



The Probin Gunmakers of 18th Century Birmingham

by Brian Godwin, John Evans and David Williams

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*Officer's fusil by
Thomas (1) Probin,
c.1720. Note the "TP"
maker's mark and
private proof marks.
(Royal Armouries,
Leeds — XII.1750).*

Introduction

When investigating the history of any type of antique object, one usually starts by looking at a surviving example in detail. In the case of antique firearms of any quality, the gunmaker (or the retailer) will normally have signed the piece, sometimes adding the place of origin. In addition, English firearms were almost always struck with proof marks, which will further assist the researcher. If the gun was silver mounted, then the unique English hallmarking system will give a fairly accurate indication of when it was made. Building up a list or database of these characteristics will help to develop a clearer picture of the quantity and quality of the maker's work.

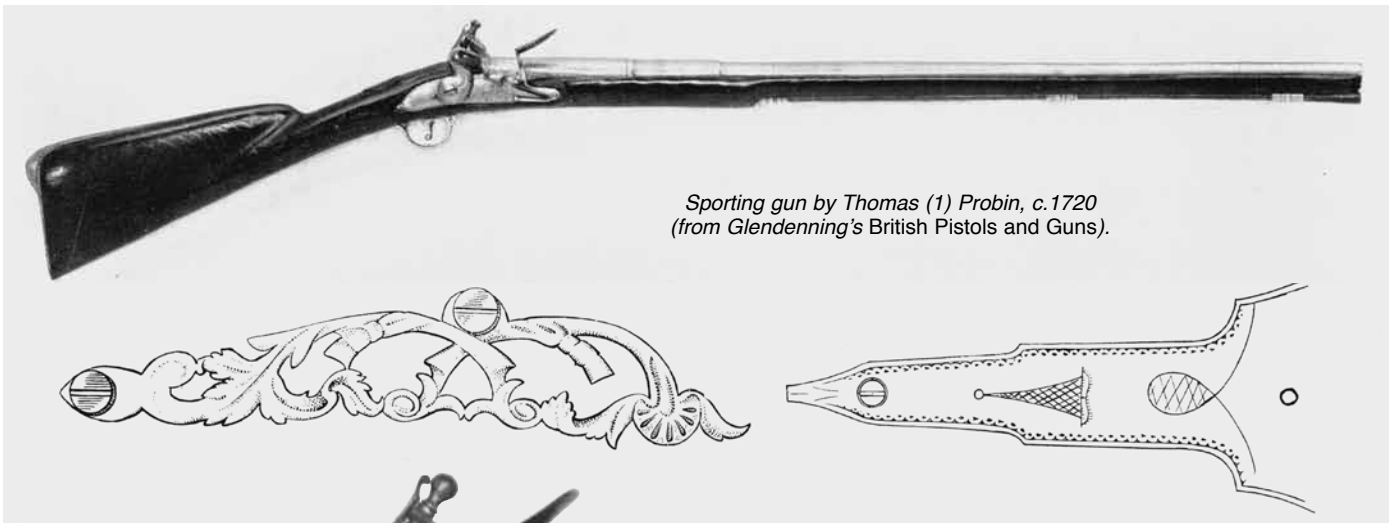
But all this only tells us about the guns themselves, not the people who made them. It is only by examining primary sources of data, such as parish records of baptisms, marriages and deaths, wills, lawsuits and contemporary accounts in journals that we begin to get some idea of the men (and a few women) whose names are signed on the pieces that we collect and value so highly. Where London makers are concerned, there are additional records available to researchers such

as the archives of the Gunmakers Company and official government papers describing the activities of the Board of Ordnance. These sources have already informed some well-known studies of famous London gunmakers, such as the Mantons, Griffins and Forsyth.

In stark contrast, the history of the English provincial trade has remained largely unexplored until the last few years. Recently, however, an increasing amount of information from Britain's Record and Archive Offices has become available in digitized form, which enables us to throw far more light on the affairs of the craftsmen of the 17th and 18th centuries. This article attempts to trace the fortunes of the Probins, a family (indeed, one might say, a dynasty) of Birmingham gunmakers.

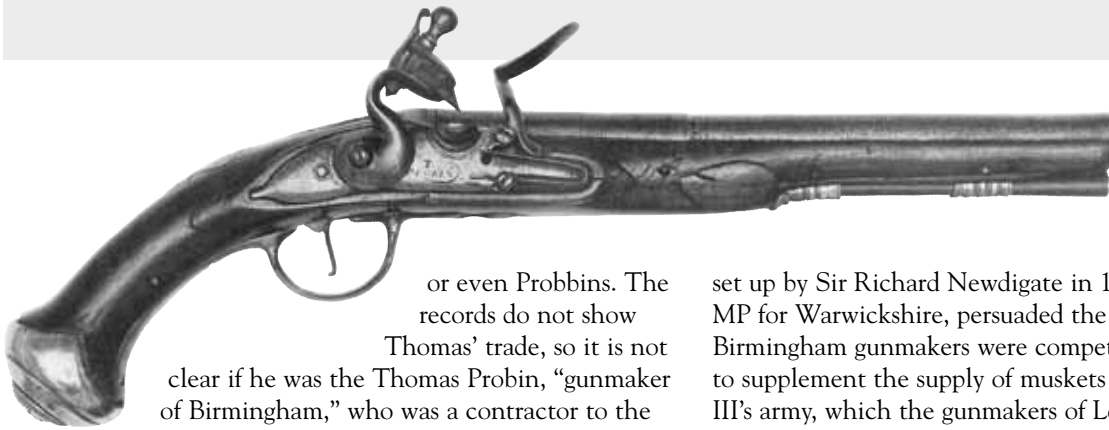
Beginnings

The earliest sources of information about the Probin family in Birmingham are contained in the parish records of two churches: St. Martin's and St. Philip's. The baptisms and burials of Thomas Probin's children are first recorded in the register of St. Martin's church during the mid-1690s. At that time, the spelling of the name varied from Probin to Probine,



*Sporting gun by Thomas (1) Probin, c.1720
(from Glendenning's British Pistols and Guns).*

*(left) Holster pistol by
Thomas (1) Probin,
c.1720. (Wallis & Wallis)*



or even Probbins. The records do not show Thomas' trade, so it is not clear if he was the Thomas Probin, "gunmaker of Birmingham," who was a contractor to the Board of Ordnance between 1708 and 1727.

St. Martin's church is south of the town center, and in 1715, a new church, St. Philip's, was built on the high ground to the west side of the area that came to be known as the gun quarter. As this new church was considerably closer to his home and workshop, Thomas changed his allegiance to St. Philip's, which then became the family church. Probin baptisms, marriages and burials are recorded in the church registers over the next 100 years. Unfortunately, the trades of these individuals are not recorded, but it is almost inconceivable that they should not be members of the Probin family of gunmakers, especially as no other Probins can be found in Birmingham at this time.

The 18th-century Probins

Very few examples of Thomas (1) Probin's work appear to have survived, and only three guns were found after an extensive search by the authors. Among the earliest is a musket of exceptional quality, probably made for an officer, that dates to about 1715 and is now in the Royal Armouries, Leeds (XII.1750). Another long gun by Thomas formed part of the Ian Glendenning collection and is illustrated in his book *British Pistols and Guns 1640-1740*.¹ A fine brass-mounted holster pistol signed "T. Probin" and dating to the early 18th century was sold at Wallis & Wallis in 1994.²

Thomas is known to have supplied muskets to the Board of Ordnance in 1708, and must therefore have served his apprenticeship and established himself in business some time before this date, perhaps as early as 1695. It is possible that he had been apprenticed to one of the Birmingham gunmakers who supplied muskets to the Ordnance following the contract

set up by Sir Richard Newdigate in 1689. Newdigate, who was MP for Warwickshire, persuaded the Board of Ordnance that Birmingham gunmakers were competent and capable enough to supplement the supply of muskets required by William III's army, which the gunmakers of London were struggling to meet.³ The Birmingham gunmakers involved in this contract were Jacob Austin, Thomas Moore, William Bourne, Thomas West and Richard Weston.⁴

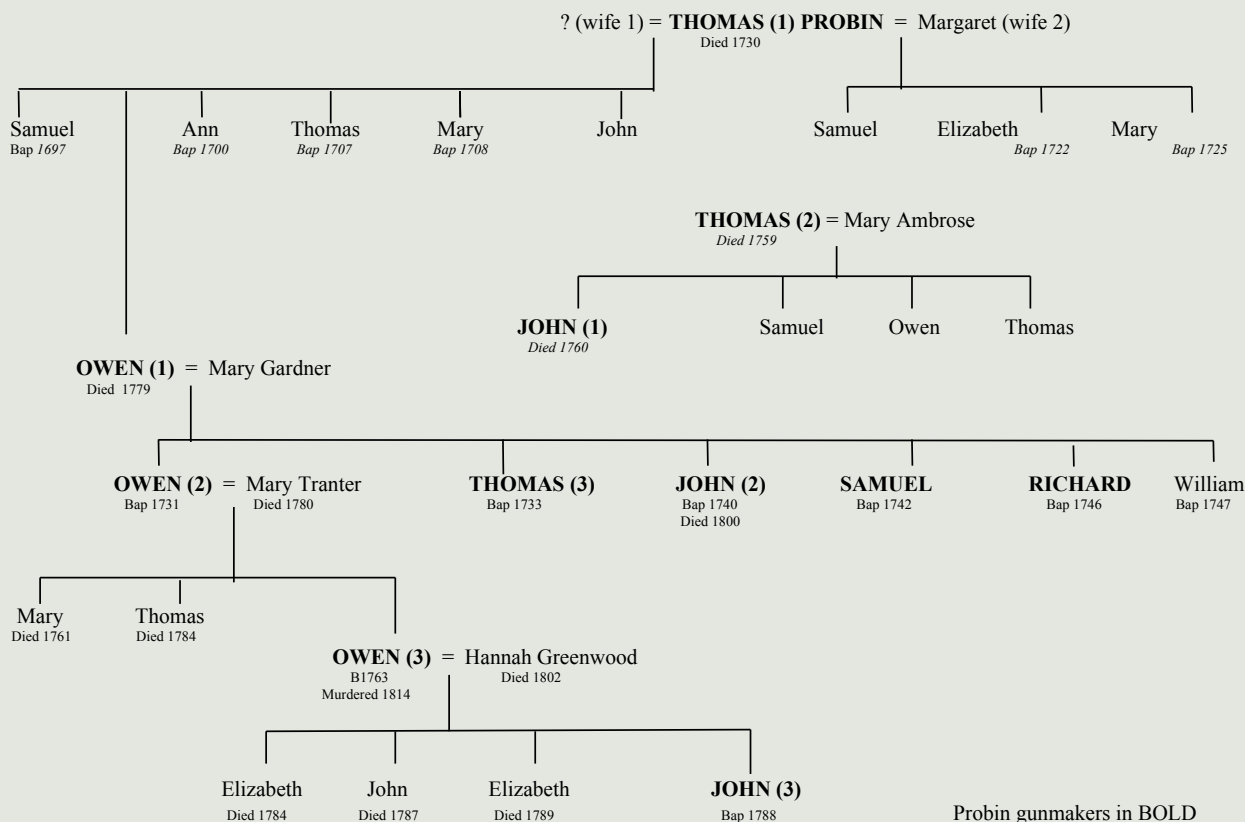
It is quite likely that Thomas Probin married after the completion of his apprenticeship, as was the custom. Thus, the baptism of the first of his children was recorded in the church register around 1695.⁵

The Board of Ordnance Bill Books record that Thomas Probin was a contract supplier at various times between the years 1708-1727. Records of the bills dated during these years show:⁶

- March 2 to September 28, 1708 — 100 Land Muskets with nosebands to Pattern @ 22/-
- July 1 to September 8, 1710 — 53 Muskets
- July 1, 1710 to January 12, 1711 — 53 Muskets
- 1717 — 300 sets of iron Musket furniture @ 2/6 per set
- 1717 — 300 sets Carbine ribs & rings
- March 17, 1720 — 856 sets Carbine ribs & rings
- December 30, 1727 — 377 Land Service Muskets, iron mtd, w/ bayonets @ 26/6

Apart from the church records, little is known about Thomas' life, although his will, written in 1730, together with a probate list of his "Goods & Chattels," does provide a few clues and gives us some insight. Thomas Probin, "Gunmaker of Birmingham," died later that year and probate was granted in February of 1731.⁷ It appears that he had children from both an earlier and a later marriage. His older children, Owen, John, Thomas and Ann, were almost certainly adults by the time of his death, Ann having married John Jackson

The Probin Gunmakers of Birmingham



in 1720. To these older children he bequeathed a token “five shillings a piece.” His younger children, Samuel, Elizabeth and Mary by his second wife Margaret, were still below the age of majority, so in addition to “one Guinea a piece,” he bequeathed money from his estate to be set aside for their “maintenance and education,” and to young Samuel, “all necessary apparel during his apprenticeship.”

Before probate was granted, an inventory of Thomas Probin’s house was taken, which recorded that the building consisted of a parlour and kitchen on the ground floor (above a cellar), with two chambers on the next floor (bedrooms) and a garret (or attic) above this. Unfortunately, the address is not recorded, and there is no mention of a workshop or tools. The contents of the house included old leather chairs and pictures, pewter dishes and plates, a spinning wheel and “some Delft ware” — a modest but comfortable home.

The Christian names Owen, John, Thomas and Samuel were very popular male names for the Probins and reoccur many times during their story, as will be seen in the following paragraphs. While St. Philip’s church records the arrivals and departures of the Probin family during this period, no clear link between the names of these individuals can be found. The resultant family tree is, therefore, a matter of conjecture, which may or may not be correct, although every effort has been made to make good sense of them. Similarly, records of their gunmaking activities remain a little vague and fragmented.

Another, younger, Thomas Probin was mentioned in a letter dated 1743 from James Farmer to his brother Joseph Farmer, gunmaker of Birmingham and an important supplier

to the Board of Ordnance, who was working in Liverpool at the time:

Deare Brother,

*If you could mention any time that would be proper for to send Tom Probin down to get his freedom I would sent him directly because before he comes & brings his family that would be necessary to be secured & may prevent objections & probably you may fixt it when there is like to be the least opposition I desire you would lett me know because the sooner its done ye better & spring will be coming on soon.*⁸

Farmer’s purpose for writing this letter is unclear, as is the exact meaning of the term “freedom” in this context. A Thomas Probin of Birmingham, “Gunsmith & Chapman,”⁹ was declared bankrupt in the *London Gazette* in 1747.¹⁰ Just how these two Thomas’ relate to one another, or if they are one and the same person, is uncertain.

In 1742, an Owen Probin, “gunsmith of Birmingham,” took an apprentice, Christopher Fuller, for the term of seven years, paying the amount of £5.5s for the Apprentice’s Indentures Duty, a tax that became law in 1710.¹¹ It is likely, although unproven, that Owen was the son of the first Thomas discussed earlier.¹² An exceptional double-barrelled holster pistol, c.1750, by Owen Probin is illustrated in Neal and Back’s book *Great British Gunmakers 1740–1790*.¹³

The records of the East India Company also show that an Owen Probin was sent to St. Helena as an armourer in 1753 at a salary of £42 per annum, although it is not known if he is the same Owen Probin discussed above.¹⁴ In 1755, Mary, the wife of Owen Probin, “gunsmith of Birmingham,”

is cited in a case of defamation (slander).¹⁵

A will, hastily written on a scrap of paper and dated March 5, 1779, is probably that of Owen (1) Probin, “gunsmith of Birmingham.”¹⁶ Although there is no written confirmation of his trade in the will, the five sons mentioned (Samuel, Owen, Thomas, Richard and William), together with daughter Mary Wheeler, must surely be the children of Owen Probin, the gunmaker. To each of them, he left a token payment of one shilling. His almost illegible signature is a telltale sign of his poor health, and he died shortly afterwards, with probate being granted on April 16th. His daughter Mary appears to have married one of the boys from the Wheeler family, another dynasty of Birmingham gunmakers.¹⁷

Occasional snippets of information about the Probin family continue to emerge from the records, but the few documents that survive tend to cause even more confusion. In April of 1759, another Thomas (2) Probin, “gunmaker of Birmingham,” died without leaving a will. He was mentioned in an application for probate by his son John (1).¹⁸ This Thomas Probin was certainly one of those mentioned above, but no other clues to his identity have been found. A year later, before John Probin could fully administer his father’s estate, he too died. His will, written in January and proved in May of 1760, provides a deeper insight into the Probin family.¹⁹ John Probin, “gunmaker of Birmingham,” bequeathed “Ten Pounds a piece” to his brothers Samuel, Owen and Thomas. He appointed two executors, “my esteemed friends” Robert Wilson²⁰ and William Staples,²¹ both fellow gunmakers in Birmingham, to administer the contents of the will. This is further proof of the close allegiance between the Probins and other gunmaking families in Birmingham.

John Probin appears to have done well for himself, owning, together with his friends Wilson and Staples, freehold properties, tenements, dwelling houses, shops and other premises, not only in Birmingham, but also in the nearby ancient city of Coventry. The monies, interest and rent from these properties he bequeathed to his daughter Mary Hurley and grandchild Joseph, stipulating that “it be paid into her own hands and to, and for, her sole and separate use.” He makes it quite clear that her husband, Joseph Hurley, “shall not intermeddle, control nor



Double-barrelled pistol by Owen (1) Probin, c. 1750. (Bonham’s, London)

have anything to do with the same.” Exactly how Thomas 2 and John 3 relate to the other Probins has not been established.

In 1759, Owen Probin, “Gunsmith & Bachelor,” perhaps the son of Owen (1) mentioned above, married spinster Mary Tranter.²² Also in 1759, Charles Probin of Birmingham, “Gunsmith,” took apprentice Edward Gilles, and a premium of £5.05s was paid.²³ He is listed in Birmingham Directories in various years from 1769 onwards (e.g. in 1777 as “gun & pistol maker” at Sand Street). A Charles Probin was baptised at St. Philip’s in 1727, the “Spurious (illegitimate) son of Thomas Probin and Mary Ambrose.” It is unclear whether he was the “gunsmith” mentioned above or his exact relationship to other members of the Probin family.

In 1764, a Richard Probin was recorded as “Gunsmith & Bachelor” when he married Mary Dyas at St. Philip’s.²⁴ He is also likely to have been the son of Owen (1) mentioned earlier and probably the Richard Probin mentioned in the baptismal register of St. Philip’s in 1746.²⁵

In 1796, Richard Probin, “of Warwickshire, a Gunsmith,” was indicted for a felony along with another man in London for stealing a bank note valued at £100.²⁶ The two men were tried at the Old Bailey magistrates court where they were found guilty and sentenced to transportation for seven years. At the time, this often meant being sent to a penal colony in Australia, an eight-month journey of some fifteen thousand miles. A note in the Criminal Register states that the two men were sent to the (prison) hulks at Portsmouth,²⁷ but it is not known if they served their sentence there or were indeed sent to Australia. Interestingly, this Register also records a description of Richard Probin, “aged 45, 5 feet 8 inches, Dark Complexion, brown hair and grey eyes.”²⁸ How Richard Probin came to be in London and what became of him after this time is unknown.

Thanks mainly to the Birmingham city trade directories that were published from the mid-1760s,²⁹ a clearer picture of the Probin gunmakers can be established. This later generation of Probins are shown working at a number of different addresses within the Gun Quarter. The Christian names so popular with the Probins of an earlier generation persist: Owen Probin of Newton Street, “barrel stainer,” Thomas Probin of Higgins Yard, “gun-finisher,” Samuel Probin of Upper Priory, also a “gun-finisher,” and John Probin of St. John Street, a “gunmaker.” These four may have been brothers, probably the sons of the first Owen Probin [Owen 1] mentioned earlier,³⁰ but again this cannot be proved definitively. Their details follow below:

Owen (2) Probin, “barrel stainer,” is recorded at Newton Street between 1776 and 1785. It is possible that he was baptised at St. Philip’s church in 1731 and married Mary Tranter in 1759. Three children are recorded in St. Philip’s register: Mary in 1760, Owen (3) in 1763 and Thomas in 1766. Only Owen survived childhood. After his wife’s death in 1780, it appears that Owen (2) quickly remarried Elizabeth Shaw within the year.

Thomas (3) Probin is recorded at Higgins Yard, off Russell Street, between the years 1769 and 1777. In 1771, he took two apprentices, Joseph Whitmarsh and Moses Whitehouse.³¹ In 1784, then working at Bath Street, he unsuccessfully bid to become an engraver of small arms to the Ordnance. Thomas Probin “gun-finisher” wrote his will in 1783 and died in 1792.³² He

Four-barrelled volley pistol by John (2) Probin, c.1770, with tutenag barrels and frame. Note that the underside of the breech is stamped "PRO" "VED". (Private collection)



To the right we see the breech with the barrel group removed and the base of the barrel group itself.

(three views to the right) A Wender turn-over pistol by John (2) Probin, c.1770. (Bob Freeman collection)



Samuel Probin is mentioned in John Probin's will dated 1800, and it is possible that he was baptised at St. Philip's church in 1742, the son of Owen (1).

John (2) Probin was described in St. Philip's Church banns as "Gunsmith & Bachelor" when he married spinster Ann Pickford in 1767. Of their three children, only daughter Ann survived childhood. John may also have been the "son of Owen [1]" recorded in the register of baptisms for January of 1740. If so, he would have been aged 27 when he married in 1767. John Probin is recorded in the Birmingham trade directories during the period 1769 to 1800. The directories document him working at John Street and Bull Street. His business and reputation appear to have been highly thought of, and his guns bore the proud inscription "Gunmaker to the Prince of Wales," even though official documentation of this appointment has not been found. From the numerous surviving examples of his work, it is clear that he was capable of the finest craftsmanship and he specialized in the production of breechloading guns and multi-barrelled or multi-shot pistols. He was also capable of supplying both the Ordnance and private militias with muskets, carbines and pistols.

instructs his executors Charles Price and Joseph Gibbs, both button makers, to administer "all my Leasehold, Messuages, Lands, Tenements, Shops, Buildings and Premises," and to make sure that the profits went to Elizabeth, his wife, and Ann, his niece, the daughter of his sister, Elizabeth Jackson. Like the Probins of a previous generation, he had also done well for himself. It is possible that he was the "son of Owen [1] Probin" baptised at St. Philip's church in 1733, but this is not clear from the church records.

Samuel (1) Probin is recorded between 1769 and 1784. In 1777, he is listed as a "gun finisher" working at Upper Priory and was still there in 1784. The Sun Insurance records of October 24, 1781, now in the Guildhall Library, show that Samuel Probin insured his Birmingham property³³ as follows:

On buildings in Bull Street	1 house in tenure	£120
	brewhouse adjoining	£10
	shop adjoining	£20
	1 house in tenure	£100
	brewhouse adjoining	£10
	2 stables adjoining the shop	

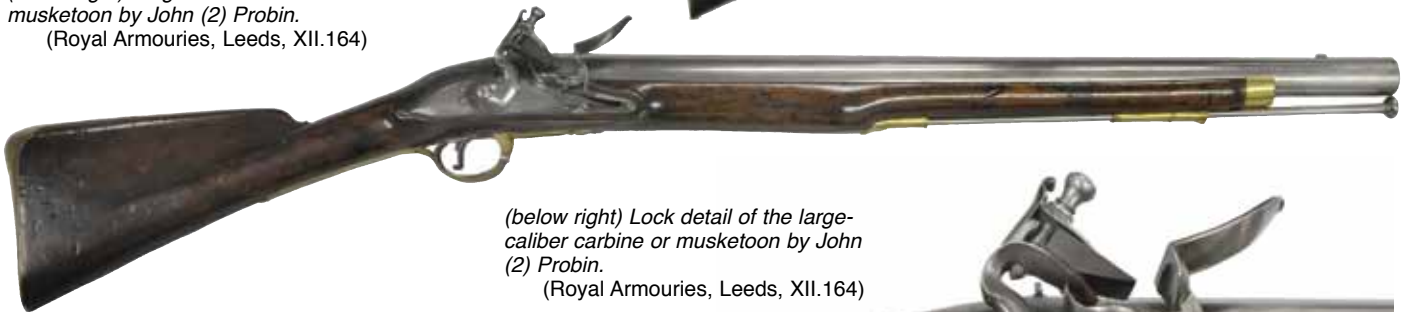
As we have seen, Thomas Probin supplied the Ordnance and John Probin supplied private militias with muskets (see for example the Short Land Pattern Musket), rifles, carbines and pistols. While there are some of his weapons in the

Lock detail of a blunderbuss by John (2) Probin, c.1770. (Private collection)

(inset below) A Short Land Pattern musket by John (2) Probin. (Bonham's, London 2003, Lot 221)



(below right) Large-caliber carbine or musketoen by John (2) Probin. (Royal Armouries, Leeds, XII.164)

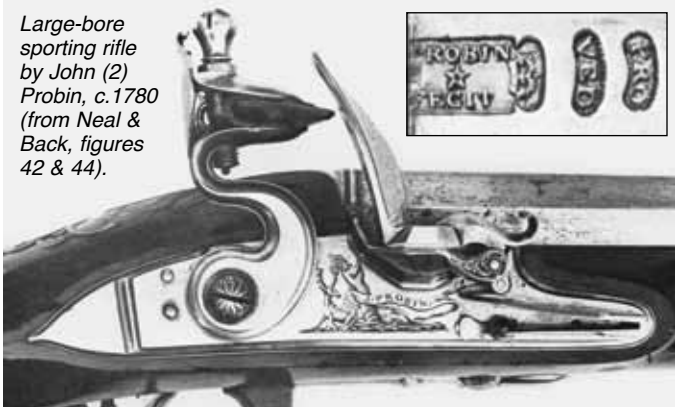


(below right) Lock detail of the large-caliber carbine or musketoen by John (2) Probin. (Royal Armouries, Leeds, XII.164)



collections of the Royal Armouries, it is not thought that he was a supplier to the Ordnance to any great extent, which was unusual for a well-known Birmingham gunmaker. A number of heavy, short-barrelled, four-bore carbines or musketoens are known — for instance, XII.164 from the Tower Collection in the Royal Armouries. One is claimed to have been used by the

Large-bore sporting rifle by John (2) Probin, c.1780 (from Neal & Back, figures 42 & 44).



Scottish poet Robert Burns during his duties as an excise man. Also, John Probin made large (0.67–0.69 inch) bore rifles with eight grooved octagonal barrels. Examples are marked with either London Gunmakers (Royal Armouries, XII.150) or Birmingham private proofs. These suggest that John had a reputation as a contractor for unusually large-bore weapons and was equipped to make rifles.³⁴ Although no documentary evidence exists, it is likely that John Probin's brothers Owen, Thomas and Samuel may well have been involved in the production of large orders of military firearms.

John Probin, "Gunmaker of John Street," Birmingham, died on July 8, 1800, and his death was announced in Bir-



(above and right) Rifle by John (2) Probin. (Royal Armouries, Leeds, XII.150)

irmingham's *Aris's Gazette* on July 14th. His will, proved on August 2, 1800,³⁵ mentions his brothers William, Owen and Samuel, and his nephews John Probin and Owen Powell. His named executors, Thomas and William Astbury, merchants of Snow Hill, Birmingham, were required to administer his estate, which included property, stock-in-trade and workshop implements. He left the bulk of his estate to his wife Eliza, but there were bequests of five guineas each to his brothers and nephew John, for them to buy "a suit of mourning."

John left a set of tools to both his brother Owen and nephew John Probin (see separate entry below). It is very likely that they were gunmaking tools, which helps to support the assumption that his brothers Owen and Samuel were the gunmakers mentioned above, and adds substance to the proposition that they might all be the sons of the gunmaker Owen (1) Probin of the previous generation. Although his daughter Ann is mentioned, the wording of the will suggests that John Probin had no male heirs and that perhaps his nephew John was his apprentice and protégé. After John Probin's death, the business was taken over by fellow gunmaker John Cherry of Bull Street, and was renamed Probin, Cherry & Co. This concern was active during the period 1800 to 1811.

Important Connections

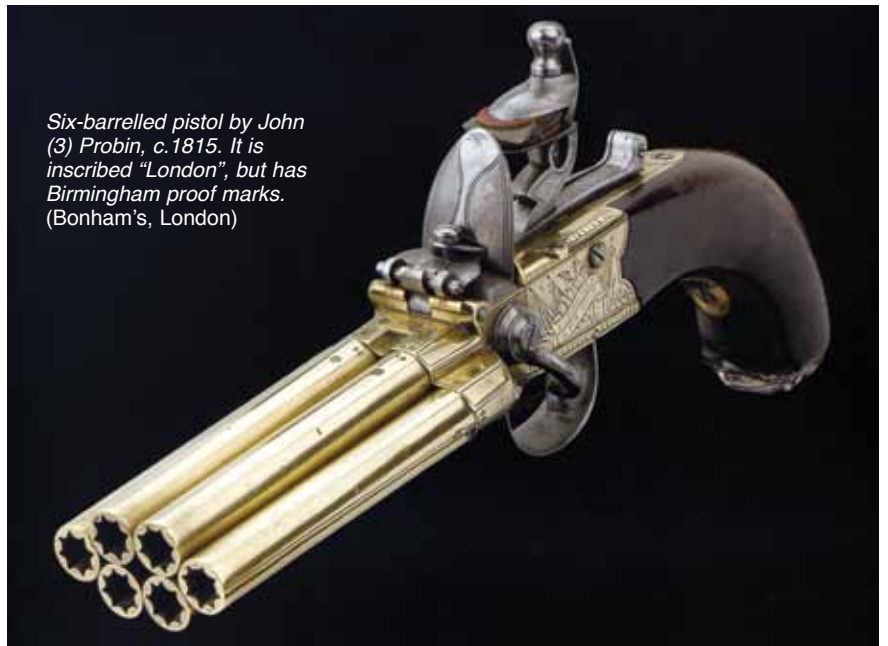
The Probin dynasty continued working into the 19th century, and details of two further Probin gunmakers are included, as they are inextricably linked with the earlier Probins. However, their affairs are as baffling as those of the previous generations.

John (3) Probin, the nephew, is first mentioned in his uncle's will of 1800 detailed above. Assuming that he was baptised in St. Philip's parish, only one John Probin from the last quarter of the 18th century was found, that of "John, son of Owen and Hannah," baptised in 1788. There appears to be no record of his



apprenticeship, but it is likely that he started this around the age of fourteen (c.1802), as was usually the case, and finished seven years later in about 1809, most probably under the guidance of his late uncle's business in Bull Street.

Like his uncle before him, John Probin seems to have inherited the ability to produce fine firearms of all types, particularly sporting guns, which is evident



Six-barrelled pistol by John (3) Probin, c.1815. It is inscribed "London", but has Birmingham proof marks. (Bonham's, London)

Air-gun by John (3) Probin & Co., Lisle St., London, c.1820. (Bonham's, London)



Double-barrelled sporting gun by John (3) Probin, made for the Prince of Wales, c.1809. (Private collection)



from several surviving examples. Some are signed “John Probin, London”. As with so many other contemporary Birmingham makers, he may have had a business outlet in the capital. One remarkable double-barrelled sporting gun from this period is shown on this page. It was made for George, Prince of Wales,³⁶ as the barrel inscription testifies,³⁷ and this is confirmed by the Royal cipher “Ich Dien” engraved on the silver escutcheon. This piece must date between the end of John’s apprenticeship (c.1809) and The Regency Act of 1811, when George, Prince of Wales, became Prince Regent.³⁸ Especially poignant is the inscription engraved on the underside of the barrels (“Nephew to the late I.P.”), which is a fitting tribute to his uncle.

However, John’s success did not last. In 1816, he was in London, listed in the *London Gazette* under Insolvent Debtors: “John Probin, formerly of Birmingham, Warwickshire, but late of the Haymarket, Saint James’s, in the County of Middlesex, Gun-Maker, now a prisoner for debt in the Fleet prison, in the City of London.”³⁹ At this time, insolvent debtors could be

detained indefinitely if their creditors so wished. Nevertheless, he apparently resolved the problem and continued in business at 29 Lisle Street, Leicester Square, from 1826 to 1829 and, from this high-class address, produced high-quality percussion firearms of all kinds.

In 1827, John Probin is again recorded in the *London Gazette* as an insolvent debtor, and his London addresses are listed as 25 Lisle Street, then Earl Street, Edgware-Road, then Beak Street, Regent Street, and finally “of late at No. 29, Lisle-Street, Leicester-Square.”⁴⁰ In 1829, a business partnership failed, and the case was also reported in the June 8, 1829 *London Gazette*: “The Partnership between John Probin and Charles John Holland, as Gun-Makers, carried on by them as John Probin and Co., No. 46, Lisle-Street, Leicester-Square, London, is this day dissolved.”⁴¹

Between 1829 and 1834, he was at 46 Lisle Street, in 1834 at 3 & 29 Gerrard Street, at 70 Strand in 1841–42, at 11 Agar Street, West Strand in 1843–46, and then St. Martin’s Lane in 1851.⁴² In 1849, John Probin was yet again in debt



Cased pair of pistols by John (3) Probin, inscribed "Maker to His Majesty", with a Lisle Street, Leicester Square address label, c.1830. (Bonham's, London, November 2003)

and once more listed in the *London Gazette* as an "Insolvent Debtor" — and an inmate of the infamous Marshalsea Prison: "John Probin, late of No. 29, Lisle-street, Leicester-square, Middlesex, Gun-Maker — In the Marshalsea Prison."⁴³

The events of John (3) Probin's life remains as vague as the Probins' before him, and only fragments of his tantalising story remain. St. Philip's church, Birmingham, records the baptism of a John Probin, "son of Owen" in 1788 (probably Owen (3) Probin — see next entry — although it cannot be proven). During the entire period of his time in London, a John Probin was also recorded in Birmingham at Steelhouse Lane (1802–06), Bull Street (1807–13), Moor Street (1814–1817), Moland Street (1827–39), Branston Street (1840–45), and Barrington Street in 1846. Whether these are one and the same man has not been established.⁴⁴

The 1841 Census of London recorded a John Probin, gunmaker, aged approximately 55 years and born in Birmingham, living at the Strand. He is missing from the 1851 Census, but there is a John Probin on the 1861 Census for Aston, Birmingham, aged 72, occupation "gun-sight maker." He was buried at St. Peter & St. Paul's, Aston, in 1866, aged 78 years, so was therefore born around 1788. Could this be the John Probin, Gunmaker to the Prince of Wales, of an earlier time?

Owen (3) Probin set up his business as a gunmaker in Hull, Yorkshire in 1802, claiming in advertisements that he had worked for, or with, the most prominent London gunmakers of the day, including Wilkinson, Egg, Nock and Wogdon. His business addresses during the period 1802 to 1814 varied between Scale Lane and Silver Street. An advertisement in the local newspaper *The Hull Packet* for 1807 reads, "Owen Probin, gun-maker from London, foreman to the late John Probin." The claims made in his advertisements that he could produce guns with the latest London refinements at a fraction of the London prices upset other gunmakers in Hull, most of whom had been established in the city for some years. Probin's arrogant style of self-promotion continued, with frequent newspaper advertisements proclaiming his ability to produce better guns. These assertions were always rejected by the other traders and tended to make him more and more unpopular.⁴⁵

His life came to a sudden and tragic end late one evening in June of 1814. It seems that Owen Probin shared a property with John Lever, a saddler, in

Silver Street, which was divided into two individual shops on the ground floor with a shared staircase to the upper floors. One Saturday evening, passersby were alarmed to hear shouts of "Murder!" and witnessed the sight of Probin and Lever brawling in the street, whereupon Probin cried out "He has stabbed me — I am a dead man." He was carried to his upstairs rooms, but despite medical aid, he died within half an hour. He had been stabbed three times with a shortsword. John Lever was immediately taken into custody and charged with willful murder, although, following his trial in August of 1814, the charge was reduced to manslaughter, and Lever was sentenced to one year's imprisonment with a fine of just 1 shilling. The two men had apparently been on bad terms for some time, but the reason for this final deadly argument remains a mystery.

The newspaper report of the murder stated that Owen was the son of Owen Probin of Birmingham — probably Owen (2) Probin, the barrel-stainer of Newton Street, and presumably the son who was baptised at St. Philip's in 1763.⁴⁶ Owen Probin's advertisement of 1807 stated that he was a "Gunmaker, from London" and "foreman to the late John Probin, Gunmaker to the Prince of Wales". The "late John [2] Probin" would therefore have been Owen's uncle.

Further evidence that Probin was not quite such a respectable citizen as some of his predecessors can be found in a document dated in July of 1807, entitled "Bastardy Order of Owen Probin, gunsmith, Hull." This was a legal document requiring a father of an illegitimate child to pay maintenance. The cross examination of "singlewoman" Ann Linwood of Hendon parish, whose son was born in June of that year, declared that Owen Probin was the father.⁴⁷

The life of Owen (3) Probin, like his death, remains sketchy and elusive, and provides quite a twist to the Probin story. The records of St. Philip's, Birmingham, show that Owen Probin had married Hannah Greenwood in 1789, and their four children were baptised in 1784, 1787, 1788 and 1789 respectively. Only one of these children, John (3) born in 1788 (see above), survived. This child was, therefore, the great nephew of "the

late John [2] Probin of Birmingham,” discussed previously. As probably the only surviving male child of these gunmakers, John (2) may well have considered him as his protégé and favoured him enough to call him “nephew” in his Will of 1800. The entire, convoluted Probin history has something of the air of a Dickensian novel about it with tangled relationships and loose ends leading to no firm conclusions.

Conclusion

The Probins were only one of several families of Birmingham gunmakers active throughout the late 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. This study reveals both their successes and failures, but despite the many gaps and uncertainties in the narrative, it is clear that the Probins’ main occupation throughout this long period was gunmaking. Their expertise was handed down from father to son, or to the nearest male relative in the case of John (2) and John (3). The surviving examples of their work show that, at their best, they were as capable and as innovative as any of the more illustrious London makers of the time. Finally, it is encouraging that the increasingly available sources of family information in digitized form will facilitate similar studies to be undertaken by those who wish to know more about the English provincial trade.

Sources & References


The National Archives, London; Birmingham Archives & Heritage Centre; Lichfield Record Office; Hull History Centre; East Riding Archives, Yorkshire; *The London Gazette*; The Old Bailey Online; Warwickshire County Record Office; *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*; U.K. Census 1841 to 1891 (National Archives); Monumental Inscriptions of St. Philip’s, Birmingham; Bath Record Office and *English Gunmakers: The Birmingham & Provincial Gun Trade*, De Witt Bailey & Douglas A. Nie, London 1978.

Endnotes:

- ¹I. Glendenning, *British Pistols and Guns 1640–1740*, London 1951, pp. 120–122.
²Wallis & Wallis, Sale 380, 5th January 1994, Lot 1306. Described as having a 10¼-inch barrel with London proof marks, brass mounts including a pierced foliate sideplate with animal’s-head finial and grotesque mask boss to butrcap. Overall length 16½ inches.
³D.W. Bailey & D.A. Nie, *English Gunmakers*, London 1978, page 15.
⁴See C. Harris, *History of the Birmingham Proof House*, Birmingham, 1946, pp. 7–13.
⁵Thomas (1) is likely to have finished his apprenticeship in the early 1690s, as usually apprentices could not marry until they finished their time. His first children were therefore born c.1695 to 1710 (recorded in St. Martin’s parish). If this is correct, the supposition is that he started his apprenticeship at age 14 in about 1685. He was, therefore, born in about 1670 and would have been aged about 60 years in 1731, the date of his death. As with much of the Probin story, only his date of death can be positively confirmed.
⁶Kindly supplied by DeWitt Bailey. See also D.W. Bailey, *British Board of Ordnance Small Arms Contractors 1689–1840*, Rhyl, 1999.
⁷Lichfield Record Office: B/C/11 – Probin, Thomas, 1731.
⁸Galton Papers, Birmingham City Archives – MS3101/C/C/2/1/5.
⁹A dealer or merchant.
¹⁰*London Gazette*, March 24, 1747.
¹¹National Archives: ref: 50/287 (IR1 Kew).
¹²If correct, Owen (1) would be aged about 45 years when he took on apprentice Chris Fuller in 1742.
¹³W.K. Neal and D. Back, *Great British Gunmakers 1740–1790*, London, 1984, page 124, plate 506.
¹⁴D.F. Harding, *Smallarms of the East India Company 1600–1856*, London, 1999, Vol. IV, Chapter 29, “The Users and Their Smallarms,” (see Armourers and tools for armourers), p. 13. The archival source is British Library, India Office Records, reference D/104, Correspondence Memoranda (i.e., memoranda of the Committee of Correspondence, a sub-committee of the Court of

- Directors), 1753–55.
¹⁵Lichfield Record Office: B/C/5/1755/16.
¹⁶Lichfield Record Office: B/C/11 – Probin, Owen, 1779.
¹⁷Robert Wheeler (1766–1783), Snow Hill, Birmingham (Bailey & Nie).
¹⁸Lichfield Record Office: B/C/11 – Probin, Thomas, 1759.
¹⁹Lichfield Record Office: B/C/11 – Probin, John, 1760.
²⁰Robert Wilson (1776–1772) Bull St., Birmingham. Died January 20, 1772 (Bailey & Nie).
²¹William Staples (1776–1770), Bull St., Birmingham (Bailey & Nie).
²²St. Philip’s, Birmingham, Church Banns, 1759.
²³National Archives; ref: 50/287 IR1 Kew (Duties Paid for Apprentices Indentures, 1710–1811).
²⁴St. Philip’s, Birmingham, Church Banns, 1764.
²⁵Owen (1), born 1746; see Probin tree.
²⁶Old Bailey Proceedings, Accounts of Trials; September 14, 1796.
²⁷The hulks were ships that were no longer seaworthy with their masts reduced or removed. The use of hulks for confinement began in the early 1770s, when an attempt was made to alleviate the pressure on prisons, and hulks were a cheap alternative to building more prisons on land. Initially, they were moored on the Thames, but soon this spread to Langstone and Portsmouth Harbors.
²⁸Home Office, London, Criminal Registers of Prisoners in Middlesex and the City; see website, “London Lives 1690–1800, Crime, Poverty and Social Policy” for a full transcription of this case.
²⁹Late 18th-century Birmingham City Trade Directories include Sketchley’s, Swinney’s, Pearson & Rollason’s, Baileys Western & Midland and Pye’s.
³⁰He may also be the father of Owen (2), baptised 1731; Thomas, baptised 1733; John (1), baptised 1740; Samuel (1), baptised 1742; William (1), baptised 1747; and Richard, baptised 1746, all recorded in the St. Philip’s parish register.
³¹National Archives, London, Ref: 58/30 (IR1 Kew).
³²Lichfield Record Office: B/C/11 – Probin, Thomas, 1792.
³³Sun Insurance Records, Ref: 127917;11936, Vol. 95, pg. 8,

- Guildhall Library, London.
³⁴See also D.W. Bailey, *British Military Flintlock Rifles, 1740–1840*, Mowbray, 2002, pp. 189–190. Also Neal and Back, 1984, where two rifles (one large bore and one small bore) by John (2) Probin are shown, figures 42–47.
³⁵National Archives, Kew, London.
³⁶George, Prince of Wales (1762–1830) was the eldest son of George III and became King George IV in 1820.
³⁷Like his uncle before him, John (3) Probin marked many of his guns with the inscription “Maker to the Prince of Wales,” although official documentation of this royal appointment has not been found.
³⁸The Regency Act is passed by the British Parliament to provide a Regent if the British monarch is incapacitated or is in minority. In 1811, King George III was considered unfit to rule, and his son Prince George (later George IV) became Regent, an office he held until his father’s death in 1820.
³⁹*London Gazette*, July 9, 1816.
⁴⁰*London Gazette*, January 5, 1827.
⁴¹*London Gazette*, June 8, 1829.
⁴²H.L. Blackmore, *Dictionary of London Gunmakers*, London, 1986, pp. 162–163.
⁴³*London Gazette*, September 30, 1840. The Marshalsea was an infamous prison in England located on the south bank of the Thames in Southwark, now part of London. The prison became known around the world in the 19th century through the writing of the English novelist Charles Dickens, whose father was sent there in 1824 for a debt to a baker.
⁴⁴Birmingham City Trade Directories.
⁴⁵A.G. Creadland, *Artists and Craftsmen of Hull and East Yorkshire*, Hull Museums and Art Gallery, Hull, East Yorkshire, 2000. Only two guns by Owen Probin of Hull are known to exist, and although competently made, they do not reflect the finest quality of workmanship claimed by Probin.
⁴⁶No other Owen Probin was found in the records of St. Philip’s, Birmingham, for this period.
⁴⁷East Riding Archives, Yorkshire – DDHE/17/10/95 & 96.

 *The Only Maker of Platina Touchholes out of London,*


O. PROBIN,

GUN-MAKER, from LONDON,

(Foreman to the late Mr John Probin, Gun-Maker to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales,)

SILVER-STREET, HULL,

CONTINUES to make Double and Single Barrelled GUNS, PISTOLS, Etc, on the various principles of all the most celebrated GUN-MAKERS in England: in particular, he makes double and single Guns, with indented breeches, patent hammers, and the new-invented Platina Touchholes, equal in finishing and shooting to those of the celebrated Mr JOSEPH MANTON, and at less than half his prices. Also makes double and single Guns on the same principle and construction as Mr COOK, of Bath, so much praised by R.B.THORNHILL, Esq. in his Shooting Directory, warranted to shoot as well; and any intelligent Sportsman that will do Probin the honour of calling at his Shop, may be convinced, on examining his Guns, of their superior construction and workmanship.

 Old Guns breeched and bored to shoot close and strong, and barrels browned in superior stile, in half and hour’s notice.

Owen (3) Probin’s advertisement from the 1808 *The Hull Packet*.

Acknowledgements

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