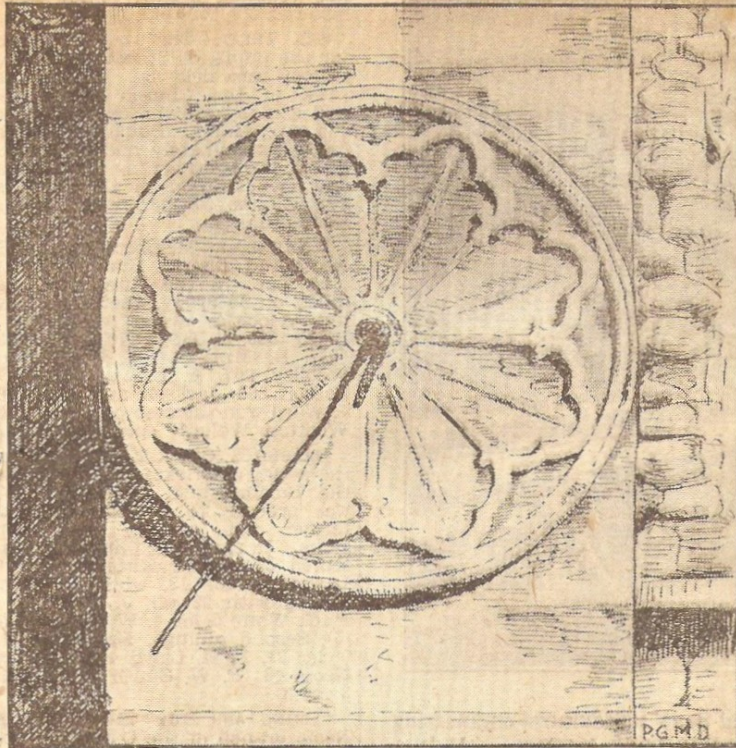


"OLD TIMERS" OF HUNTS.



The unique Mass Dial on the chancel buttress at Godmanchester parish church.

The County's Earliest Clocks

"MASS-DIALS" ON MANY CHURCHES

by P. G. M. DICKINSON

Each night, at news-time, Big Ben booms out with massive strokes the mystic hour of nine. How many of us have ever marvelled at the accuracy of his timing—for who has ever heard of Big Ben being slow or fast? How few have ever given a passing thought to his ancestors, the fore-runners of our church and town hall clocks?

Nowadays it is said that "Time runs on wheels", but in the distant ages long gone by, time meant very little to Man. Rising with the sun, he worked throughout the day and went to his well-earned rest when darkness fell. Though he had little need of clocks, however, it occasionally became necessary to have some means of fixing a definite time for special occasions.

Before the invention of mechanical clocks various expedients had been tried—the Water-clock or Clepsydra was used by the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans and its use did not die out till the 17th century. Sand-glasses and graduated candles were employed in Saxon times. They were all unsatisfactory and by far the greatest number of public clocks were sundials of one sort or another.

In pre-Conquest England small sundials were used which divided the day into "tides" of approximately three hours each, and they were true clocks in that they marked the hours throughout the day. They seem to have died out with the advent of William the Conqueror, who introduced from Normandy a simple form of sundial, scratched or incised on stone. Many examples may yet be seen on our church walls.

NOT TRUE CLOCKS

These little dials occur on walls or buttresses on the south side. From a "Style" or "Gnomon", which cast the shadow, certain radiating lines were cut to indicate special times only. In this respect they were not true clocks, and were really markers for church services, these being the only public functions for which a definite time was a necessity.

The mediaeval Mass usually began at 9 a.m., and this was the principal "hour" shown, the line marking the shadow being emphasised by deeper cutting. From this fact these dials are often called "Mass-dials". Noon or mid-day was also invariably shown by a perpendicular line marking the shadow when the sun was highest in the heavens. Other times were sometimes indicated such as 2 or 3 p.m., the time for Vespers. In later centuries times for other functions were also denoted.

As the sun does not shine upwards the correct form for these dials is an inverted semi-circle, but often the circle is completed, probably because "it looked better that way". Numerous additional radiating lines, meaningless and confusing, were added for the same reason. All these dials are placed vertically, the horizontal-pedestal type being used only in gardens or where a wall was not available.

The churches of Huntingdonshire can show a number of examples of these early time-markers, which of course, will only be found on the south (the sun refusing to shine on the north of the church, thus rendering a dial on that side useless).

Specimens both large and small, some clear, others much eroded, may be seen at Barham (on the S.W. buttress of the nave), Buckworth (a round dial on the south buttress of the tower), Fenstanton (on a chancel buttress) Grafham, (two on the S. buttress of the tower—one circular and the other semi-circular) and Pidley (one on the N. wall of the vestry—removed to that useless position when the church was rebuilt in 1864).

3 AT SPALDWICK

Southoe has one on the chancel, while Spaldwick has no less than three on the S. wall of the south chapel—two circular and one rectangular of 17th or 18th century date, having numbered hours. Tilbrook also retains three, one being on the jamb of the E. window of the vestry and another by the S. door of the chancel, for the use of the parish priest. Yelling has a circular dial on the S.E. buttress of the S. aisle.

But at Godmanchester is a dial which is surely unique in England and is possibly one of the finest.

On the westernmost buttress on the S. side of the chancel is a large carved wheel-shaped panel, still retaining its gnomon (this in itself is unusual, as in most cases they have been destroyed). It marked the hours by the Saxon "Tides",—6, 7.30, 9, 10.30, Noon, etc.

If it is really 13th century work, as the experts would have us believe (it may be much older), then it only goes to show how hard old customs die in that ancient town. Here then, was Godmanchester using a method of telling the time in the 13th century, which had gone out of fashion 200 years before in the rest of England!

Mechanical clocks began to come into use during the 13th century, but they were quite beyond the pockets of the ordinary town or village. Some improvement in time-keeping became essential as England became more civilised. So the primitive "mass-dial" was superseded by elaborate sundials, marking the hours by numbers, which called for more accurate and scientific workmanship and setting than did their simple predecessors. Often they were made of wood and the design was generally rectangular and sometimes an appropriate text was added. An early one, low down on the wall as were the "mass-dials", is at Spaldwick.

A TELESCOPE NEEDED

As children would damage the carefully set gnomon, later dials were set high up out of reach. So we may see examples on the clerestory at Hemingford Grey, on the apex of the S. porch gable at Godmanchester and by the belfry window at Morborne, where a telescope is required to tell the correct time!

Inevitably, however, mechanical clocks, worked by weights and geared wheels driving a hand round a circular face, ousted the sun-dial. The earliest "clockwork" clock in the county is that at Great Gransden, said to date from the 14th

century. At first only the "hours" were indicated by a single hour hand and a clock of this type, recently admirably restored locally, remains at Ellington. By a little careful practice and calculation, reasonable accuracy may be attained—sufficient for the wants of the villagers no doubt, but a trifle risky if a train or bus has to be caught.

Nowadays clocks are everywhere and in our county town those on the Town Hall and All Saints' Church compete in telling us when the buses should arrive. All Saints' clock is "two-faced" in more ways than one and evidently believes in not letting its left hand know what its right hand is doing. It seems to find a difficulty occasionally in agreeing with itself, one dial telling a different time from the other.

But what does it matter to us Huntingdonians? The buses will surely come sometime. We are above such minor difficulties and are quite capable of coping with the situation. We are just as ready to argue as to which clock is right as were our ancestors over their sundials a thousand years ago.