*, Shrewsbury, 2005
- *Craft Guilds – a History of the County of Oxford Volume 4*, Victoria County History, London, 1979
- *The Gentleman’s Magazine 1843* – article by “Sylvanus Urban” on the life of William Dupe
Householders & Freemen of Oxford 1834 (*HFO 1834) - online via Google Books

Acknowledgements

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