

THOMAS HART: THE FIRST CHALLENGE TO CHUBB

By Brian Morland, Curator of the Heritage Collection of Locks and Keys.



Brian Morland



▲ Contemporary documents giving great insights as to exactly what happened.

Those early inventors of patent locks were caught up in the excitement of what they believed their invention to be the perfect lock.

Quite naturally, in order to promote a new idea or principle the advantages of an idea over, say a competitor's product would be to point out and demonstrate the weaknesses of that competing product. A natural course of action, and is a marketing technique continued to

this day. This story is just a fragment in the continuous development of locks and concerns Thomas Hart the first to claim he could pick open Chubb's Detector lock.

Thomas Hart was born in 1800 in Wolverhampton, to parents Samuel, a tin plate worker, and Elizabeth. Thomas married in 1839 to Emma Whele, and produced four children, Thomas (1840),

Sarah (1846), another Thomas (1849) and Ann (1856). Interestingly Thomas and Elizabeth's third child, also named Thomas (1849-1934) and also a locksmith carrying on in the tradition of his father's trade, worked for both Milner and Chubb.

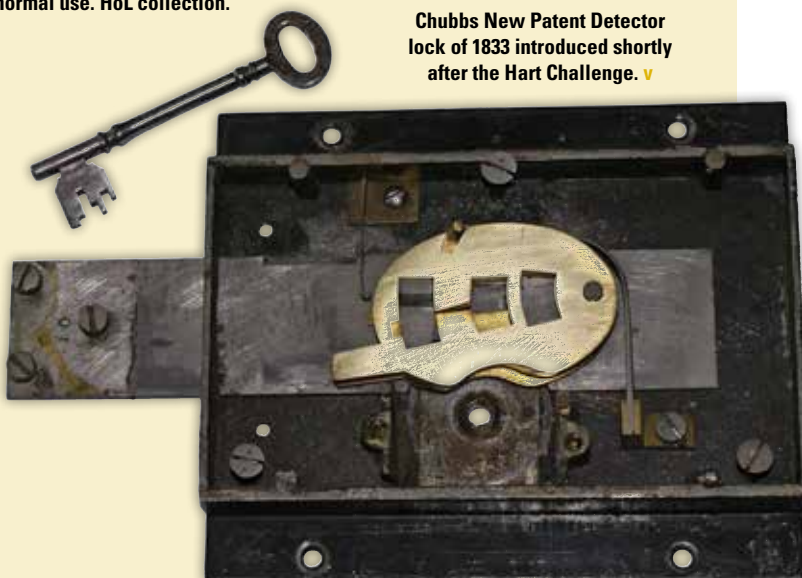
Chubb had successfully promoted his 'detecting Mechanism' to the extent that it soon became a household name earning a very enviable reputation. The popularity of Chubb's lock in those early years was such that in order to meet demand it was outsourced. One such subcontractor was Joseph Richards, a Wolverhampton locksmith, who in turn, and unknown to Chubb, further sub-contracted to another skilled locksmith, Thomas Hart.

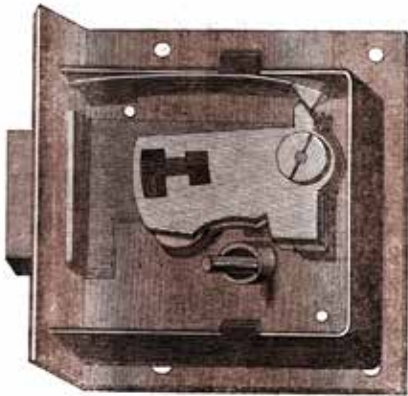
In those days locks were made by hand, lock cases and components were fettled and fabricated from metal strips, plates, bars and castings, perhaps 12 at a time. You may have noticed in some early locks all the parts were numbered either with stamped in dots or numerals or even roman numerals. This was to remind the locksmith which parts were for which lock in the series he was making at the time. He would make 12 cases, 12 bolts, 12 sets of levers and so on, finally and individually dressing each part to complete the lock. Parts were not interchangeable as in modern locks. What this meant was that the locksmith had a very clear and intimate knowledge of how each of the components interacted with each other and how the key interacted on the whole. He would also have realised weaknesses and improvements, especially in relation to efficiency of the principle or the cost in terms of time taken to produce the product for its intended market.



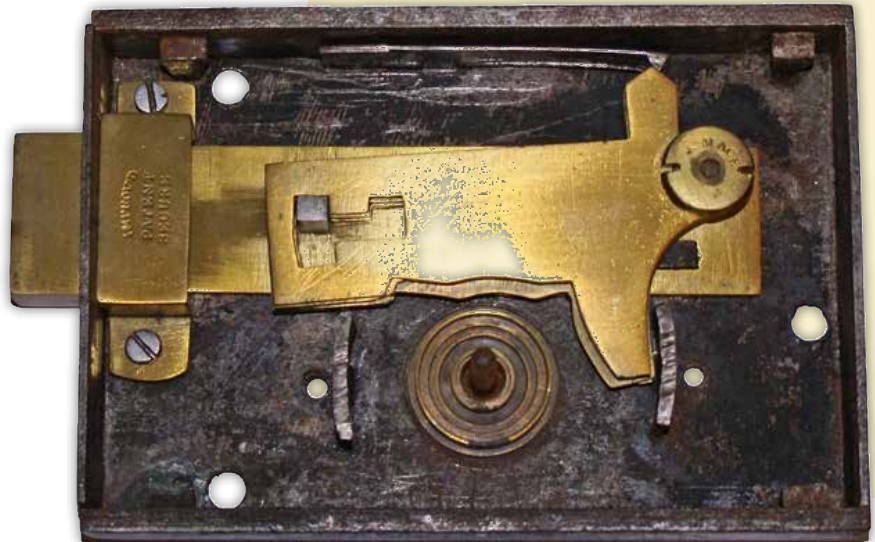
▲ Chubb detector lock in the form of a 6" safe lock, unnecessarily complicated for normal use. HoL collection.

Chubb's New Patent Detector lock of 1833 introduced shortly after the Hart Challenge. ▼





< An engraving of Harts lock from George Price's 1854 Treatise.



^ Hart's lock in the form of a 7" rim deadlock. Notice how the springs answer both the lever and detector function. HoL collection.

One such locksmith was Thomas Hart, whose skill and efficiency in fettling locks almost intuitively allowing him to speculate and theorise on a possible alternative to Chubb's lock. His speculation paid off when he came up with a design idea. Like inventors before him, he first needed to demonstrate weaknesses in the Chubb design. So around February 1832 he claimed that the Chubb lock could be picked open and proceeded to open a number of them in public. This was, no doubt, based on his practical, detailed knowledge of the Chubb locks he was making for Richards. Chubb was furious with Richards for "being too free with Chubb secrets" and refused any of his locks. Chubb responded with a challenge and £10 reward.

Hart suspected that the challenge lock was not the normal version. It was agreed that should the trial lock be anything other than a normal production version and Hart failed, then a fee of £5 was to be paid by Chubb. Hart several times left the site during the trial to make adjustments or modify his tools. With little under an hour left for the trial Hart again left to adjust his instruments. Chubb's deliberately misinterpreted his departure and put a seal on the trial lock claiming victory. Both Hart and witnesses protested but to no avail. Chubb stated that since Hart had 'conceded' there was no need to inspect the lock. Chubb naturally claimed victory and even solicited Isombard Kingdom Brunel to help denounce Harts lock. Interestingly, history was to repeat itself some 20 years later when Hobbs picked Chubb's locks - complete with claims and counter claims.

Shortly after this affair Chubb completely redesigned its detector lock, in 1833 introducing the New Patent. I wonder if

this was in part a response to Hart's public claims. Certainly the new lock was a simpler to produce.

Hart though had secured his name in locksmithing history; he sold his idea to Richards who commercially produced his lock. Indeed other companies, such as Mace, later made his design so it must have gained some merit of purpose despite Chubb's claims.

My own theory is that whilst the Chubb detector lock was 'state of the art' at the time for high security safes and vaults and the like, some felt it might be over-engineered and, therefore, expensive for the risks associated with ordinary doors for homes or securing cabinet doors etc. Harts lock answered this need more than adequately and more reasonably priced.

Thomas's son also Thomas, after living in Liverpool for a short while and working

for Milner moved to London working for Chubb at its Glendale Road works, later moving back to Wolverhampton and still employed by Chubb. So the affairs of the first Thomas Hart hadn't interfered with his son's employment either within the trade or specifically with Chubb. Indeed Victorian 'puffery' was as much a tool in maintaining an edge on public opinions, perceptions and their buying habits. Despite the claims of Patent or Proprietary lock makers, they each knew only too well the limits or viabilities of their own products - and of their rivals!

Brian Morland, curator of the Heritage Collection of locks and keys, welcomes comments and corrections on historical aspects of locks and keys. Brian can be contacted by e-mail: brian@morlands.demon.co.uk

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