

DAVIS OF WINDSOR

a family business

In June 1801 the following short obituary appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*:

'At Clewer, near Windsor, aged 80, Mr John Davis, who, with his father and grandfather were successively locksmiths to the crowned heads of this realm for more than 150 years.'

John Davis had been living in retirement at Nightingale Place, Clewer, a small estate in Hatch Lane which had been left to him by his father. He had already, some four years previously, handed over the business to his youngest son George. The

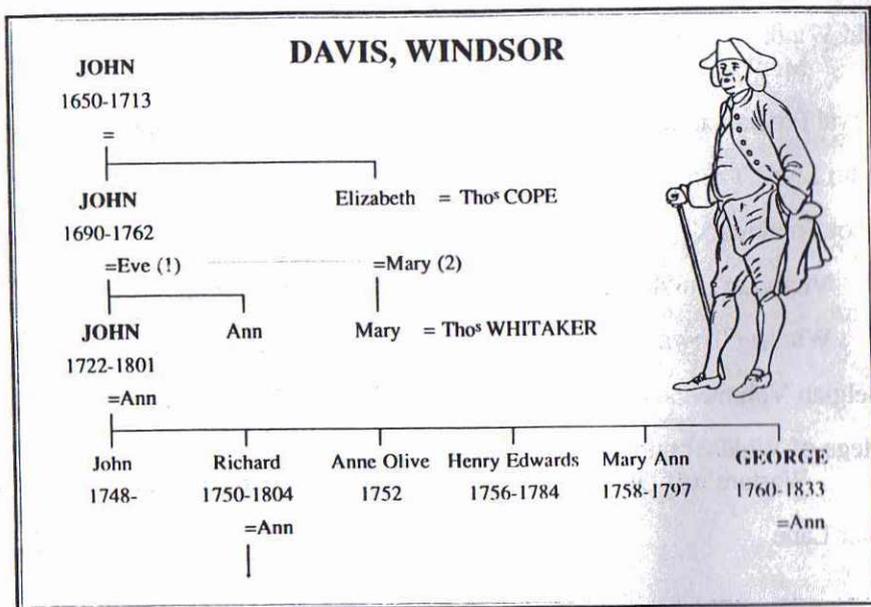


Fig. 1

funeral that took place on Wednesday 3rd June at St Andrew's Church had been a private affair, for in his will he had asked that only his relatives and workmen should attend. He had also requested to be buried in a vault to be made close to his pew in the church.

John Davis' father and grandfather had also been named John and, not surprisingly, in later years this led to a certain amount of confusion. In some cases their works became wrongly attributed. To help clarify the situation Fig 1 shows four generations of the Davis family that built up a highly successful smith's business in Windsor throughout the eighteenth century. As well as being locksmiths, they were called on to work as blacksmiths, ironmongers, clockmakers, and bellhangers. The family produced some exceptionally gifted craftsmen and the extent and variety of their work is perhaps not as fully appreciated today as it might be.

To most people the name of John Davis is only associated with the chiming clock in the Curfew Tower of Windsor Castle. The first John Davis was, indeed, the maker of this clock in 1689. Very little is known about the early part of his career. He is said to have been the son of William Davis, the King's blacksmith in Windsor, in which case he would have become familiar with all the skills needed to work in iron. However, at some stage he must also have been trained in the art of clockmaking and particularly in the use of brass. Examples of his longcase clocks and brass lantern clocks show a quality equal to that of many of the best London makers. He was equally skilful in the making of turret clocks. Four apprentices trained under him including his own son in 1705. He died in 1713, leaving a house in Thames Street to his daughter and the adjoining house together with the business to his only son John.

After the young John Davis, aged only twenty two and barely out of his apprenticeship, had taken over the business very little is known about him for nearly ten years. He was, however, to become the most successful member of this family and it is worth looking closer at some of his achievements whose varied nature is typical of work done by the Davis family over the next one hundred years.

In 1722 he commenced a long association with Eton College carrying out works that perfectly illustrate this variety. To begin with, he maintained the clock in School Yard for over forty years. Between 1725 and 1729, when the College Library was being built, he supplied a large amount of the iron work, over eight tons of it, needed for structural work, gates, and banisters etc. He then supplied interior fittings such as brass grilles for the manuscript cupboards and over 65 brass locks. His bill specifies that all these locks were 'home made'. Some years later Davis was called on to do work in the kitchens, such as mending the beam scales in the buttery and repairing the stoves. One of the most decorative examples of wrought iron work made by Davis at this period was a magnificent weight-driven clockwork roasting jack. Made in 1736, it was mounted up on the wall to one side of the open fire in the kitchen, and could drive up to six roasting spits. This jack remained in continuous use until the 1920's.