

## William Tagg the forgotten calico printer

Researched and written by Keith Baldwin.

A celebration of the achievements of Charles Swaisland would be incomplete without mentioning the achievements of William Tagg his friend and mentor, a master calico printer who together with his partner James Whitehead ran the “Upper Works” from 1795 to 1832 before allowing Swaisland to “take” it.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to be certain where Tagg was born in about 1751, though we do know from his will that he had connections with Swynnerton in Staffordshire and owned a couple of properties there. What we do know is that he apprenticed to Joseph Talwin of Bromley House, Bow probably the foremost calico printer of his day and was released on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1771.

Some time later he is recorded in a partnership with William Kennerley (originally from Cheshire), William Haite (of the Haite dynasty) and James Whitehead (son of a Mitcham millwright) at Beddington on the river Wandle. William Kennerley left this partnership in June 1793<sup>2</sup> and the remaining partnership was dissolved on Christmas Day 1794.

William Tagg and James Whitehead then moved to the site upstream of Crayford Bridge formerly occupied by John Munns, who rather worryingly was also a gunpowder maker. Munns was declared bankrupt in 1784.<sup>3</sup> Under their tenure this business thrived and an enormous L-shaped building was built increasing the scale of the enterprise far beyond its artisan beginnings. A Tagg & Co. pattern book (made from paper with a 1795 watermark) survives in the G.P. & J. Baker Archives, probably recording hand-block patterns that the partners took with them to the Crayford site. It shows fine pinned block work, and includes floral, seaweed, and vermicular motifs.

In January 1828, James Whitehead left the partnership<sup>4</sup> and in 1832 William Tagg decided to retire. Charles Swaisland took over the whole enterprise in addition to his own “Lower Works” possibly as he may well have apprenticed there himself. Certainly he valued the advice and friendship of William Tagg who may have seen him as his protégé.

Being a master calico printer himself William Tagg seems to have enjoyed a convivial working relationship with his employees who he obviously held in high regard. In his will he shows this in bequests to his pattern drawers William Hubbard (£1000), William Haite Snr (£1000), Robert Schindler (£200), Alfred Wykes (£100) and to the children of William Roberts deceased and Thomas Toptaff. He was also heavily involved in administering parish relief carrying out the duties for over 30 years.

With a total estate worth in the region of £36,000 in 1837 William Tagg was a rich man and he indulged in a passion for fine art, china and glassware often inviting friends such as Charles Swaisland and Richard Davies, vicar of Erith, to come and view new acquisitions. He is described as a

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<sup>1</sup> *This is the phrase used by Swaisland in his deposition to the Court of Chancery National Archives PROB 37/1120 4<sup>th</sup> July 1838.*

<sup>2</sup> *London Gazette*, 9 Jul 1793, p.585.

<sup>3</sup> *London Gazette*, 11 Sep 1784, p.4.

<sup>4</sup> *London Gazette*, 22 Feb 1828, p.369.

shrewd and clever man in their dispositions to the Court of Chancery<sup>5</sup> and one who often shared his wisdom with Charles Swaisland on business matters apparently.

So whilst we are currently celebrating the bi-centenary of Charles Swaisland perhaps we should also celebrate his friend and mentor William Tagg who made a lot of it possible.

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<sup>5</sup> PROB 18/132/11 lawsuit of 1838, PCAP 1/55 also to do with this case 1839-40, PROB 11/1925/63 will of 27 March 1840.

## Source notes

**National Archives** PROB 37/1120 Astbury v Scudder. The deposition took the form of answers to a number of agreed questions to ascertain the validity of four wills found in Tagg's safe. Other related documents filed under C 13/433/52, PCAP 1/55, PROB 18/132/11 and PCAP 3/4.

Will of William Tagg PROB 11/1925/63.

Inland Revenue Apprenticeship Tax papers (IR 17) IRI26/217

The holdings of the **Wandle Industrial Museum, Mitcham** relating to mills on the River Wandle

### **British Newspaper Archive**

Morning Post 30<sup>th</sup> May 1838

### **London Gazette**

### **Bexley Archives**

**Mitcham, Surrey Settlement Examinations** 1737-1772: 1814-1825 publication No 1 and Settlement Certificates 1700-1806 publication No 2 both on fiche and published by the East Surrey FHS.