

Good With Their Hands

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Some time ago, when I started investigating the surname of Mortlock, I was asked by a contact in New Zealand if I knew of 'the' Mortlock watch or clockmaker. I now know that there were nine of them, all closely related and centred on the village of Clare in Suffolk. Several other male members of this family demonstrated their skill-of-hand in wood or as coach painters. I believe this dexterity to be heritable on the basis that I myself totally lack this quality; those that can make things with their hands must be different from duffers like me who can't. The story which follows also illustrates the diaspora of a Suffolk family, in which descendants ended up settled in Cornwall, London, Kent, Nottinghamshire and Canada; and whose military service took them even further afield.

The earliest Mortlock clockmaker that I have been able to identify is Thomas of Stradishall, Suffolk, who had two silver watches and an elegant pagoda-top long-case clock stolen in 1744, the year before his marriage. This must have been a significant financial blow, for it seems unlikely that the insurance industry was sufficiently developed in those days to provide cover for a craftsman's work-in-progress. Thomas moved to Clare in that county at some time between 1749 and 1753 and it is there that his dynasty took root. The Thomas recorded as a clockmaker there in 1768 may be him or may be his son Thomas II (1746-88). 1768 is the year of Thomas II's marriage and so may also be the year of the elder Thomas' demise.

There had been Mortlocks in Clare before - Lewis, probably from Haverhill, married there in 1588 (and again in 1598) and served as bailiff of Clare in 1601. His son Lewis founded the extensive family of Mortlocks in Denham and Chevington, also in Suffolk. Lewis I's other son John, who remained in Clare, used the names Thomas, John, Richard and Samuel for his sons, which names were also significantly popular for Mortlocks in Haverhill and nearby Hundon and Poslingford. However the genealogical trail in Clare runs cold for a hundred years prior to the arrival (or return?) of Thomas the clockmaker.

One son of this original Thomas, Samuel (1758-97) removed to Clapham. At his death he held land in Buntingford, Hertfordshire and Smithfield in London, whether obtained via marriage or hard work I cannot say. A further Samuel in South London (1783-1863) may have been his son and may have been a clockmaker; Richard (1784-1861) was certainly Samuel I's son but was a tailor. I have naturally wondered whether any Mortlock clocks or watches are still in circulation. Curiously, and most opportunely, while I was actually writing this piece I was e-mailed by a gentleman in Sweden who had a silver watch made by Samuel in 1792 (see illustration).

Later, a verge dial by Samuel Mortlock of Clapham turned up in New Zealand. It is slightly later than the dial clock illustrated, which was on offer on the internet in 2003. The NZ clock has dotted minutes, a straight minute hand but an identical hour hand. The case in both instances is double saltbox with an oak backbox, mahogany dial surround and identical bezel. The movement has 5 pillars and tapered plates. The current owner bought this piece in 1994, after looking at verge dial clocks all around the south of England; the Mortlock was the best quality and most original to be found.

In 1771 Elizabeth, only surviving daughter of our first Thomas, fell pregnant to a James Lewis

and obtained a maintenance order against him for William Mortlock, born in December of that year. Presumably still smitten, she repeated her indiscretion so as to produce a John Mortlock in 1780. Whether the first slip-up precipitated her mother's demise in July of 1771 one cannot say but these things, while a frequent consequence of the flowering of the sukebind in country districts, were taken very seriously by the surrounding community. There's a happy ending with Elizabeth marrying a Thomas Hammond in 1786, perhaps kin to her brother Thomas II's bride Rhoda Hammond whom he had married in 1768, as above. William I and John both became watchmakers.

John took his nimble fingers to Northamptonshire, where he married in 1820. He then settled in Bluntisham, Huntingdonshire before returning to Suffolk five years later, to Brandon, where he died without male issue in 1829. His surviving daughter became a dressmaker.

William I had the good fortune to have to provide for five sons, in order William II (1805-93), Charles (1808-66), Richard (1810-97), and James (1815-64).

William II produced William III (1836-1920), who trained as a cooper but removed to Plumstead in south London, where he set up as a greengrocer, in which he was succeeded by his son Charles William (1875-1933). This perhaps reflects an aptitude for running a business which was necessary to the original profession. William III's other sons were labourers of one sort or another but continued to live nearby with their families.

As in the case of William III, there cannot have been infinite room for clockmakers in so small a place as Clare. Charles (1808-66), presumably apprenticed outside the family, became a cabinet maker and upholsterer - who knows, a maker of long-case clock cases? Cabinet making was surely complementary to clockmaking. Upholstery used up the horsehair which was an important Suffolk product, and which was also used for wigs and military plumes until Chinese competition caused the demise of the last Suffolk horsehair-using factory in 2001. Three of Charles' sons followed him in this trade, the first two setting up as C & A Mortlock, cabinet makers. They went bust in 1869. The senior, Charles II (1835-72), remained in Clare - was he unwell? but Arthur, who had temporarily decamped to Brighton to marry a carpenter's daughter, removed to Newark where he seems to have had a satisfactory career, supported by the youngest brother Henry.

Similarly, William I's Richard was trained as a brazier, but developed into an ironmonger (that is to say, he sold iron to blacksmiths, but would also have increasingly traded in manufactured goods). His son, Richard II (1837-1913), followed his father as an ironmonger and prospered until the business had spread over five premises. Richard II's son Maurice Richard (1873), however, became a grocer. Maurice Richard's son, Maurice John, lost his life in 1942, serving in the Royal Signals during the doomed battle for Singapore.

Two other sons of the elder Richard became skilled tradesmen. Robert Westley became a coach painter, but moved to York. Frederick moved to Upper Clapton, London, where he set up in business as a cabinet maker and maker of billiard tables. Three of Frederick's sons followed him into woodwork, Frederick James and Henry William as joiners and David George as a woodworking machinist. With the coming of war in 1914 all was interrupted. David George joined up, enlisting in the Middlesex Regiment.

Although already 36, Frederick James joined up as a private in the 2/5 Bedfordshires¹. He already had TB. Medically discharged six months later in June 1916, he was described as hardworking, willing, honest, sober and trustworthy, which should be remembered to his credit. But he did not make old bones; his TB did for him in 1917.

Another son of Frederick's, Reginald Percy, was medically discharged from the RAMC (to which he had transferred from the infantry) when his childhood ailments - rheumatic fever at 6, plus now piles and heart disease - rendered him unfit for service. This disability may be why he had, before the War, after working for a barber, become a, presumably more sedentary, pursemaker rather than a woodworker.

These two brothers offer a sad insight into living conditions for children in Victorian London, but an uplifting one because of the way, in spite of surely knowing that their own deficiencies would give them an exceptionally arduous time on military service, they none the less stepped forward to do their duty. What the MO thought he was doing in letting these two into the Army in the first place is quite another matter.

Another exile from Clare was Martin Oliver, son of William I's James. In the early 1900s he took his watchmaking skills to Marazion in Cornwall - about as far from Suffolk as he could get. The actual reason for this move was Martin's father's respiratory problems. There he was succeeded by his eldest son Oliver Samuel. One of Martin Oliver's clocks is still in the family, owned by a descendant in America. Incidentally Martin Oliver's children, although all born in Clare, were baptised in the Independent chapel in nearby Hundon.

Thomas II's Thomas III (1768-1823) does not appear to have been a skilled tradesman, although his daughters Mehetabel and Ann became an upholsterer and a seamstress respectively. His only apparently surviving son William (1797-1868) was a labourer who emigrated five miles from Clare to Cavendish, presumably in search of work, in 1818.

This William's Thomas IV (1817-82), like his brother William (1824-98), enlisted in the Royal Marines². It would seem that William tried to return to Cavendish after his service but perhaps that didn't work out; by 1874 he was back in Chatham as a labourer. His son Joseph, by then described as a brickmaker, enlisted at Maidstone in 1884 in the Royal West Kents and served for twelve years including three at Gibraltar, two in Malta and five in India.

Thomas IV saw action; he was aboard HMS *Asia* for the Syrian campaign of 1840. He eventually retired to pension in Chatham as a Colour Sergeant, after returning to Clare to run a beerhouse immediately after his service. One of his sons, James Tucker, died at sixteen after a very brief career in the Royal Marines. James Tucker's next brother, Ambrose George, in an interesting throwback, after emigrating to Canada set himself up as a cabinet maker and became a skilled maker of pianos (as well as being a talented amateur photographer).

Of 1835-John's sons, Robert Burling died young; "playing behind a waggon, he fell, and taking hold of the wheel to rise, was drawn up under and his neck was broken". I include this as a

¹ The PRO references used for military information are WO97/3509 and WO364

² The PRO reference for Royal Marines service is ADM157

reminder of how dangerous life was for children in the countryside even without motor-cars.

Arthur Henry enlisted in the Grenadier Guards (they took him, even at 5'8" and 34" chest) having acquired a taste for soldiering in the Bury St Edmunds militia, and served for twelve years from 1887 to 1899.

Charles (1878) slung his hook and was in Dublin as a billiard marker when he pulled himself together and took the shilling on 29.12.1896, enlisting in 7th Middlesex via the militia. The army was the making of him (it also got him tattooed). By 1914 he was a Regimental Sergeant Major and at the end of the War he was awarded the Croix de Guerre, in 1918, and the Meritorious Service Medal in 1919.

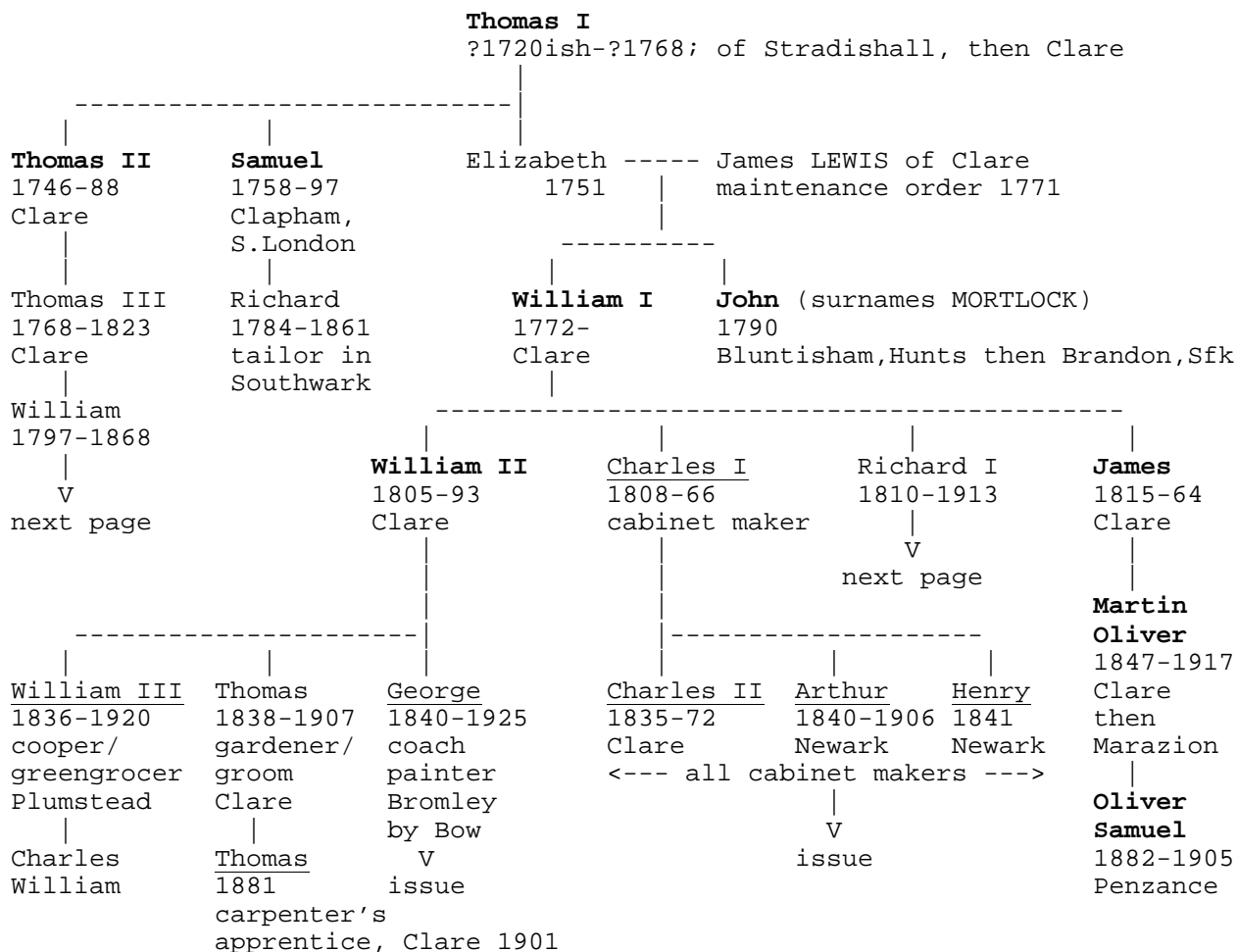
Of John's other children (there were twelve in all), Albert died age five of scarlet fever. Mary Ellen also only lasted five years, and George a mere five days. Many other families of the time had similar stories to tell.

A useful reference is Haggard & Miller's *Suffolk Clocks and Clockmakers*, published by the Antiquarian Horological Society in 1974.

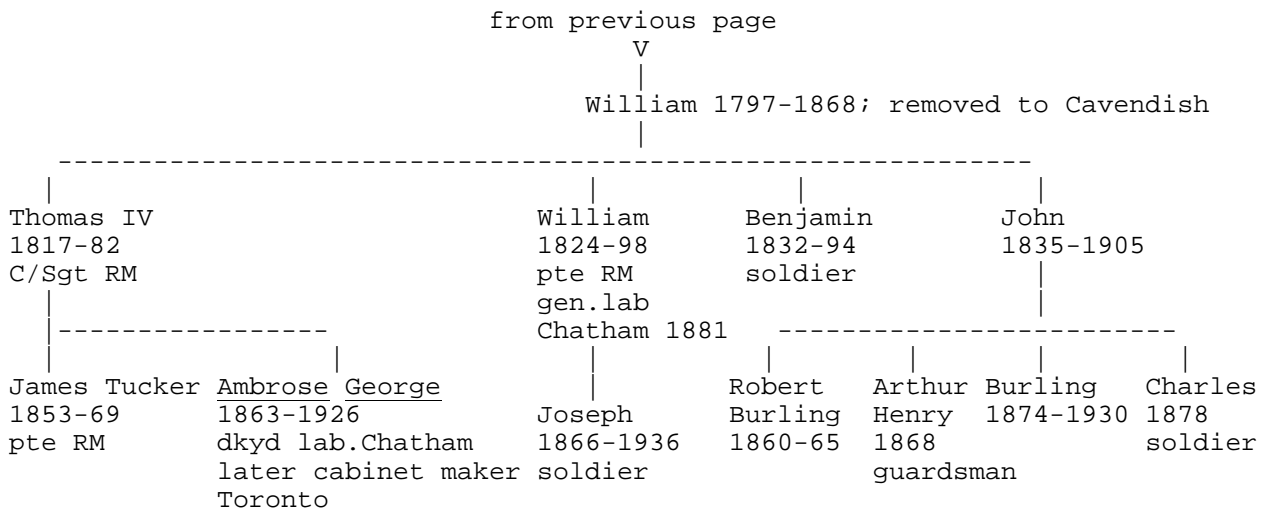
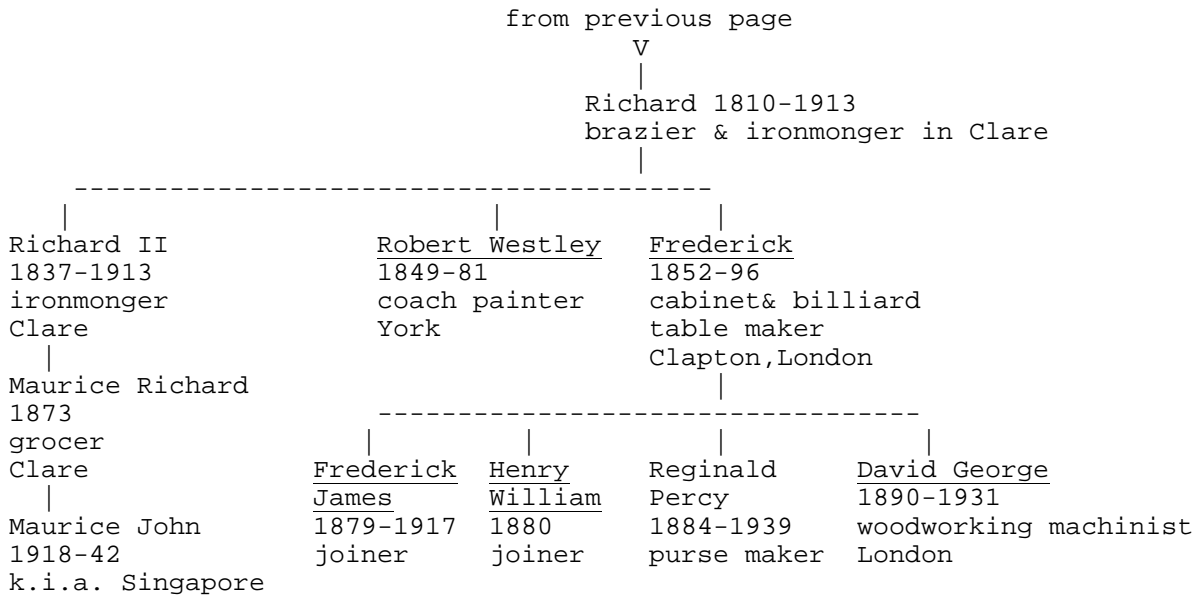
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Mortlocks of Clare(1)

Watch and clockmakers are shown in **bold type**
Cabinet makers, joiners and coach painters are shown underlined



Mortlocks of Clare(2)



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