

MARCUS BENJAMIN

an Australian watchmaker, 1839-1906

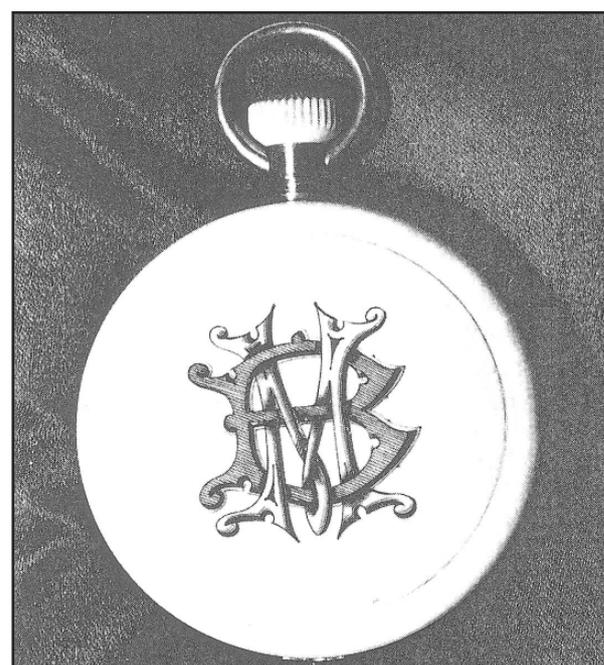
JOHN HAWKINS

AUSTRALIA in the 19th century saw the arrival of at least two practising clockmakers, James Robertson (1781-1868) and James Oatley (1770-1839) both of whom worked in Sydney between 1820 and 1840. The art of the clockmaker requires totally different skills and tools to those involved in the manufacture of a watch. According to 19th century advertisements by Australian jewellers and watchmakers, they were involved in the repairs and maintenance of clocks and watches, not in their manufacture.

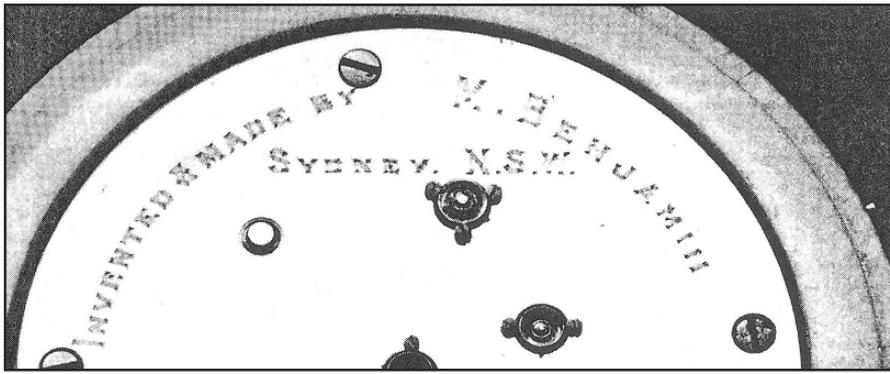
Marcus Benjamin must have been a most remarkable man. He was inventive, with a great knowledge and the technical skill and tools to execute his ideas. In 19th century Australia, he worked in a technological wilderness, the parts available to watchmakers in England and Europe being unobtainable. As a result, he was forced to make his invented watch part by part from the materials to hand. Benjamin mastered all the specialized trades involved. This included casemaking, dial making, enamelling, the making of hands, pinion cutting, wheel cutting, engraving, springing the balance, and the making of the balance, to name but a few separate crafts to which a man served a seven-year apprenticeship within the watchmaking industry.

I can only speculate, but a gold case for a watch made by an employed watchmaker with six children was probably out of the question in terms of cost. The fact that the art of casemaking as a specialist craft required particular tools and equipment in all probability meant that Benjamin was incapable of making the case even if able to purchase the raw material. The compromise of an ivory case, easily turned and snap fitted, ruled out the problems of making the hinges - yet another specialized craft. It would have been an uphill battle to make such a watch. The competition from imports was such that to sell a locally made watch and justify the labour involved was

Overall view of watch to show gold pendant and bow to the ivory case, the enamelled dial with centre swept dead seconds with separate seconds dial. Signed "Invented by M. Benjamin, Sydney, N.S.W." The stop for the centre seconds at 6 o'clock on the perimeter of the case.



The engraved monogram of Marcus Benjamin to the rear of the ivory case.



The backplate of the movement signed "Invented and made by M. Benjamin, Sydney, N.S.W." and the gold mounted jewelled pinion holes.

impossible. As a result, it remained with him as his masterpiece, engraved with his initials, for the rest of his life. Its survival makes Benjamin Australia's only practising 19th century watchmaker and the watch a masterpiece of Australian Victorian technology, as well as a tribute to his skill.

Marcus Benjamin, according to his death certificate, was born at Pickelyn in Russia in 1839, arriving in New South Wales in 1884 with his second wife, two sons by his first marriage and four children by his second. On his arrival, he was employed by John Hardy of the Sydney firm of jewellers Hardy Brothers, and together they took out the worldwide patent on Benjamin's invention in 1890.

For the technically minded, the patent for the watch is described and illustrated in the English publication, *The Horological Journal*, of March 1892. It is described as "a rather ingenious adaptation of a form of remontoire for the purpose of obtaining an independent centre seconds to mark full seconds without a separate main-spring." The full patent for New South Wales is held at the Australian Patent Office in Canberra.

The watch was exhibited at The Worlds Columbian Exhibition, Chicago, USA, and a contemporary description exists in a catalogue of the New South Wales exhibits:

"An Independent Dead-beat Centre-seconds Stop Watch, with one movement, invented and patented by the exhibitor.

"To get a full second with one beat a watch of this kind was formerly made with two movements. By this improvement the mechanism for the centre-second movement is reduced by 75 per cent, and the full-beat second is recorded with the same movement. This watch is made on the best principles, many other improvements having been effected by the exhibitor. All the wheels and the setting

of the jewels are in gold, and also the mounting of the case. Patented in New South Wales, Victoria, United States of America, Great Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland."

This description omits to mention the case being made of ivory. However, the watch is mounted in gold, as are the wheels and the settings for the jewels. The case is monogrammed "MB" and the watch remained in Benjamin's possession until his death in 1906, as is confirmed by this extract from his will:

"... I give and bequeath unto my daughter Teresa Davis wife of David Davis of Sydney aforesaid my ivory watch mounted in gold made by myself. I give and bequeath unto my daughter Dora Benjamin of 37 Alfred Street aforesaid my silver watch and gold chain . and also all my tools in trade implements and utensils of or in connection with the trade or business of watchmaker of which I shall die possessed..."

His will confirms the affection Benjamin held for this particular watch—the fact that it was "made by myself" and that he was possessed of the "tools in trade implements and utensils" with which to make it.

Benjamin appears to have parted company with Hardy Brothers in about 1896 when he moved to 16 Alfred Street, North Sydney. Living there for two years, he moved to 37 Alfred Street, with a shop at 23 Pitt Street, Kirribilli, at which address he died on July 19, 1906, leaving an estate of £190.17.6d.

References

- Australian Dictionary of Biography.
- Hawkins, Australian Silver 1800-1900. Death Certificate, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, No. 10473.
- NSW Patent dated June 2, 1890, No. 2228, in the name of Marcus Benjamin and John Hardy.
- The Horological Journal*, March 1892, pp. 96 and 97.
- Catalogue of Exhibits in the NSW Courts, Chicago 1893, p. 420.