

AHS London Lecture Thursday 19 September 2013

Douglas Bateman, 'The Time Ball at Greenwich'

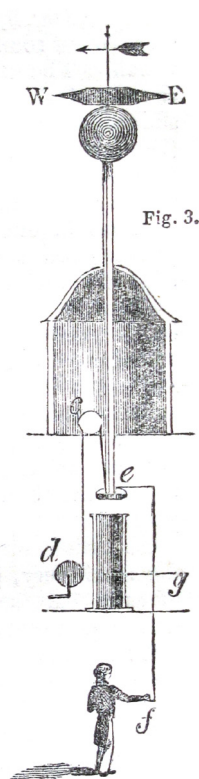
The time ball at Greenwich was the very first accurate public time signal, specifically intended for ships' navigators to check their chronometers against Greenwich Mean Time. It owes its origin to Robert Wauchope, a naval captain with a distinguished career who saw a need for checking chronometers whilst on the ship rather than accepting a rating that had been set ashore.

This talk will describe how the time ball came into being in the 1830s, was initially hand operated, then soon came under electro-mechanical control for the drop of the ball from an electrically maintained pendulum clock, which also drove the equally famous Shepherd clock at the gate. From 1960 it was controlled by a Synchronome clock and then in 1991 by



Douglas Bateman, FBHI, has written many articles on horology and sundials. He has been involved as the designer and co-constructor of the purely electronic control system for the Greenwich time ball that operated from 1991 until 1997. A three-part article on the subject is being published in *Antiquarian Horology*.

radio time signals using a custom made electronic controller. Although the external movement of the ball appears to be unchanged to the outside world, its operation and control reflect the evolutionary changes from a working observatory to part of a museum.



Left: detail from an engraving printed in the *Weekly Visitor*, February 1835, two years after ball and mechanism were erected.

Right: the time ball after its daily drop, photographed in 2011.

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