

## ***John Russell(1745-1817)***

### ***Watch and Clockmaker of Falkirk***

**Winnie R. McPherson**

John Russell, Falkirk's most noted Clockmaker, was born about 1745 at Dennyloanhead. In early life he was apprenticed to a trade, probably that of a wright, as were his brothers James and William but *'showing a remarkable aptitude for mechanics and proving himself of an inventive turn of mind, he drifted away from his original calling to the calling of watch and clock making and, by his ingenuity and industry, he raised himself to an eminent and prominent position in his profession'*. He settled in Falkirk some time between 1765 and 1770 and was considered to be a tradesman of more than ordinary ability. The Edinburgh Evening Courant dated 12<sup>th</sup> May 1783 carried the undernoted advertisement which demonstrated the 'versatility of his genius'.

#### ***TO THE CURIOUS IN MECHANICS***

*To be sold a very curious Organ Clock, being the first ever made in Scotland, which plays a tune every two hours. The barrel it has at present consists of twelve different tunes and more may be made if required.*

*To be seen at any time at Mr. Russel's, Watchmaker, Falkirk, to whom proposals from intending purchasers may be made. He likewise makes and repairs Musical Clocks, Organs, etc.; also makes portable jacks of a new construction, Barometers, Thermometers and every kind of machinery in the watch and clock branch.*

*By a long course of study and practice, having brought his Organ Clock to the utmost perfection, Mr. Russel humbly begs leave to solicit the patronage and encouragement of the public and all favours will be thankfully and gratefully acknowledged.*

As well as working to establish his business, Russell was already taking an interest in the general affairs of the town. After the forfeiture of the [Livingstons of Callendar](#) in 1715, control of Falkirk's affairs had fallen to a group of men called the [Stentmasters](#) who had emerged sometime during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The composition of the group, appointed annually, comprised four elected by the merchant guild, four by *"the pairs of the town"* and two from each of the trades guilds. From these members a 'Preses' or Chairman and Treasurer were

appointed. John Russell was chosen as a Stentmaster in 1780, representing the watch and clock makers and he was also a member of the Hammermen's Society of Falkirk – the incorporation of hammermen comprised nearly all the trades in which a hammer was used.

In 1785 the Steeple clock was giving cause for concern as it had been allowed to fall into a state of disrepair. The Stentmasters agreed that repairs should be carried out and also that estimates should be given in by 'proper tradesmen for the repairing of, winding up and keeping in order the town's clock'. The town drummer, who was employed by the Stentmasters to perform the duties of town officer, published the 'advertisement' by 'tuck of drum'.

John Russel's offer was accepted and he agreed to keep and wind the clock from Whitsunday 1785 to Whitsunday 1789, for a yearly sum of sixteen shillings and eight pence. Later, John Russell was allowed a sum of three shillings '*by and attour*' his salary for winding the clock, if he would erect a proper '*pase*' (pass) to it, the former one having given way. Six years later, in 1791 John Russell informed the Stentmasters that he had resolved "not to keep the clock in repair, wind '*hir*' up any longer than the time of Whitsunday next, against which time a new agreement must be made with him, otherwise he would not allow the clock to stand." But his threat seems to have fallen on deaf ears as it was not until 1793 that the Preses informed them that as "Mr John Russell had from time to time complained that his '*sellery*' for keeping up the '*macinary*' of the Tollbooth clock was not adequate to the trouble and expense incurred thereby". After discussion, it was reckoned that John Russell was in fact a "considerable" loser in keeping the machinery in repair" and it was agreed that in addition to his yearly salary was "consistent with Justice" and that for the year 1793 he should be given £1.11s.6d.

Four years later, Russell had again to inform the Stentmasters that the clock was much in need of repair, for which he would require the sum of £4.4s and that a new wheel to "*wind hir up*" would also be required. The Stentmasters purchased the wheel themselves at Carron and "agreed with Russell to get the clock repaired with all convenient dispatch".

The Tollbooth, formerly the Baron Court and town jail, which adjoined the Steeple, was sold to an incomer to the town, William Glen of Forganhall, by William Forbes, the new owner of the Estate of Callendar. It was Glen's intention to build houses and shops on the site of the tollbooth and, despite the stipulations specifically written into the disposition of the property that the steeple walls should not be weakened or damaged, the excavations carried out by him caused the steeple, which already had a lean to the east, to list further and a bad crack appeared. In 1803 it was considered in "danger of collapse" and, in order to avoid "threat to life and limb it was cast to the ground". The ensuing court case against William Glen and latterly his Trustees, took some eight years with claims and counter-claims finally being resolved by the Lords. In 1811, therefore, the situation was that the Trustees were liable for the rebuilding of the steeple. However, in an effort to speed things along, the Stentmasters decided to rebuild the steeple themselves and to accept a sum of money in lieu of the Trustees' responsibility.

During this period, John Russell carried on with his business in Falkirk but in 1792 had the misfortune to have some of his stock stolen, as this item from the Edinburgh Evening Courant of 30<sup>th</sup> June 1792 confirms:

### **WATCHES STOLEN**

*Whereas a man naming himself William Muir, an Englishman journeyman Clockmaker with Mr John Russel, Falkirk, went off on Monday, the 25<sup>th</sup> curt., carrying away eight silver watches, one of them cap'd and jewelled, with seconds from the contrite wheel figures in place of hours upon the dial plate, maker's name John Lamb, London; another cap'd with the name John Henderson upon the cape, and maker's name John Russel, Falkirk, No. 132; the other six are common watches, one of the makers' names John Russel, Falkirk and another of them James Upjohn, London.*

*He appears to be a man between 30 and 40 years of age, about five feet five inches high, short black hair, thin on the forehead, a large mark of a cut upon the right corner of his brow; had on when he went off a snuff brown coat tore at the right armpit, dark brown ververet vest with small yellow spots, plain drab-coloured breeches, round hat, blue-white stockings, and shoes tied with leather thongs. Whoever will apprehend, or cause to be apprehended, the above person shall on conviction be handsomely rewarded.*

*It is entreated that all watchmakers and those dealing in the business will stop the offerer of such articles, and information being given to John Russel, or Mr George Williamson, messenger, Edinburgh, will be gratefully received and rewarded.*

This advertisement gives us a very graphic picture of William Muir, the alleged thief and an interesting insight into the period. Whether or not Muir was apprehended is not recorded but, three weeks later, John Russel was again using the columns of the Edinburgh Evening Courant but this time to advertise his "Lottery".

Edinburgh Evening Courant, 26<sup>th</sup> July 1792:

### **LOTTERY**

*-by John Russel, Clock and Watch Maker, Falkirk. -*

*The prizes are a Chamber Barrel Organ with four stops, which plays 24 different select tunes at pleasure, neatly fitted up in a mahogany case, elegantly ornamented on the front with round towers and gilt pipes; a silver watch cap'd and jewelled with seconds and Prince of Wales escapement; two fine eight-day spring Clocks; a brass solar microscope; with a number of eight-day clocks, silver watches, Barometers and Thermometers; also a number of capital prints engraved by the late Sir Robert Strange neatly framed with inside gilt mouldings.*

*Tickets/ ...*

*.../ Tickets at five shillings each with Schemes to be had of J. Russell, Falkirk, Messrs. Goldie and Robertson, Merchants, opposite to the Cross, and C. Elliot, Bookseller, Parliament Square, Edinburgh. Also by J. Bannerman, Carver and Gilder, Glasgow.*

*As a great number of the tickets are already sold, those who wish to become adventurers will please apply for tickets as soon as possible that the time of drawing may be fixed. Gentlemen who please to call at J. Russel's will have an opportunity of viewing the organ, etc., and he is persuaded they will sufficiently recommend themselves.*

*J. Russel returns his most grateful thanks to his friends and the public for past favours, and begs leave to inform them that he has been in London and other manufacturing towns in England purchasing a fresh stock of materials for the better carrying on of his business in the Clock and Watch line. Also he has selected a number of capital prints engraved by the best masters, among which are a few impressions of Mary Queen of Scots with James VI., both engraved on one plate by Bartolozzi.*

During the next six years, John Russell's business would appear to have been very successful, the quality and workmanship of the articles he created – the eight day clocks, musical and chiming clocks, barometers, etc. – brought high prices and extensive sales. His capabilities and accomplishments, which “made his name and fame more than local” came to the notice of the Prince Regent, afterwards George IV, who appointed him ‘Watchmaker for Scotland’. In 1798 he established his business in Falkirk High Street, within sight of the Steeple, by purchasing a “tenement of land, two merchant booths and a dwelling house”. His royal connections were further enhanced when, in 1803, he presented one of his now highly acclaimed barometers, later known as the ‘Royal Barometer’, to the reigning Sovereign, George III. A London newspaper, *The Star*, issued on Friday, 15<sup>th</sup> July 1803, contained an account of his interview with the King and the Royal Family:

*On Wednesday last Mr John Russell, of Falkirk, watchmaker for Scotland to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, had the honour of being introduced to the King, at Windsor, by General Cartwright, in consequence of a recommendation from the Right Hon. Lord Melville, and of presenting to his Majesty a new and curious barometer of his invention, by which the rise and fall of the mercury is ascertained to the thousandth part of an inch.*

*His majesty received Mr Russell with that affability and condescension which are so prominent features in his character; examined the instrument – which was opened to show him the mechanism – with great minuteness, and asked such pertinent questions as proved his Majesty to be well acquainted with the principles of natural philosophy and mechanics.*

*Mr Russell had the honour also of shewing and explaining to his Majesty a curious watch of his making, which beats dead seconds, and which he intends to present to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Both these instruments were afterwards inspected by her Majesty, the Princess Elizabeth, the Duke of Cambridge, and other branches of the Royal Family, who were all pleased to express their approbation of them.*

*Mr Russell then retired, much flattered with the reception he had experienced, and impressed with a high sense of the attention which his Majesty and the Royal Family pay to the protection of the Arts, and to the encouragement of ingenious men.*

A few years later, the Prince Regent commissioned a gold chronometer watch to be made for himself. An article in the Weekly Scotsman reported this event as follows –

*John Russell took special pains with this watch and on its completion journeyed up to London. He arrived at Carlton House one day in June, 1812, and having received an audience, submitted the watch. The Prince, who was no mean judge of such work, made a careful examination of it, and was graciously pleased to express his entire satisfaction with its merits and finish. This, of course, was as may be expected, and our worthy Falkirk craftsman, to show his gratitude for the signal mark of Royal favour, presented his patrons with three articles, two of them being closely associated with Scotland.*

*One of these was a small box made from the wood of Wallace's tree in Torwood, Stirlingshire, and elegantly mounted with gold. The box contained a quantity of wheat which was found in a vault of the Roman wall, or Graham's Dyke, at Castlecary. The lid of the box contained on a gold plate an inscription with the above particulars.*

*The second article presented was a silver Crookstone dollar, a coin of Queen Mary and her husband, Darnley, and struck at Crookstone Castle in the year 1665. These two unique articles, and an ancient watch of curious workmanship, were duly accepted, and the Prince Regent, after some further conversation, then personally showed Russell the various specimens of horological skill that were in his house.*

The *Edinburgh Evening Courant* dated 6<sup>th</sup> July 1812 also carried a report on the above event.

Falkirk was without its most prominent landmark for ten years and as noted earlier, the Stentmasters had decided to build a new Steeple to restore 'Falkirk's former glory'. Having obtained estimates and plans from three 'respectable' architects and finally accepted the submission made by David Hamilton of Glasgow, an appeal for subscriptions was made to the people of Falkirk. The appeal raised the sum of £456.2s. In September 1814, the new building being almost complete, the Stentmasters agreed to purchase a clock for the Steeple and John Russell's offer 'to do the town in which he resides a favour in making a clock for the Steeple, Falkirk, at the lowest possible rate' was duly accepted.

The sum of £100, payable in five equal instalments from Whitsunday 1815, without interest, was agreed. Mr. Russell also stated that he had agreed 'to make a clock for the steeple of the Kirk of Kilsyth at £126, but in this instance he was giving up the difference for the benefit of the town'.

The excellence of John Russell's workmanship was widely acclaimed. He had been proud at receiving the contract and took a great pride in its construction using only the best of materials. The Steeple clock served the people of Falkirk for over one hundred years until it was damaged in the lightening strike of 1927. It is now exhibited in the National Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh.



*Specifications for Steeple Clock*

- 1<sup>st</sup> Size of frame three feet four inches in length made of wrought iron in place of cast iron
- 2<sup>nd</sup> The bars made of wrought iron in place of cast iron
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Height of frame 31 inches
- 4<sup>th</sup> Depth of frame 19 inches
- 5<sup>th</sup> Two great wheels fourteen inches and  $\frac{1}{2}$  Diameter
- 6<sup>th</sup> made of Brass one inch thick
- 7<sup>th</sup> The barrel ends made of brass in place of cast iron
- 8<sup>th</sup> Barrel bolts made of brass in place of steel iron
- 9<sup>th</sup> wheel made of Brass placed between ends of the barrel and great wheel to keep the clock going in time & winding her up

A compleat going clock with hands, paces, pendulum, a box to cover the work, and every other thing necessary to put up the same, in proper going order.

John Russell  
18<sup>th</sup> Sept 1814

**John Russell's Specification for the Steeple Clock**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Size of frame, three feet four inches in length, made of wrought-iron in place of cast-iron.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> The bars made of wrought-iron in place of cast-iron.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Height of frame, 31 inches.
- 4<sup>th</sup> Depth of frame, 19 inches.
- 5<sup>th</sup> Two great wheels, fourteen inches and a half in diameter, made of brass, one inch thick.
- 6<sup>th</sup> The barrel ends made of brass, in place of cast-iron.
- 7<sup>th</sup> Barrel bolts made of brass, in place of steel-iron.
- 8<sup>th</sup> A wheel made of brass placed between ends of the barrel and great wheel, to keep the clock agoing in time of winding her up. A compleat going clock with hands, paces, pendulum, a box to cover the work, and every other thing necessary to put up the same, and leave in proper going order.

Sgd. John Russell  
Thomas Johnston  
Falkirk, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1814

The original plan for the new Steeple was to include a bell and at their meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1815 the Stentmasters recorded –

*“The meeting agree that John Russell shall order a bell for the steeple of Falkirk from London not to exceed 15 cwt. and that Mr. Russell agrees to order it free of commission.”*

The cost of the bell, including its carriage from London by one of Carron Company's merchant vessels, was around £200. The bell, made by Thomas Mears of London, carried the motto 'May Falkirk Flourish'. Eight months later, in August

1816, doubts were expressed about the positioning of the bell and John Russell, Michael Muir, the well known wright in Falkirk and Henry Taylor, the mason who had built the Steeple, were asked to investigate the rehanging of the bell so that it might be heard to better effect.

About this time, several dissenting churches in Falkirk requested that the 'great bell' be rung at a quarter before eleven, quarter before two and eight o'clock on Sabbaths; six o'clock in the morning and six and ten o'clock in the evening on week days and nine o'clock in the morning on market days. As several subscribers threatened to withdraw their subscriptions for the purchase of the bell if this were not done, the Stentmasters duly agreed. This decision brought about a vigorous protest by the Minister of the Parish, Dr. James Wilson, as he considered it would "*produce much inconvenience and confusion and is contrary to both law and practice*" as it had been "*the immemorial practice in Falkirk to ring the Town Bell at the same time with the Church Bell and at no other time on the Sabbath days*".

As Dr. Wilson threatened to take his protest to the Court of Session, the Stentmasters took the option of counsel. A statement prepared for that purpose stated that the seceding congregations – the [Relief](#), [Burghers](#) and [Anti-Burghers](#) – were by far the most numerous, their churches had no bells, a great number of their members had subscribed to assist in building the new steeple and purchasing a new bell and it was therefore their desire that the Stentmasters had agreed to their requests. The opinion of Counsel was that the Stentmasters were entitled to ring the bell at the hours agreed upon for the accommodation of the Dissenters, and to ring it at any other hours for any lawful purpose and that Dr. Wilson had no right to prevent them from ringing the bell on Sunday, or to direct them as to the hour when the bell should be rung.

The Stentmasters resolved to ring the bell as formerly – at the same time as the Established Church bell – and they reserved the right to ring the bell upon the Sabbath days at any proper hour for a useful purpose.

As stated earlier, John Russell was very interested in the affairs of the town and as an elected member of the Stentmasters he would appear to have fulfilled this commitment by his involvement with the provision of the town clock and bell. But during this time he was also fulfilling his obligation as Watchmaker for Scotland to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent and his royal connections were further extended when in 1817, acting under the advice of Lord Keith, he presented one of his Royal Barometers to his Imperial Majesty, Alexander of Russia. The presentation of the barometer, which was accompanied by an address to the Emperor from John Russell, was entrusted to Sir James Wylie, M.D. It is unlikely that John Russell ever saw an acknowledgement from the Emperor for he died a few weeks later on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1817. The *Edinburgh Advertiser* of 30<sup>th</sup> September 1817 carried the following obituary notice:

*"Died at Falkirk on the 25<sup>th</sup> September, Mr John Russell, Watchmaker to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. From a different line of trade to which he was originally bred; by his ingenuity and industry he raised himself to an eminent and prominent situation in his profession."*

A few days later on 5<sup>th</sup> October the Kirk Session of [Falkirk Parish Church](#) recorded that:

*“The heirs of John Russell, Watchmaker, obtained leave a few days ago to have him buried in an unclaimed grave to the west of Sir John the Graham’s monument, and paid the dues accordingly.”*

The gravestone was described as ‘A beautiful and chaste designed monument’ inscribed:

*Erected by brother James Russell – In loving memory of John Russell,  
Watchmaker to H.R.H. the Prince Regent 1818*

Unfortunately, between 1959 and 1962 all the tombstones in the Parish Churchyard, except those of historic importance, were cleared away from the graveyard. With hindsight many now regret the removal of these stones.

Examples of John Russell’s work were and still are highly sought after and many still exist far and wide and in private homes locally. There are also some available to the general public – as already noted the Steeple Clock of 1817, renovated and in working order, is on display in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; in Falkirk Municipal Buildings there is a fine Long Case Clock; and there is the clock in Kilsyth Burns and Old Parish Church.

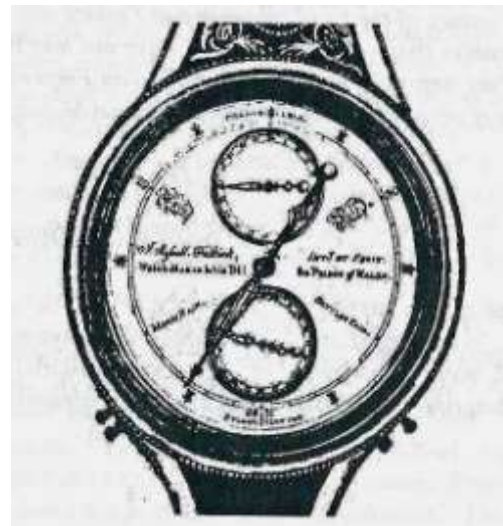
Russell’s High Street business was carried out by his younger brother, William and William’s son, John, who was running the business in the 1850s. John Russell’s Falkirk property later passed to the family of his brother James who thereafter disposed of it to Adam Smith, Writer in Falkirk.

Postscript ...../ see next page



**Postscript:****The Saga of the 'Royal Barometer'.**

**Some thirty-four years after his death, John Russell's name again appeared in the local newspaper in connection with the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. The article concerned reads as follows:**



The Face of the Royal Barometer inscribed  
"J Russell, Falkirk. inv. et fecit.  
Watchmaker to his RH the PRINCE of WALES"

*The Falkirk Herald, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1851 :*

### **THE GREAT EXHIBITION**

*We have seen an elegant Barometer for the Great Exhibition made by our townsman, Mr. Dobbie, Clockmaker to the Queen, on an improved plan, by which the least possible rise and fall of the mercury is ascertained with the greatest precision. The smallest divisions on the dial are not less than one tenth of an inch though each of these answers one thousandth of an inch in the rise and fall of the mercury. It presents two indexes – the one of the common range and the other pointing out the thousandth of an inch, and it has two registers moveable from the side. Above the dial is a superior looking thermometer, with the scales of Fahrenheit and Reaumur. The case of the barometer, which is a very elegant style, was made by Mr. James Miller, Cabinetmaker. Among the other articles forwarded to the Great Exhibition from this town and neighbourhood, we may mention some specimens of fine glue manufactured by Mr. Nimmo, Tanner and Currier, which though not the most striking or showy, is not the least useful of the contributions from the district.*

John Russell's nephew, William Russell of Queenzie Forge, Kilsyth wrote to the Herald to rebuke the writer and William Dobbie if he was party to the suggestion that the barometer was a new invention. It was obviously John Russell's work and should be acknowledged as such. "I am aware," he went on, "a truly generous mind scorns to appropriate foreign merit or to strut in borrowed plumes. Plagerism and piracy I am certain a well regulated mind equally eschews and detests." He enclosed a number of papers which proved John Russell's authorship of the barometer and invited "some corrective notice or disclaimer" from Mr Dobbie. The letter appeared in 1<sup>st</sup> May 1851 producing a swift reply from Dobbie:

*The Falkirk Herald*, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1851 :

*To the Editor of the Falkirk Herald*

Falkirk, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1851

Sir,

*In the Herald of the 1<sup>st</sup> May current, I observed a vindictive letter dated Queenzie Forge, Kilsyth, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1851, signed one William Russell, complaining of a paragraph said to have appeared in a number of your paper, published in March last, giving a description of an improved royal barometer which I had made and sent to the Great Exhibition in London.*

He went on to conclude that:

*I have never said, published, suggested or approved of any publication whatever, purporting that I was more than the maker of the improved royal barometer (although I could with strict propriety and truth have said more), not even in the printed return sent to the officials in London did I do so as the Chairman and Secretary of the local committee at Falkirk can testify.*

*I may also mention that, notwithstanding I have not had the honour of presenting one of the improved royal barometers to an Emperor, a King, or even a Prince, I may yet send one to Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen.*

*I am, etc.*

WILLIAM DOBBIE

The original paragraph referred to had actually appeared on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1851 and not March as stated. The correspondence would appear to have ended at this point, but on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1852, William Dobbie had a column in the *Falkirk Herald* advertising a 'Grand Sale' of the '**Improved** Royal Barometer or Great Exhibition Royal Atmospheric Recorder'!

**PRINCIPAL SOURCES:**

- |                     |      |  |
|---------------------|------|--|
| <i>Falkirk Mail</i> | 1911 | 'Mr John Russell, a Famous Clockmaker' (1.7.1911)                                  |
| Love, J.            | 1896 | 'Falkirk Steeples, Tollbooths and Bells' in <i>The Falkirk Herald</i> (19.12.1896) |
| Love, J.            | 1908 | <i>Antiquarian Notes and Queries</i> Vol 1: 'John Russell, Clockmaker'             |
| Love, J.            | 1910 | <i>Antiquarian Notes and Queries</i> Vol 2: 'The Town Bell'                        |
| Reid, J             | 1993 | <a href="#">'The Stentmasters of Falkirk' in Calatria 5 p.25</a>                   |
| Smith, J.           |      | Old Scottish Clockmakers   |

**OTHER SOURCES :**

Scottish Record Office  
New Register House  
Falkirk Library  
National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh  
Falkirk Community Trust Archives and  
Research Centre, Callendar House

Old Statistical Account for Falkirk  
Falkirk Old Parish Church Records  
Census Returns  
Denny/Falkirk Old Parish Records  
*Falkirk Herald*  
*Falkirk Mail*

