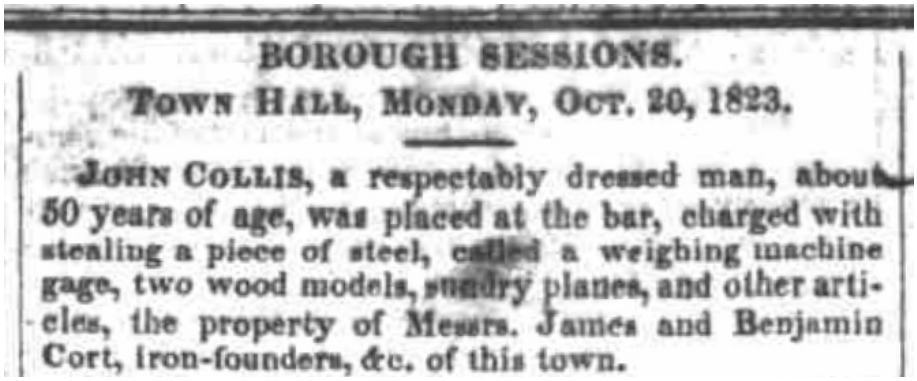
Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker looks at the crime and punishment of his ancestor John Collis, a patternmaker at Cort's iron foundry

It's Monday 20 October 1823. My ancestor John Collis – foreman patternmaker at Cort's iron foundry – appears before Edward Goulburn, the Recorder at Leicester Borough Sessions. Despite being of otherwise good character, he stands accused of stealing tools from his long-time employers in readiness for joining another foundry. His future hangs in the balance.



BOROUGH SESSIONS.

TOWN HALL, MONDAY, OCT. 20, 1823.

JOHN COLLIS, a respectably dressed man, about 50 years of age, was placed at the bar, charged with stealing a piece of steel, called a weighing machine gage, two wood models, sundry planes, and other articles, the property of Messrs. James and Benjamin Cort, iron-founders, &c. of this town.

Snippets from the newspaper report explain the unfortunate turn of events:

> "On the 2nd Aug following, the prisoner came to the foundry, & wished to look into a box which he had left there… On opening it he saw six dozens of files, twenty planes, eight moulding frames, and a pair of compasses, which had generally been used by Messrs Cort's workmen… It was his duty as foreman, to make models; and keep the general custody of them." John Collis claimed that "Mr Cort has given the planes to me" and his colleague Charles Potter later helped him remove the tool chest from the foundry to his home.
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> "John Christian, clerk to the prosecutors, had paid the prisoner 35s per week for the seven weeks prior to his leaving: when he had made seven days in each week (Sunday excepted) by working from six o'clock in the morning till eight in the evening. Usual hours of working were from 6 to 6."
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> "Mr James Cort said, the prisoner had been in his employ more than twenty years, but he denied he had ever given him any planes. Mr Watts was a partner with himself and his brother, when Collis first entered their service, but had ceased to be so in 1817, when an inventory was taken of all the tools, & Mr Watts was paid a third part of them."

The jury, after a short consultation, found John Collis guilty, but recommended a lenient sentence on account of his previous good character – a view also supported by his master, Benjamin Cort. "Here was a workman on the point of quitting his employer, who had no fewer than twenty-eight planes in his box..."

declared the Recorder, “Had it not been for the recommendation of the jury, I should have felt it my duty to have transported you for seven years; however, the sentence of the Court is that you be imprisoned twelve calendar months to hard labour in the County House of Correction.” With that, John Collis is led to the County Bridewell.

A report of the case runs to a full column in the Leicester Chronicle. Tracking it down – thanks to the British Newspaper Archive online – was one of those joyful moments we family historians experience from time to time. Here we have an unexpected glimpse into an ancestor’s life that helps add context and colour to the family narrative.

Prior to finding this article, the details of John Collis’ life were somewhat sparse. He first appears “of St Martin’s parish” at his marriage on 1 January 1793 to Elizabeth Watts in Thurmaston. Settling in Leicester, they go on to have six children, four of whom have ‘Watts’ as one of their forenames. The Watts connection is significant. Elizabeth’s father, Edward Watts and two brothers Thomas (1762-1813) and William Watts (1766-1839) were all blacksmiths, in the metalworking trade. They appear to have prospered, acquiring properties, and from 1799-1817 William Watts joins the Cort brothers in partnership.

Dr GT Rimmington in his paper, ‘Leicester Foundries in the Early Nineteenth Century’ (LAHS35), picks up the story: “The first successful iron foundry in Leicester was established in 1799 on the canal bank at the Public Wharf in Belgrave Gate. This developed out of the ironmongery business of James Cort [in the Market Place]… and during the first decade of the foundry’s existence no fewer than fifteen apprentices became bound. In order to extend his business and become a substantial iron founder Cort had had to take in partners, these being William Watts and Benjamin Cort, his brother.”

James Cort “was beginning to emerge as an engineer of promise” and the opening of the canal link between Leicester and Loughborough in 1794 helped provide extra impetus for setting up his foundry; now it was possible to transport coal, as well as bar iron from furnaces in the Chesterfield area, cost effectively into the centre of Leicester.

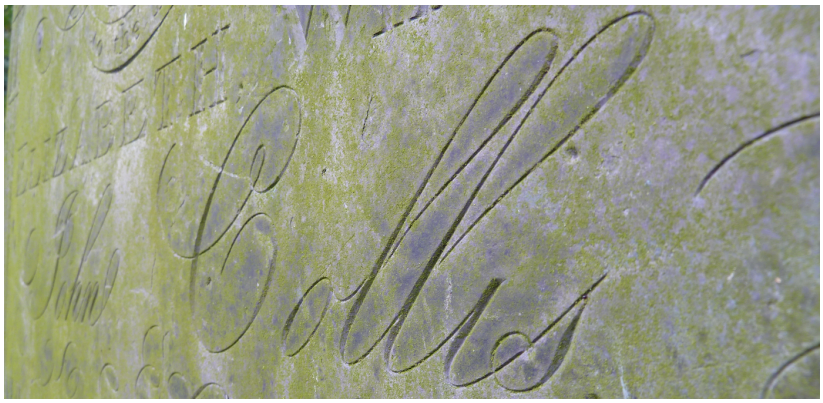
Susannah Watts (no relation) describes the scene in 'A Walk Through Leicester' (1804): "Here, among numbers of newly-erected dwellings (proof of the increasing population of the town) is the public and principal wharf on the navigable canal, near which is an iron foundery." And Cort & Co's foundry is significant enough to be labelled on an 1828 map of the town, standing near the gas works and lime kilns. The buildings have long gone, but the street names Foundry Lane and Foundry Square survive.

It seems likely that John Collis started working at Cort's foundry almost from the outset. As a patternmaker – or model-maker – he worked largely in wood to create very precise models that could be used in the casting of metal parts. It was a skilled craft – using carving, turning and cabinet-making techniques to make accurate models suitable for sand-casting – and he would have had an eye for exacting detail. Chisels, files and planes, along with an analytical mind, were the tools of the trade.

Cort's foundry cast items such as machinery and fixtures for the hosiery and other industries, and iron fittings like spouting, window frames and railings for houses and churches. In 1821 they cast the first gas lamps for the town, and in 1830 malleable iron rails and keys for the Leicester and Swannington Railway, of which Benjamin Cort was a director. Following on from Cort's, other foundries opened in the town: by 1827 there were five firms in Leicester described as iron and brass founders, employing some eighty-seven foundry workers by 1831.

Among the town's foundry workers were John's two eldest sons: Thomas Watts Collis became a patternmaker like his father, and John Collis junior served a seven-year apprenticeship from 1812 to Cort & Watts – in other words, working closely with his father and uncle at the foundry – before becoming a smith.

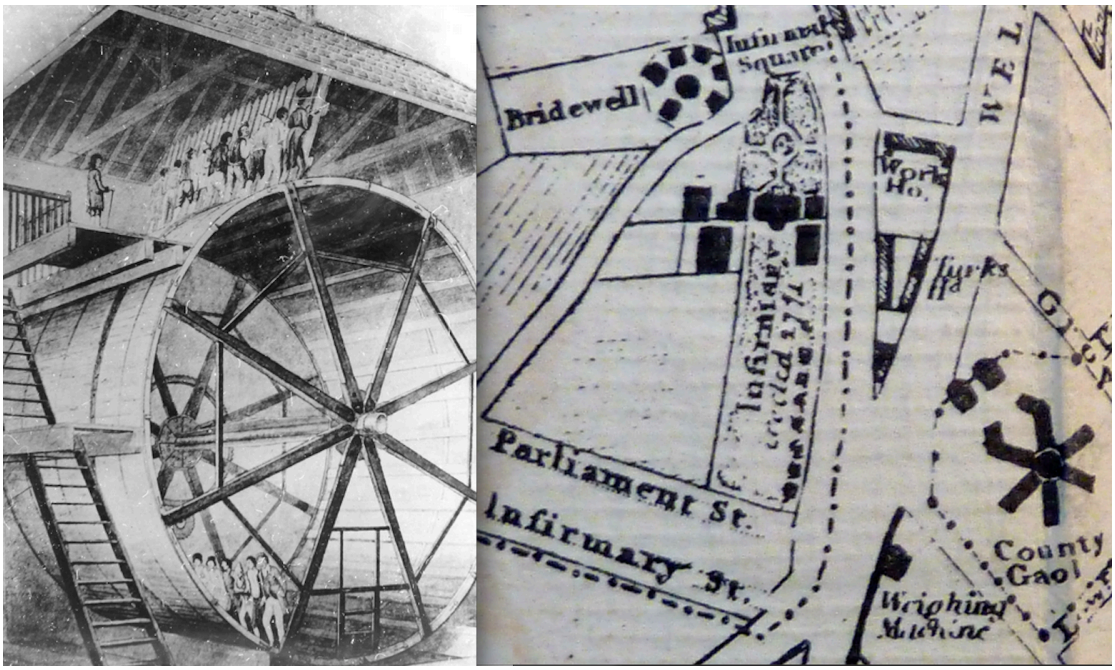
The Collis family moved to a newly built, three-storey dwelling at 187 Belgrave Gate, a block or two along from Foundry Square. Ordinarily the house number would have been lost in history but – again, thanks to a newspaper snippet, this time about a property dispute in which the Collis children were simply witnesses – “Mrs Bramley [nee Maria Jane Watts Collis] said her father, John Collis, lived in the house in question from the time of its being built until 1823… and Mrs Bramley was born in the house [1810].”



In March 1814, the family’s circumstances take a sad turn: Elizabeth Collis, John’s wife, dies aged only 43. He erects an elaborately inscribed slate headstone in her memory at St Martin’s churchyard – also commemorating two of their children, and his younger brother George. With several young children still at home, it’s perhaps not surprising that John re-marries within a year. His second wife is Matilda Russell, herself a widow with children and part of the Harrison family of nurserymen and seed merchants. They go on to have three sons together – Joseph, George and Martin Collis – whilst continuing to live at the Belgrave Gate house.

And so it is that we arrive back at the Borough Sessions in October 1823. John Collis has been sentenced to twelve months in the County Bridewell, also known as the House of Correction. After a decent hard-working life, and two respectable marriages, the shame must have been unbearable.

Opened in 1820, the County Bridewell stood just to the west of Infirmary Square and was one of four prisons in the town at that time, the others being clustered on Highcross Street: the County Gaol, Borough Gaol and Borough Bridewell. It wasn’t until a few years later (1828-9) that the new County Gaol was built on Welford Road – both are shown here on the 1828 map, alongside an 1823 watercolour by H Goddard of the giant treadmill at Leicester Gaol on Highcross Street.



The Bridewell was generally used to hold prisoners who had committed lesser crimes, though the regime was still a tough one. One observer in the Chronicle (July 1824), arguing for a “spirit of humanity”, wrote: “To keep prisoners upon little beside bread and water, as we understand is the case at the Bridewell, and to require them to labour at the tread-mill at the same time, appears to us to be bordering on cruelty. We are creditably informed, a few weeks ago, that out of 60 prisoners, there were not more than twenty of that number in a proper state of health, in the County Bridewell, the remaining forty being on the sick list!” To help improve matters, soup was occasionally added to the prisoners’ diet.

However, it seems that John Collis avoided some of the discomforts of prison life. An exchange of letters in the Leicester Chronicle in Oct and Nov 1824 between an aggrieved inmate Samuel Sumner and the Governor, John Allen, sets a slightly different complexion on how John Collis was treated during his time in the County Bridewell. Sumner complained, “Another prisoner (Collis) was… allowed to provide his own meals, have ale sent in, and to see his wife, daughter, or friends almost daily without the gaoler’s interference.”

Governor Allen replies, “I am charged also with making a distinction between Sumner and Collis. I answer that it rests on the general rules of the prison, which give to a prisoner voluntarily performing hard labour the liberty to spend part of his earnings on provisions, and to have a better diet than those who, like Sumner, do nothing at all; and the meat and malt liquor which were permitted to Collis, were ordered, like the coffee and meat by Sumner, by the written direction of the surgeon.”

In fact, John Collis didn't complete his full sentence. There is a remarkable intervention: “a petition most numerously and respectably signed in his favour” was drawn up, writes Recorder Edward Goulburn, “begging me to make the application… that the remainder of his man’s sentence may be remitted. I do

this in consequence of his excellent character, deposed to for nearly 20 years by the prosecutors and a large portion of the Town including the Mayor and Magistrates, his good conduct whilst in prison, the state of destitution to which his imprisonment reduces a wife and large family, and (which most weighs with me) a feeling (which I collected in a conversation recently had with Mr Cort the prosecutor) that... he, Mr Cort, was in his recollection not quite accurate." So, the conviction is thrown into doubt, and on 8 Sept 1824, the Home Secretary, Robert Peel, grants "By His Majesty's Command" John Collis remission and discharge from the Bridewell.

What becomes of John Collis after his release? He swiftly relocates to Northampton – along with his wife and young children – and resumes patternmaking work at Brettell & Barwell's Eagle Foundry, the foundry he'd originally planned to join upon leaving Cort's. "Iron Arms for Carts and Waggons, Tire and Nails, iron Hurdles, hare Fencing, and every other Article manufactured in wrought Iron," boasts their advert. Alas, it was not to continue for long: the family's health seems to have declined, as within a few years both his wife Matilda (1828) and John (1829) had died in Northampton.

A fatal error of judgement – taking tools from his employers – brought John Collis' life to a rather sorry end. However, a more favourable part of his legacy was that he kick-started the family's involvement with patternmaking and engineering. Four generations followed in his footsteps, working at various foundries and engineering companies in Leicester and London. Decades later, one descendant even made his fortune with the Collis pallet truck. But that, as they say, is another story.

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