

AHS London Lecture Thursday 21 January 2016

Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd

Sundials – History, Art, People, Science

In the late 19th and early 20th century the sundial was in decline as an instrument for setting clocks, and it was finally laid to rest on 5 February 1924 by the six time pips then introduced by the BBC. Henceforth clocks in Britain would always be set by the radio, not the sun. Before its decline sundials were used to set clocks in railway stations, grand private houses, on churches and in other places. Earlier still the sundial on the church was much more accurate than its clock, and earlier still it was the only instrument for measuring time. All over Europe, in India and in the Muslim world there are fine examples of monumental dials, and pedestal and wall dials – many on churches and mosques. For European gentlemen there were fine desk top dials for setting the household clocks, and earlier still, before the development of the pocket watch, exquisite personal instruments with fine gilding and engraving.

Horologists will see a parallel in the decline of the mechanical clock as an instrument for scientific measurement, now supplanted by electronic timekeepers. Yet, this decline of the clock has not diminished the public's appetite and love for them. Nor so with the sundial, for the British Sundial Society has a thriving and energetic membership. Similar societies exist in France, Italy, and Germany.

The making of a sundial is essentially very simple. It is designed to show the position of the sun in the sky. For several centuries we have measured time by dividing the day into 24 equal units or hours, starting from

midnight. So too with the sundial, but it was not always so. In earlier periods time could be measured in unequal hours with the result that an hour in summer was longer than an hour in winter. In some systems the day could begin at sunset, in others at sunrise. For anyone interested in the history of time measurement there is much of interest.



Sir Mark Lennox-Boyd is Patron of the British Sundial society. He is the author of *Sundials, History, Art, People, Science*, published by Frances Lincoln. His working life has mostly been in politics, but he has always retained an interest in other matters, including sundials and the history of science.

TICKETS:

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