



Federation of Model Engineering Societies

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Chubb and Bramah lockmakers

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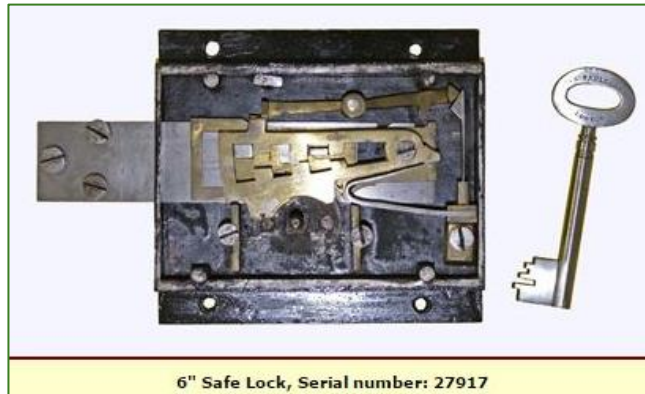
At the Great Exhibition of 1851 there were two British lock manufacturers who demonstrated their superiority in making well engineered locks. They were Bramah & Co and Chubb. On their stands at the exhibition they both claimed that they produced unpickable locks, Bramah the 'Challenge' lock and Chubb the 'Detector lock'. Chubb's device had been patented back in 1818; Bramah's lock was even older, having been patented in 1787 and used a system



JOHN CHUBB

based on 18 sliders, which could produce 470 million possible permutations. Bramah was so confident that since 1801 a large padlock containing his Challenge system, had been displayed in the

window of his shop on Piccadilly painted with the legend offering 200 guineas to anyone who could open it without the key. Many tried, none succeeded.



At the Exhibition was an American visitor, Alfred Hobbs, who worked for a New York lock company Day and Newell and was promoting their company's products and in particular the firm's 'Parautoptic' lock. He believed that all this tub thumping about the infallibility of British locks, which were 33 and 64 years old respectively, needed to be tested. He announced that he intended to crack both. He began with the Chubb Detector, picking one at the great exhibition in front of a group of eminent gentlemen in under five minutes. This had the desired effect of creating a stir in the press along with a chorus of complaints that the lock was clearly 'fixed'. Hobbs wrote to Messrs Chubb saying he would pick any other of their locks in front of a panel of judges. The demonstration went ahead and Hobbs cracked a Detector attached to a strong room door in Westminster in less than half an hour. The news sent shock waves through the strong room owners of England.

Next, Bramah's famous Challenge lock was taken from the shop window and moved to an upstairs room. A group of witnesses watched as it was encased in a wooden box so that only the keyhole was visible and despite being the older of the two locks this proved the more complex. Hobbs took 51 hours to crack the mechanism after which he demonstrated the opening and closing the lock repeatedly to the assembled judges. Whilst there was considerable bickering regarding the exact legal terms of the challenge eventually Bramah paid up the 200 guineas.

The London locksmiths were so shocked that the challenge was thrown back and one of them offered to crack Hobbs Parautoptic lock. After 30 days he had to admit defeat.



JOSEPH BRAMAH

The result of this was not a collapse of British lock making, as Chubb and Bramah went back to the drawing board to improve their locks and both are with us today marketing a range of security products still aimed at defeating the lock picker and safe breaker.

Hobbs used the prize money to set up his own London based locksmith company before returning to America to become involved in arms manufacture.

(Based on an article by Justin Pollard).