

The Thomas and Gilpin Families of Coalbrookdale

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Mary Smith, who married William Benington (1802-1896) in 1829 at Stockton-On-Tees, was the grandmother of my great-grandfather Arthur Benington, the first of my Benington ancestors to emigrate to America. A birth certificate still in the family establishes that she was born in Bristol in 1806, the daughter of William's business partner, the grocer George Smith, and his wife Mary. There are many George and Mary Smiths, even in Bristol, but thanks to a companion certificate, we know she had a brother, Mark Gilpin Smith, born in 1808, also in Bristol. Mark's middle name suggests that his mother's name may have been Gilpin, and, in fact, there is a marriage in 1806 at the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Bristol of George Smith of Bristol, son of William and Mary Smith of Bromham, Wiltshire², and Mary Gilpin, daughter of "Mark Gilpin of Coalbrookdale, ironmonger," and his wife Mary Thomas.

Coalbrookdale is in Shropshire in the British Midlands, up the River Trent from Bristol and east of Birmingham, near the border with Wales. Iron has been made there since at least the 16th century, but starting in the early 18th century it was the site of some of the most important innovations in the history of iron making. This is the story of how Thomases and Gilpins found their way there and contributed to launching the industrial revolution³.

Abraham Darby I and John Thomas

Abraham Darby I (1678-1717) was a Quaker from Staffordshire who apprenticed to a maltster in Birmingham before moving to Bristol where he entered the trade in brass and iron pots around 1700. In 1702, with the help of some expert labor imported from the Netherlands, he started casting brass pots. He soon got interested in making them out of iron, a less expensive material. Iron casting in those days used molds made out of loam. They could be used only once and making them was time-consuming. Darby started experimenting with molds made out of sand, which could easily be reproduced from a reusable wooden mold. He was not being successful when John Thomas, a Welsh apprentice, had an idea involving leaving a hole in the sand mold for the heat to escape. The resulting iron pots were not only easier to make but much lighter. Darby received a patent for the idea in 1707 and soon started looking for a source of pig iron he could control.

Iron had been made in Coalbrookdale since the sixteenth century. The area had all the necessary materials – good quality iron ore close to the surface, abundant water to power the bellows pumping air to the furnaces, and the River Trent through which the end product could be shipped to Bristol to be sold. Heat for the smelting process came from burning charcoal, made by heating wood from local coppices. But, in spite of careful forest

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² Locations mentioned here can be found at <http://bit.ly/1sKhQSR>.

³ A pedigree of George Benington showing connections to the Thomas and Gilpin families is at the end of this article.

management, the supply of wood was getting short, and Darby started looking for a way to replace it with coal, also abundant in the area. Coal could not be used directly, as the sulphur it contains would contaminate the iron. The answer was to cook the coal first, to eliminate impurities, yielding coke. By 1715, Darby had perfected the process and by the time of his untimely death in 1717, built a plant unique in Britain in that it had two coke-fired blast furnaces feeding two separate foundries using reverberatory furnaces that could be fired by coal, as the chambers in which the fuel and iron were contained could be kept separate.

Darby's success, especially on the foundry side, enabled the fabrication of another critical enabler of the industrial revolution, the steam engine. The engine, invented by Thomas Newcomen (1664-1729), required a piston to move in a chamber into which hot steam entered and cooled⁴. The chamber needed to be manufactured to close enough tolerances for the piston to operate correctly. Early prototypes were made out of brass, but the new iron casting techniques reduced costs significantly. The Coalbrookdale Company made the cylinder for first iron steam engine installed in 1719 for draining a coal mine nearby. Entire engines were being made by 1722 and a machine for boring cylinders, similar to the ones used for boring canons, was being made by the 1730s. James Watt developed a much more efficient design for steam engines in the 1760s which were made by Boulton and Watt, a company he founded in partnership with Matthew Boulton and buying parts from the prominent ironmaker, James Wilkinson. Watt's engine was installed in Coalbrookdale foundries, first to recirculate water used to drive the waterwheels that provided power to the bellows, and eventually to drive the bellows directly.

John Thomas and his family

In an article in *The Journal of the Friends Historical Society* of 1938 one finds:

John Thomas, the Ironmaster and co-inventor with Abraham Darby of casting cooking pots in iron, was born near Welshpool in 1690. He was the second of the five sons of Robert Thomas, "who was not a Friend but a sober man", and his wife Priscilla Evans. The wife was "a fair Latin scholar and for a while in the service of the Countess Conway". Her parents were Edward and Katherine Evans, said to be natives of Radnorshire, but residing in Welshpool. They were imprisoned in November 1662 for declining to take the Oath of Allegiance, where Edward Evans "being an infirm man and unable to bear the Filth and Dampness of the Place, laid down his Life, the unwholesome Confinement there having hastened his death". He was buried in St. Mary's Churchyard, Welshpool. His wife was imprisoned for five years.

Thomas Oliver [of Dolobran], and "a Minister among Friends" first employed John Thomas. Later he was shepherd to Charles Lloyd, the Ironmaster of Dolobran. Here he succeeded in rescuing a flock of his master's sheep from a snowdrift, and later in the spring of the same year, during heavy rain and melting snow, he swam the river Vyrnwy to fetch home a herd of mountain cattle. These he collected and drove to the river, but the ford had now become a boiling torrent. He

⁴ It turns out that Thomas Newcomen is also related to Herbert Benington, but through his maternal grandmother, Margaret Hingston. That is a story for another day.

nevertheless crossed it on the back of an ox, and brought home the whole herd in safety. As a reward for his courage his master presented him with four of the sheep which he had saved. He sold their wool in order to buy better clothing for himself, and afterwards disposed of the sheep so that he might obtain money wherewith to travel to Bristol to seek his fortune. This was in 1704. Afraid of being taken for a soldier if found in Bristol out of work, it being the time of the Duke of Marlborough's wars, he requested his master to recommend him as an apprentice to a relative, Edward Lloyd, a wine merchant who was one of the partners of the Baptist Mills. The boy was accordingly sent into the brassworks until he should procure employment. As he was looking on during the trials of the Dutch workmen to cast iron he told Abraham Darby that he thought he saw how they had missed it. He begged to be allowed to try, and he and Abraham Darby remained alone in the workshop the same night for the purpose.

Before morning they had cast an iron pot. The boy Thomas entered into an agreement to serve Abraham Darby and keep the secret. He was enticed by the offer of double wages to leave his master; but he continued nobly faithful, and afterwards showed his fidelity to his master's widow and children following the untimely death of Abraham Darby. From 1709 to 1828 the Thomas family were confidential and much valued agents to the descendants of Abraham Darby. For more than one hundred years after the night in which Thomas and his master made their successful experiment of producing an iron casting in a mould of fine sand, with its two wooden frames and its air-holes, the same process was practised and kept secret at Colebrookdale, with plugged keyholes and barred doors.

John Thomas married Grace Zeane in Bristol in 1714. She was the daughter of George Zeane, of Somerset, a thread maker, and his wife Ellen. They had four children, all born in Broseley, Shropshire:

1. **John Jr.**, b in 1715, and died in Broseley in 1775. Like his father, he was a pot founder. He married in Shrewsbury in 1742 Ann Mansell. They had five children, the second of whom, **Mary Thomas**, was born in 1747 and married **Mark Gilpin**, about whom more below.
2. George, b in 1716, and died in 1760. He married Mary and had two children.
3. Hannah, b in 1718 and died in 1791. She married Thomas Rose.
4. Samuel, b in 1722. He settled in Bristol and married Esther Derrick in 1746. Their daughter Henrietta (1773-1834) married Thomas Cranager (1711-1780). Thomas and his brother George were workmen in Coalbrookdale and they were awarded a patent in 1766 for refining iron in a reverberatory furnace.

The Gilpins of Coalbrookdale

When Abraham Darby I died in 1717, his son, Abraham Darby II (1711-1763) was six and the company was managed by Richard Ford. Abraham II started working at 17, became a partner 10 years later, and took over as manager on Ford's death in 1745. Under his leadership, iron smelted with coke became suitable for converting into wrought iron, which could then be hammered and rolled and which dominated the iron trade. He was succeeded by his son, Abraham III (1750-1791). It was at this time that Mark Gilpin, who had been born in Kendal, Westmorland, in 1743, came to Coalbrookdale as a clerk. In 1770, he

married Mary Thomas, and died there in 1804, soon followed by his wife. Both are buried in the Friends' Burial Ground in Coalbrookdale, along with their son Mark Jr. (Figure 1)

Gilpin's death was commemorated in this obituary from 1804:

At Coalbrook-dale, aged 60, Mr Mark Gilpin, one of the people called Quakers, and many years principal clerk to the Coalbrook-dale Company. Of the multitude which this miscellany records as having "gone down to the grave", none perhaps possessed a superior claim to the esteem and regret of surviving acquaintance than this amiable character. His affability and meekness, his integrity and circumspection in all the walks of life, and above all his unaffected piety, were models to all around him; indeed by the persuasive influence of example, he may be said to have been as "preacher of righteousness," and that not the least eloquent. As he lived, so he died, in peace and calmness, embalmed with the tears of his numerous offspring, by whom he was justly venerated, for he early taught their feet to tread the path of virtue and peace.

The principal clerk was the chief financial officer of the company. Gilpin's role with the Coalbrookdale Company is recorded as early as May 1773, when he wrote a letter describing a major landslide nearby. In 1778, he wrote to the Duke of Devonshire concerning an order for a pumping engine the Company was building with Boulton and Watt. He was not yet principal clerk.



Figure 1. Headstones of Mark and Mary Gilpin in the Friends' Burial Ground at Coalbrookdale.

The greatest accomplishment of the Coalbrookdale Company during the leadership of Abraham III was the construction of an iron bridge over the Severn River, funded by the Coalbrookdale Company shareholders. Richard Hayman writes:

Erected in 1779 and opened on New Year's Day in 1781, it was immediately hailed as one of the wonders of the age, and was an early triumph in the heroic age of civil engineering. In America, Thomas Jefferson obtained an engraving and hung it in the

White House. Darby received the gold medal of the Society of Arts in 1787, his compensation for what turned out to be a financial disaster.

The Iron Bridge (Figure 2) was intended as an advertisement for the company, and into the beginning of the 19th century, several were cast in Coalbrookdale and erected elsewhere in Britain and Europe. This was helped by the fact that during a major flood on the Severn in 1795, the Iron Bridge was the only one that was not damaged.



Figure 2. The Iron Bridge of Coalbrookdale

In 1792, Gilpin became one of the controlling partners of the company, with members of the Darby's extended family, but this partnership was dissolved two years later.

Mark Gilpin and Mary Thomas had 12 children, all born in Coalbrookdale:

1. Jane, b 1771. She married William Leicester in 1796 in Hartshaw, Lancashire.
2. Thomas, b 1772, d 1845. He was also a clerk for the Company.
3. Ann, b 1774. She married Daniel Rose in 1824. He worked for the Company and although not a descendant of John Thomas, he became a representative for his family.
4. Mark Jr., b 1776, d. 1799. He was also a clerk at the Company, and is buried with his parents.
5. **Mary**, b 1782, who married **George Smith** in 1806 in Bristol. She probably died before 1841.

6. James, b. 1780, d. 1855 in Bristol. He married Mary Sturge, daughter of Joseph Sturge of Birmingham, a grain importer and prominent reformer⁵. They had 15 children, among them Charles Gilpin (1815-1874) a Quaker politician who advocated against the Corn Laws, slavery and the death penalty⁶.
7. Elizabeth, b. 1782.
8. Bernard, b. 1783. d. 1783.
9. John, b. 1784, d. 1805 in Warrington, Lancs.
10. Hannah, b. 1786, d. 1834 in Manchester. She married Michael Satterthwaite and had three children.
11. Samuel, b 1788, d. 1788.
12. Robert, b. 1790, d. 1835 in Warrington. He was a confectioner and married Ann Shepherd.

The origins of the Gilpin family

Many members of the Gilpin family can be traced back to the twelfth or thirteenth century in Westmorland. Prominent among them was Barnard Gilpin (1517-1583), an Anglican theologian known as “The Apostle of the North”⁷. Thomas Gilpin (1623-1702) was an army officer who joined the Society of Friends in 1651 and was jailed several times for practicing his religion. His son Joseph (b. 1663 England-d. 1741 Birmingham, Pennsylvania) married Hannah Glover in 1691 and they emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1695, where they are the ancestors of most of the Gilpins born in the USA.

However, beyond two generations, I have found no documented connection between the Coalbrookdale Gilpins and the Westmorland family. Mark’s parents were **James Gilpin** and **Jane Holme**. James Gilpin was a weaver, who lived in Kendal, Westmorland. He married Jane Holme in 1727 in Kendal. They had five sons and five daughters. Other than Mark, there was a son Robert, b. in 1735, who married Margaret Crewdson in 1759 in Shropshire, and it appears that he was also associated with the Coalbrookdale Company. Robert died in Coalbrookdale in 1783.

James Gilpin was the son of **Benjamin Gilpin** and **Margaret Walker**. Benjamin died in 1729 in Kendal, Westmorland. He was clearly a Quaker, having received a permit in 1714/5 to hold prayer meetings at his house in Strickland Roger, on the outskirts of Kendal. It is not clear whether he was born a Quaker or joined the Church later. Benjamin left a will made in 1726 and probated a year later, that names his wife and several of his children, including James.

**Benjamin GILPIN of Skelsmergh, parish of Kendal, County Westmorland,
yeoman –**

Will dated: 25 November 1726

Executrix: my now wife Margaret

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Sturge

⁶ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Gilpin_\(politician\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Gilpin_(politician))

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_Gilpin

Supervisors: my brother George BATEMAN of Kendal, my brother Edward WALKER of Skelsmergh and my friend John THOMPSON of Crook

Witnesses: John GIBSON Henry BENSON Elizabeth WHINFULL

To my now wife Margaret GILPIN all my messuage and tenement with appurtenances called Bateman Tenement being in Kirkland Roger part of the lands of Lord Viscount Lonsdale of the yearly rent of twenty shillings and six pence half penny during her widowhood.

To my eldest son Robert GILPIN the tenement aforesaid after the viduity or decease of my wife, nevertheless charged and chargeable with the payment of one hundred and twenty pounds within one year after my son enters into possession of the said lands as follows:

Thirty pounds to my son James GILPIN;

Thirty pounds to my daughter Margaret GILPIN;

Thirty pounds to my daughter Elizabeth;

Thirty pounds to my daughter Isabel GILPIN

To my son Robert GILPIN twenty pounds to be paid by my executrix at three years after my decease.

To my son Mark WALKER eight pounds ten shillings to be paid by my executrix three years after my decease.

To my son James GILPIN forty pounds, to my daughter Margaret GILPIN thirty pounds, to my daughter Elizabeth GILPIN thirty pounds, to my daughter Isabel GILPIN thirty pounds all to be paid by my executrix three years after my decease.

To my executrix all my goods, credits, chattels, cattle whatsoever, she paying my just debts, funeral expenses and legacies. To my supervisors five shillings.

Probate: 17-Apr-1727

This is very likely the will of our James. Skelsmergh and Strickland Roger, where he appears on Mark's marriage, are less than 3 miles apart. The will mentions "my son Mark Walker", suggesting that Walker was Margaret's name from an earlier marriage. I believe had been married to John Walker, who died in 1698, and their son Mark was born in 1697. To make things more interesting, her maiden name was also Walker. She died in 1749 in Kendal.

Benjamin Gilpin and Margaret Walker had at least five children:

1. Robert, the eldest, born in 1700 in Kendal, died in 1777 in Kirkby Kendal. He was then living in Strickland Roger.
2. **James**, who married **Jane Holme**.
3. Margaret, who died in 1755 and married Thomas Harding of Lupton in 1745 in Kendal.
4. Elizabeth, who married John Harrison in 1730 in Kendal.
5. Isabel, who died in 1783. She married in 1740 John Dawson and lived in Skelsmergh.

Unfortunately, this is as far as I can now get with the Gilpin line.

There were other Gilpins from Cumbria in the iron business, but I can't tie them to any other ones from the family⁸. Benjamin Gilpin, born about 1741, and thus a contemporary of Mark's, went to Wrexham, Wales, to work with Isaac Wilkinson (ca. 1704-1784), and both are said to be "veterans of the Cumbrian iron industry". Benjamin married there in 1765 Elizabeth Davies and their son, Gilbert, born in 1766, had a remarkable career in the iron industry as clerk, inventor, industrialist, and one of the most notable commentators on the state of the industry at the time. Gilbert Gilpin's first job was a clerk for Isaac Wilkinson's son John, at the Bersham Ironworks in Wrexham from 1786 to 1796. His voluminous letters document the business between the Wilkinsons and Boulton and Watt. Gilpin left the Wilkinsons in 1796 and was employed by Bolton and Watt and other firms, until his most significant contribution – the development of wrought iron chains. N. J. Clarke writes:

John Wilkinson had made some attempt in the late 1770's to introduce iron chains and wire rope for use in winding and engineering work; but it was not until the first decade of the 19th century; when the price of hempen rope increased because of restrictions on the import of hemp from the Baltic during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, that more successful efforts were made in this field. Shropshire seems to have pioneered the successful substitution of wrought-iron chains for winding ropes in collieries and for other industrial purposes, with the work of William Horton and Benjamin Edge at Coalport, and that of Gilbert Gilpin. According to a contemporary account, Gilpin's "method of working chains in grooves was first put in practice ... in 1803-4; and employed in the working of cranes, capable of purchasing from 10 to 15 tons, in the working of the governor-balls of the steam-engines constructed by Boulton and Watt, and in the raising of coal and ore from the mines, for which purposes ropes have before been solely used....". Gilpin's work was recognised by the Society of Arts, who in 1805 presented him with a silver-mounted purse containing 30 guineas and a silver medal.

Conclusion

The central events described here, all involving Quakers, from the beginning of John Thomas's association with Abraham Darby I, to the death of Mark Gilpin and his wife Mary Thomas coincide almost exactly with the eighteenth century and provide good examples of the economic and geographic mobility that came along with the Industrial Revolution. Thomas, born in the Welsh countryside and who started life as a shepherd, found a place in Bristol, where his ingenuity made him a valued member of Darby's organization. Darby saw in the fledgling iron industry of Shropshire an opportunity to make cheaper pots, but it was his substitution of abundant coal for increasingly scarce wood as heating material that was one of the major enablers of the scaling up of the iron industry. Mark Gilpin, made the journey from Kendal to Bristol to Coalbrookdale, where he joined the Company in time for its next great technological leaps, the Iron Bridge and the connection to the steam engine. Mark's daughter Mary also married in Bristol, but then moved with her husband to Stockton, where her daughter married William Benington, who was also involved in iron-making, railroads, and the tea business, whose growth was made possible by shipping.

⁸ I'm not the only one. William Gilpin, the author of a genealogy of the Gilpin family in 1879, also notes that although he is aware of this branch, he cannot connect any of the ironmaking Gilpins either. Nor do they appear in Alan Gilpin's more recent study of the Gilpins of Kentmere Hall. I suspect that this may have something to do with the fact that this branch became Quakers.

Acknowledgements

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Photos by the author

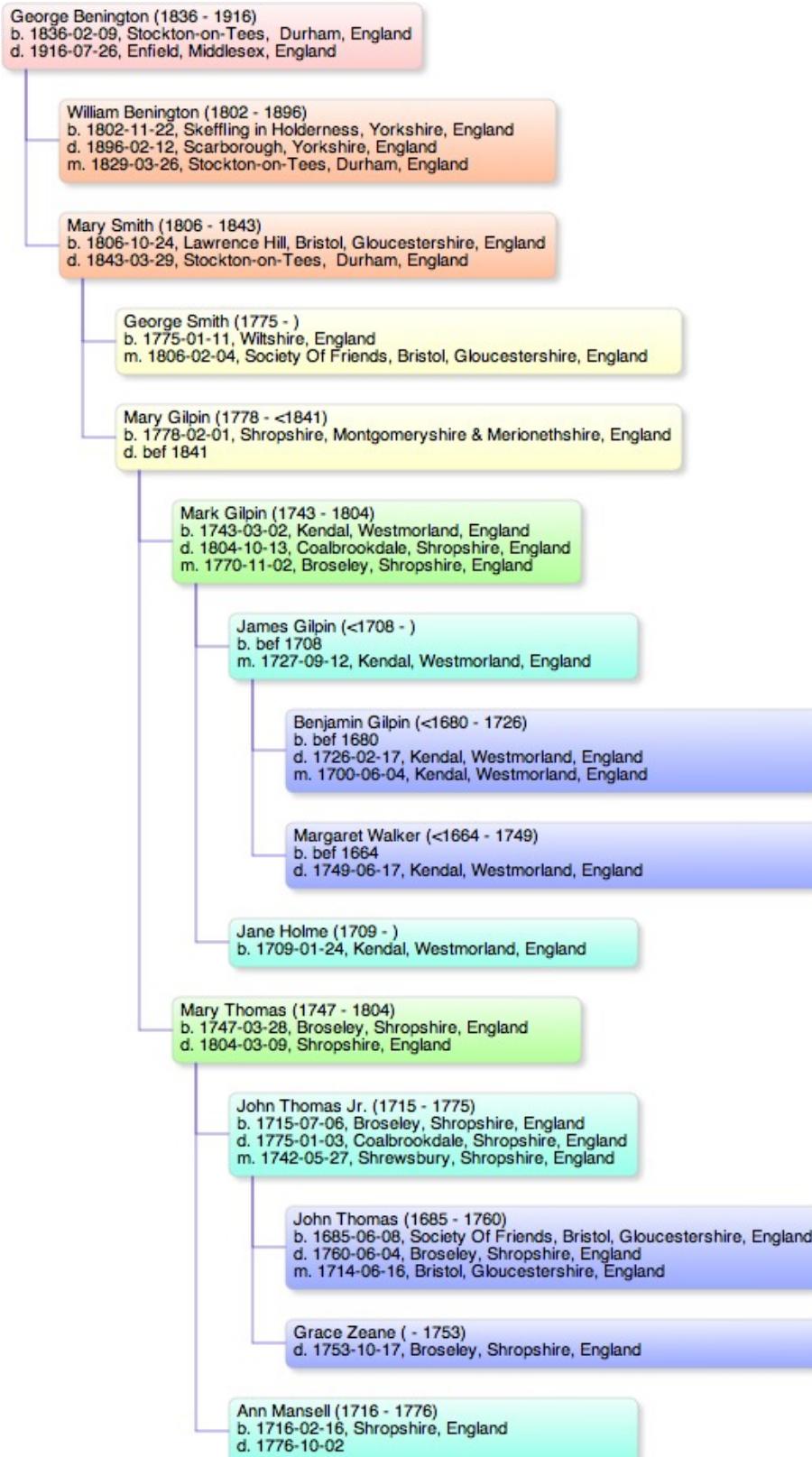


Figure 3. The Gilpin and Thomas ancestors of George Benington