

Shedding Light on Art

Many people think they can make a sundial. When they try, they find major unexpected difficulties because it brings together skills in mathematics, design and practical craft. Piers Nicholson's (*B3 1948-52*) love and understanding of these subjects has turned into a full career.

After leaving Marlborough in 1952, I did my National Service in the Navy, starting as a Boy Seaman RNVR and ending up at the dizzy heights of Midshipman RNVR. I then read physics at Magdalen College, Oxford, and after that went to Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study Industrial Management.

After a spell selling electric motors, I joined the firm of O W Roskill Industrial Consultants, which latterly specialised in providing market information for mining companies. By 2002, it was time to move on, and I started a small web-design company, specialising in creating information websites, and greatly developed my sundial interests.

I first got interested in sundials in the 1970s. For a long time it was just a hobby, making a few painted wooden sundials for myself and some of my friends. One of them told me about the British Sundial Society, and I suggested at an Annual General Meeting that a Sundial Award Scheme should be set up and was invited to join the Council to set up the first one.

Later, I became interested in the internet in connection with my job and set up the website www.sundials.co.uk and it has since become one of the leading information sites on sundials.

One of my other interests is cycling, and in the early 90s I rode on two of the trail-blazing rides of Sustrans, a cycling charity in the UK that subsequently got a large National Lottery grant to build the National Cycle Network. They asked their supporters whether they had any special skills and I told them of my sundial interests. They asked me to design a sundial for the Witham cycle path from Lincoln to Boston. This was my first public sundial commission. It was a very interesting project, carried out under very adverse weather conditions.

1999 was a very special year. I was asked to design a large sundial for the City of London, and I had the idea for an innovation in the design of horizontal sundials. The Worshipful Company of Tylers and Bricklayers is one of the ancient City of London livery companies, with a history going back over 500 years. They wanted to give a present to the City of London to mark the Millennium. I designed a polar sundial standing on a plinth of exactly 2,000 bricks. It is located on the riverside walkway, Paul's Walk, outside the City of London Boys' School and very near to the Millennium Footbridge.

Also, in 1999, my wife kindly took me on a bus tour of Guatemala. We had a certain amount of time hanging round bus stations with not much to do, so I thought about a question that comes up in the British Sundial Society from time to time, 'Why are garden sundials so awful and what on earth can be done to improve them.'

One of the big problems for people buying a sundial is how to set it up correctly. My idea was to make this part of the process easy, by making a slot in the

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gnomon that casts the shadow. When the sun is directly overhead at noontime, a line of light will shine through the slit for a few minutes. Then, all you need to know is the exact time of noon at your location. It was fairly simple to produce the website www.solar-noon.com to give this information for every day of the year for every given latitude and longitude.

It took two years to get the first brass spot-on sundial into production. They are now made to my design in India, imported in bulk into the UK, and sold from there all over world. In 2004, we produced two larger brass sundials, one of which was for the bicentenary of the Royal Horticultural Society. We also produced a small polar dial, repeating the design of the Blackfriars sundial but on a smaller scale.

More recently, we have produced spot-on sundials in stainless steel. These have proved very popular for the larger garden, for schools and for public open spaces.

One of them is in position on the South Bank of the Thames near City Hall, and another is on public view at the Horniman Museum in South London. Altogether, more than 2,000 brass sundials and 200 stainless steel sundials have been sold around the world.

My latest project has been 12 years in gestation and will hopefully come to fruition this year, depending on the implications of Covid-19. It is called the Fleet Street Heritage Sundial. I became aware that, due to two unconnected historical accidents, there was a very large blank wall at the corner of Fleet Street and Bouverie Street. Fleet Street used to be the centre of the British newspaper industry, but all the newspapers have gone, leaving hardly a trace behind them.

The wall is east facing, so it only gets the sunlight in the morning. East-facing sundials are unusual in that the hour lines are nearly parallel to each other, and this

permits the mastheads of some of the newspapers that used to be on Fleet Street between the hour lines.

Ideally, one would wish to place the mastheads of some current newspapers there, but the City of London regulations do not permit advertising on walls in the City, so it looks as if there will only be defunct newspapers on the wall.

At the end of 2019, the City of London gave full planning permission for the proposal, and the funding phase started. I had already started talking to newspapers but they explained how advertising was drying up, and they had to concentrate on core activities. Nevertheless, donations totalling £2,600 had been received towards the budget costs of £24,000 when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. Since then, things have become much more difficult, though there is a City of London Stronger Communities Fund that we hope will provide £10,000. If that comes through, there will only be another £14,000 needed from individual donations and construction would then start as soon as the lockdown eases off. Once the money is raised, we hope it will be built in 10 weeks or so.



Piers Nicholson is a firm believer that entrepreneurship isn't just for the young; some people can't stop