

# THE FLEET STREET HERITAGE SUNDIAL IN CENTRAL LONDON

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My article ‘A New Sundial in Central London’, published in the March 2020 issue of the *BSS Bulletin*<sup>1</sup> introduced the planned Fleet Street sundial but ended at December 2019, at which point there was still considerable uncertainty about whether we could get the permissions, the finance and the team together to make it happen.

This article takes the story up to the opening of the completed dial (Fig. 1) on 21 October 2021.

It started with the planning permission, which has to be done through an online portal. I was fortunate in being able to speak to people in the planning department from time to time. My initial idea to have the mastheads of two or three current newspapers (with the hope of raising some revenue) was thrown out at once – the City of London does not permit advertising, so all the newspaper headlines had to be defunct titles. My second thought was to include the badges of three livery companies, but that too was counted as advertising (even though there are many examples of such badges on display in the City).

I also wanted some plaques, at eye level, on the freedom of the press, the sundial, and the newspaper industry, all to be set within an 11 metre wide list of all the national newspapers from *The Daily Courant* in 1702 onwards. However, the planners would not sanction the list of newspapers because it would include some current titles and that would be advertising! Full planning permission was finally given in December 2019.

We had deferred looking for the money to build the sundial until we had planning permission. This seemed to be a sound decision at the time, but it meant that our timing could not have been worse, since people had too many other things to think about at the beginning of the Covid pandemic. We had some individual donations amounting to some £3000, which was a good start but insufficient for the whole project. Fortunately we discovered that the City of London had a Community Infrastructure Levy Neighbourhood Fund, who, at the third application, came to our rescue.

The sundial could not be designed until the exact declination of the wall relative to true North was known. The hour lines of dials facing near to East are very sensitive



Fig. 1. The completed Fleet Street Heritage Sundial.

to even minor changes in the declination. There is no great problem in measuring the declination if one has access to the front surface of the wall, and one is certain that the face of the wall is in one plane. But access was only possible with scaffolding or a cherry picker, which would have cost money we did not have; the wall was about 150 years old, and had a pronounced step in the middle of the sundial area.

An attempt was made to get the declination from a surrogate. The coping at the head of the wall casts a shadow on the pavement when the sun is highest in the sky, so theoretically the declination of the coping could be determined from the exact time when this shadow was the same distance from the foot of the wall as the overhang of the coping. The shadow, of course, is not very clear at 17 metres distance, it moves very quickly, and it was difficult for one person not in the first flush of youth to determine the exact time when the edge of the shadow is the same distance out from the wall as the overhang of the coping.



Fig. 2. Steven Whitaker painting the Royal coat of arms.

The final solution was to get a laser survey of the wall done. This produced a point cloud of several million  $(x, y, z)$  coordinates of every point on our wall. This was ably interpreted by Chris Lusby Taylor, who found out that the wall declines 3.75 degrees North of East, and that it is 0.21 degrees out of plumb. The step was later measured to be approximately 6 cm at one end and 4 cm at the other. Kevin Karney, who had been associated with the project for some years, did the final delineation of the sundial.

We decided that the sundial would be painted on the wall, and were very fortunate to find a signwriter, Steven Whitaker, who did a magnificent job, particularly on painting all of the detail of the Royal coat of arms on the *News Chronicle* masthead (Fig. 2).

The erection of the scaffolding (Figs 3 and 4) should have been very straightforward. We had obtained a quote some months before, so we told them to go ahead. But we needed to get a licence from the City of London to put it up, and the licence we received had the name of Fleet Street and not Bouverie Street on it. That took another week to sort



Fig. 3. The scaffolding at the end of August 2021: the wall is ready for the border and hour lines to be painted.



Fig. 4. The author on the scaffolding.

out. The highway authority will only allow the work to start on a weekend, and the environmental department will not allow any noisy work to happen after noon on Sunday. That imposed another three days of delay. These were just two of the many glitches in this phase of the project.

We went out to a public consultation on the question of which newspaper mastheads should be included on the sundial in addition to *The Republican*, which would appear at the top since it was actually published by Richard Carlile, who had his printing office at 62 Fleet Street. The four mastheads which received the most votes were *The Morning Post*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *News Chronicle* and *The Daily Herald*. The other four on the ballot paper were *The Manchester Guardian*, *Daily Sketch*, *News of the World*, and *Daily Worker*.

Fabrication of the gnomon did not go as easily as expected. I had hoped that the fabricators who make my stainless steel sundials in Norfolk would be able to do it, but they could not meet the delivery date because they were installing some large and complicated new machinery. A fabricator in Devon said they could do it, but were unable to get their design signed off by structural engineers. This



Fig. 5. October 2021: working on the installation of the gnomon.



Fig. 6. At the opening on 21 October 2021. Left to right: Piers Nicholson with the Lady Mayoress, Hilary Russell, and Kevin Karney.

meant we had to extend the scaffolding date by another month. Fortunately, this meant that the original firm could now make the gnomon in time, so it was delivered on 7 October. Chris and I with our builder Ern installed it the following Monday, weaving it out of the way of the scaffold poles (Fig. 5).

We had originally planned to repaint only the top portion of the wall white, but decided this would look strange, and that we should paint the whole wall white. But the painters were unable to get at the top portion of the unpainted wall because the scaffold did not have the requisite boards on its low stages, and it was not possible to get ladders up between the scaffolding. So this part of the job had to be left till the scaffolding came down.

Looking back, the main difficulty was that of executing a series of complicated processes with no previous experience. Throughout, I have had a lot of support from the committee of the Castle Baynard Ward Club, from the Fleet Street Sundial CIC, John Latham and Nigel Springer



Fig. 7. Cutting the ribbon.

(who represents the owners of the wall), and from my fellow members of the British Sundial Society.

It all worked out all right in the end. The scaffolding came down on 14 October, the wispy sunshine that day indicated that everything was fine, and this was confirmed in the stronger sunshine next day. The three plaques were installed on 15 October, and everything was then ready for our official opening.

After many delays, consultations and glitches, the sundial was finally opened by the Lady Mayoress of London, Hilary Russell, on 21 October 2021. It was a cold grey day at the time the ribbon was cut before a very small audience, and we then held the main event in a spacious heated room kindly made available by C. Hoare and Co. at their bank just along the street.

#### REFERENCE

1. Piers Nicholson: 'A new sundial for central London', *BSS Bulletin*, 32(i), 23-25 (March 2020).

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