

Courtenay Adrian Ilbert, Horological Collector

Part 3: 1939–1956 — ‘It’s been such fun.’

Paul Buck*

*Courtenay Adrian Ilbert (1888–1956) was without doubt the greatest horological collector of the twentieth century. Over a lifetime he built up a vast and comprehensive collection, gathering material from both Britain and the continent, covering almost every aspect of the history and development of horology. When, on his death, the extent of his collection was calculated, there were approximately 2,300 watches, 210 clocks and 40 marine chronometers, along with scientific instruments and many peripheral items of horological interest. Ilbert was renowned for his generosity. He would welcome interested visitors into his home, often lend to exhibitions, and also lend books from his extensive horological library. His collection, the vast majority of which is now housed in the British Museum, has global recognition. This is the third part of a projected four-part article, being a revised version of the 19th Dingwall-Beloe lecture, delivered by the author in 2009. The first and second parts were published in *Antiquarian Horology* December 2010, pp. 499–516 and June 2017, pp. 202–220.*

War

On the warm sunny Sunday morning of the 3rd of September 1939, Ilbert would almost certainly have been listening, along with the rest of the nation, to the wireless. At 11.15, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, delivered his broadcast from the Cabinet Room of 10 Downing Street:

This morning, the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note, stating that unless we heard from them – by 11 o’clock – that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that; consequently, this country is at war with Germany.

Bomb-shaped barrage balloons floated in the clear autumn sky as Londoners braced themselves for an air attack similar to those that had been reported over Poland earlier in the week. The entire population of Britain had been issued with gas-masks,⁸⁷ in case Hitler launched a poisonous gas attack. All cinemas, theatres and places of entertainment were closed immediately because of the risk of mass casualties in an air raid.⁸⁸ Ilbert, who was still living at number 10 Milner Street, packed all his clocks away into a brick safe in the basement including the nine-foot-high year-going Daniel Quare longcase clock,⁸⁹ which he managed on his own. His valuable watches were all stored just up the road in safety deposit boxes in the basement of Harrods.⁹⁰ In the event Milner Street wasn’t hit though there was a high explosive bomb dropped on nearby Cadogan Square.

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87. Ilbert also made a respirator for his much-loved cat, Rama.

88. This decision was hastily reversed when the government realised that these venues could be morale boosters.

89. For a photo showing its size see *Antiquarian Horology* December 2010, cover and p. 514.

90. For which he paid 12s. 6d. a month.



Fig. 54. Barrage balloons surround Buckingham Palace, London. Ilbert was living at Milner Street, a mile to the south-west. Photo Wikimedia Commons.

The following is a letter Ilbert wrote to Philip Thornton⁹¹ on the 9th of October 1939:

Dear Mr Thornton

I will write Dr. Stevens about his G.S.⁹² clock. When I last saw him he said it was continuing to work admirably, whereas by all the rules of the game I should not have thought it would go at all. However that is just like clockwork. One fits up a 'Heath Robinson' gadget & it continues to work for years & then one makes a permanent job of an article which breaks down in 24 hours.

I am in a very valuable area, so all my watches are in the safe deposit & the clocks are all stored in a brick cupboard in the basement.

I have returned to my old office quite near here as all the staff have been evacuated to the country. The office is opposite Victoria station so it is presumed that

not much will be left of it at the end of hostilities.

I have practically done no horology since the war began. Whenever I start on anything, I find I want to refer to a model as to how it used to be done & of course that happens to be packed away.

Clowes of Clowes & Jauncey has some work for the Government & is trying to get more. We were discussing the situation some time ago & your name was mentioned as being available probably for getting some of the work done. The instruments he is after is not unlike clockwork.⁹³

Yours sincerely

C.A. Ilbert.

The old office opposite Victoria Station Ilbert refers to was that of Stothert Pitt who had premises at 36 Connaught Mansions, Victoria Street, London. While he was there, he was

91. Letter in the Ilbert archive at the British Museum. On the horological repairer and restorer Philip P. Thornton FBHI (1901–1975), see the obituary in *Horological Journal*, December 1975, p. 35.

92. Grande sonnerie.

93. Clockmaking was a reserved occupation and many turned their hand to instrument production.



Figs 55-56. Dial and movement of the Edward Massey timer (British Museum 1958,1201.1132).

involved in work on Mulberry Harbours.⁹⁴ Stothert Pitt had been commissioned by the government to design and build a ‘flat-pack’ marine crane which could be erected in a couple of days and came with its own power unit making it self-sufficient.

Carry on collecting

Although Ilbert’s collecting was seriously curbed by the war,⁹⁵ it was not entirely restrained, and in February of 1940 he bought several pieces from Malcolm Gardner including the interesting one shown in Figs 55–56. It is a watch signed Edward Massey,⁹⁶ and has the extraordinary rate of 42,300 beats per hour or 12 beats a second. The main dial is divided into four hours with the minute hand revolving every 20 minutes. At the bottom are two subsidiary dials: the one on the right has a hand revolving every 20 seconds, the one on the left a hand revolving every 2 ½ seconds. This timer is an ingenious and practical application of horology and was specifically designed to be used for surveying. It works by employing the difference between the speed of sound, and the speed of light in the

following fashion. A boat, or a number of boats, would be sailed away from a ship but remain within sight of it. A canon would then be fired on board the ship. The flash would be seen by the crew of the boat and the timer started and when the report was heard, stopped. The speed of light —186,000 miles a second — is, at this distance, virtually instantaneous, but sound travels at 761 mph at sea level. The interval between the sight and sound of the canon would give the distance. The 2½ second dial has 30 divisions; each division is equal to 31 yards in sound distance.

In Part Two there was an example of the upbeat correspondence between Paul Chamberlain⁹⁷ and Ilbert. On May 16th 1940, in what would be his last letter to Ilbert (he died eleven days later), Chamberlain wrote

Dear Ilbert. I wish we were together—yes here or there—even a few minutes a day we could devote to the clarification of the beginnings of things horological. You have a vast knowledge and somehow my (patchy?) memory helps bring out that

94. From Ilbert’s obituary in the *King’s College Annual Report* 1956, pp. 23–4.

95. There are only ten ledger entries for 1940 and only nine in 1941, all items bought from Malcolm Gardner.

96. Renowned for his introduction of a new form of lever escapement which in many ways established the pattern for the detached lever escapement still in use today.

97. Author of *It’s About Time* (Richard Smith, 1941).



Figs 57-58. Watch by Joseph Windmills of London c.1690-1700, the time displayed is 7:56 (British Museum 1958,1201.3051)

which I fear you will never put on paper.⁹⁸ At the moment most of the world is saying 'Well what's the use, there may be none left who are, or ever will be interested in such things!' Unfortunately, I am not in condition to do much but think and that may not be quite the function. Certainly round in circles I trace the likely goings about of my friends in the danger zone which spreads and spreads.

Working for the Ministry of Supply

A little over three weeks later, beginning on the 10th June Britain was fighting for its survival as Goering's Luftwaffe tried to clear the skies prior to a German invasion. It was also in June that Ilbert went to work for the Ministry of Supply, Timber Control⁹⁹ as an assistant. A restriction on civil building had been imposed and under the Defence Regulations of 1940 any private building work over £500 could only be carried out with approval from a Government Department.¹⁰⁰ Ilbert is listed in 1943 as an assistant at £700 per annum,¹⁰¹ and ends up as deputy assistant controller with his pay

rising to £1000. Many years later King's College Cambridge published the following, giving an insight into his *modus operandi*:

As a Timber Controller, he was expected to go on well-heralded, chauffeur-driven visits to the sites of work in progress; but it was his custom, two or three days before the date fixed for his official visit, to arrive unexpectedly by bus, and, in his own phrase, either 'peer through a hole in the fence', or else go scrambling over the scaffolding, talking to the men and finding out what was really going on; departing, as likely as not, without anyone knowing who he was.¹⁰²

Later in the year he also volunteered as a fire-watcher, sharing these duties, one week on one week off, with his aptly named neighbour John Sparkes. They were the only two left in the Lennox/Milner street neighbourhood. He later told his niece-in-law Jacqueline Duncan that Cadogan Square was virtually empty.

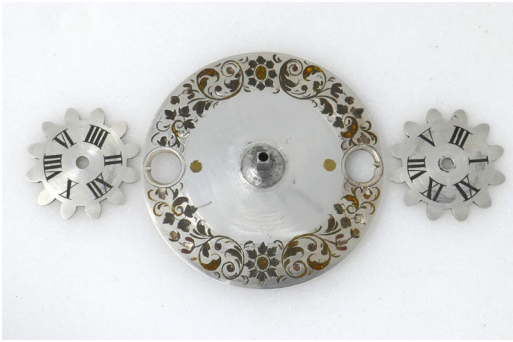
98. Despite generously sharing his considerable knowledge, library and collection, Ilbert was never prolific in print.

99. At Lacon House (it is named from an amalgamation of nearby Lambs Conduit Street); though rebuilt, it is still there on Theobalds Road.

100. In the London area this was later reduced to £10 [sic].

101. In the *British Imperial Calendar & Civil Service* list published by HMSO.

102. From Ilbert's obituary in the *King's College Annual Report* 1956, pp. 23-4.



Figs 59–60. Watch by Joseph Windmills of London c.1690-1700 (British Museum 1958,1201.3051).

Novelty watches

In 1685 the French king Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes,¹⁰³ resulting in almost a million Huguenots leaving the country for many parts of the globe, taking their diverse talents with them. A number of these Huguenots wound up in London and this influx coincides with a period of great variety of novelty in watches. It is possible that this was a result of the increased competition where a novel dial might win a sale. Below are two fine examples that Ilbert acquired during the war years. The first he bought from Malcolm Gardner on Friday the 24th of January 1941. It is a well-made silver cased watch signed 'Windmills London' (Figs 57–60). The wandering hour dial was used to great effect on night clocks in the last quarter of the seventeenth century and has periodically reappeared right up until the present day. Here it is used on a watch as a novelty and in this instance works in the following fashion.

An enamelled silver disc with two apertures on opposite sides (Fig. 59) rotates once every two hours. Two smaller toothed silver discs, one inscribed with the even numbers II, IIII, VI, VIII, X and XII and the other with the odd numbers I, III, V, VII, IX and XI rotate freely on studs on the dial's underside. As the enamelled disc rotates one of the twelve teeth on each of the small discs will be picked up by one of the two studs on the dial plate (Fig. 60) causing them to rotate one division and present

the next hour in the aperture on the dial.

The second watch he acquired incorporating a novel dial was bought in December 1944 costing £15. It is a silver cased watch signed J. Banks Nottingham.¹⁰⁴ It has a differential dial and works thus. The minute hand revolves in the normal fashion once per hour. The central hour disc numbered I–XII revolves 11/12ths of a revolution once per hour. This is achieved by a canon pinion of 22, a common intermediate wheel of 22 and an hour wheel of 24. As a result, the hour disc and minute hand travel round almost in tandem with the minute hand gradually moving across its corresponding hour.

End of the War

On May 8th 1945 Germany surrendered. The war in Europe was over and life could begin to return to normal at Milner Street. The following is a memory from Charles Allix:¹⁰⁵

During the war I was in the navy serving in the Far East and whilst there I read a magazine called *Mariner's Mirror* and there was a piece in there by Gould so I wrote to him. He replied with the recommendation that when I got back to London 'Go and see my friend Courtenay Ilbert at 10 Milner Street because he has the finest collection of clocks and watches in the world.'

So, when I got back to London, I made

103. The Edict of Nantes had been issued on 13 April 1598 by Henry IV of France. It had granted the Calvinist Protestants of France (also known as Huguenots) substantial rights in the predominantly Catholic state. Through the Edict, Henry had aimed to promote civil unity.

104. BM CAL.2344. See Terence Camerer Cuss, *The English Watch 1585–1970* (Antique Collectors Club, 2009), p. 140 for another example.

105. Recorded in the British Museum, Horology Study Room.



Figs 61–62. Gold pair-cased watch signed 'John Neale London' and hallmarked P for 1770. British Museum CA1.2349.

a beeline for Milner Street and went to visit him. He was very generous with his knowledge and subsequently I visited every Sunday repairing the clocks as well. Low end high end, he couldn't resist anything. He had a genuine interest in all aspects of horology. I went there for five years every Sunday. His old housekeeper was called Mrs Duff. The kitchen was downstairs on the floor below. The dining room had a panel in the floor which was in fact the top of a lift with a carpet on top of it. At a given time the carpet rose up with lunch on it, whereupon Ilbert would shout 'meal!' and we'd all adjourn to the dining room and have what Mrs Duff had produced and a bottle of beer to drink. In the room there was a kneehole desk, and swinging in the kneehole was the most awful remains of a dead bird, and that was the cat's plaything and during lunch it could be seen swinging very slowly. He (Ilbert) would continuously be saying 'my poor cat, my poor cat'. In the evening he used to take us out to dinner. If he was feeling very flush it was the Ivy but much more likely it was a café down the road round the corner.

I remember down in the basement he took something from the workroom or

somewhere else down there because he wanted to hammer it and he went into a room called the housekeeper's room and he put it on a sandstone mantelpiece and hit it a heavy blow with a hammer whereupon the mantelpiece collapsed. Ilbert just shrugged and went out leaving it where it was.

With life returning to normal, opportunities opened up for collecting again, often in the company of Malcolm Gardner. In May 1947 he bought from Gardner another watch with an unusual and interesting dial (Figs 61–62). It is a gold pair-cased watch signed 'John Neale London' and hallmarked P for 1770. It has a standard verge movement but an interesting dial showing, by way of three under-dial wheels the time at eleven different global locations. Antigua, Canaries, Brazil, Mexico, Strait of Anian, LONDON [in capitals], Russia, Italy, Strait of Uries, China and Persia. It is tempting to suggest that this watch shows a global consciousness of a shrinking world but given the locations vary from the vast areas of Russia and China to the relatively small island of Antigua and the mythical location of the Strait of Anian,¹⁰⁶ it has to fall into the category of a novelty watch to be shown off and admired.

106. Thought in 1770 to be where the sought-after north-west passage was.



Fig. 63. A sideboard in the drawing room at Milner Street overloaded with clocks. Ilbert erected a ping-pong table on its side to accommodate wall-clocks. Photo taken before 1944, in BM file 1944,11-1.1. From left to right:

- 1) The musical carillon clock by Nicholas Vallin CAI.2139
- 2) Zoomorphic gothic clock. CAI.2136.
- 3) Large heavy *Stoelklok*, Groningen 1695-1705. CAI.2103.
- 4) Johannes Muys lantern clock CAI.2102.
- 5) French transitional wall clock CAI. 2096.
- 6) Painted iron-cased German wall clock with alarm CAI.2107. /
- 7) Pewter oil clock CAI.2073
- 8) Pewter oil clock with Ilbert tag CAI.2072
- 9) French brass & tortoiseshell watch stand CAI.3287.
- 10) French wooden clock by Jean Le Febure, Fontainebleau 1964,1203.2.
- 11) Month-going chiming clock by Claude Duchesne CAI.2192

Life at 10 Milner Street

Jacqueline Duncan recalls:

In 1952 I was living in a local convent and Michael¹⁰⁷ had kindly suggested that I use his flat at weekends when he went home to Buckinghamshire.¹⁰⁸ As a result I got to know Courtenay much better. He was slightly built, not very tall with grey hair

and dressed very conventionally. He had a habit of cupping the side of his face in his right hand, the third and fourth fingers over his mouth so it was often difficult to interpret his mood, though with greater acquaintance I had no trouble. Every Saturday he lunched at the Spanish Club with Plum.¹⁰⁹ They had been doing this for years as well as taking monthly

107. Michael Inchbald was Ilbert's nephew.

108. To his parent's house, Iver Garden, in Iver, Bucks.

109. Malcolm Gardner.



Fig. 64. A photograph taken in early 1949, almost certainly at The Spanish Club where Courtenay met Gardner every Saturday and where he would often entertain guests.

From left to right Major Cowan (British Horological Institute), Malcolm Gardner (horological dealer), Orville R Hagens (North American Watch and Clock Collectors representative),¹¹⁰ Gladys Yule,¹¹¹ Courtenay Ilbert, Captain Jauncy (horological collector) and Phillip Clowes (horological dealer, Frodshams).

trips to Paris where Courtenay acquired a lot of the collection. At some point during this friendship it transpired that Courtenay was having trouble keeping up with the work generated by the size of the collection which by now occupied the whole of the 30-foot drawing room, together with several cabinets of shallow drawers which housed the extensive watch collection. He disliked sending clocks out for repair.¹¹² Thus, they came to an agreement. Plum's very skilled assistant Coole,¹¹³ would leave work at around 3 o'clock every Friday arriving at Milner Street about 4pm. Together with Courtenay they would start the work of repairing new additions, cleaning old friends and winding them, in itself a considerable chore. They worked through

until about 7.30 and then Courtenay would take Coole out to supper in the Old Brompton Road. This had nothing to do with me and I paid little attention to it beyond the courtesy of a hello to the visitor. However, one Friday seeing me alone Courtenay suggested that I might like to join them for supper and I was delighted. Accordingly we set off on foot, down Beauchamp Place where we stopped for a bottle of wine, *Entre Deux Mers*, always the same, 'So that we know what we are getting', across Brompton Road to an Indian restaurant for curry. Always the same, and as he spooned out rice he would remark 'very important to put down your cement first Jacko!'

On Sunday Foulkes,¹¹⁴ known to Courtenay as Fookie, arrived in the

110. Orville Hagens set out on the *Queen Mary* from New York for Southampton in February 1949, intending to be away for two months

111. Identified by Rodney Law.

112. Though in fact he had done this in the past.

113. Philip G. Coole, later curator of the horological collection at The British Museum.

114. Robert K. Foulkes.

morning and it was the same routine as that he pursued with Coole. Eventually I cooked lunch for them and Fookie and he worked on for a time afterwards, sitting together at a large table in the north window, the cill of which was table height so they were visible from the street. Unhappily this meant that those who wished to see Courtenay and knew his habits tended to call unannounced on Sunday afternoons, and this drove him to distraction since it deterred him from getting on with his work. If he saw a clockie heading for the house, he dived below the table, dragging whoever was with him in an attempt to pretend he was not at home. It worked sometimes but the horological world was very persistent.

When he was working, he wore two large aprons back and front, to protect his suit from oil or anything else he was handling, and to protect it also from cat hairs left on the chairs by his elderly cat Raja. He also used jewellers' glasses which he accommodated by pushing his own glasses on top of his head, so that if he opened the door to a stranger, he did present rather a startling figure.

The Spanish Club

Ilbert was a frequent visitor to the Spanish Club in London at 10 Cavendish Square (Fig. 64). Rodney Law said that as a young man he was a guest there of Ilbert's. He mentioned what a kind man Ilbert was and that, although his horological knowledge was immense in comparison to that of the young Rodney, he never made a fool of him and always had something positive to say about any object that he showed him.

Jacqueline Duncan:

Courtenay's mother was tremendously sociable and she entertained a lot. When she died Co was left with dozens of everything. You remember Malcolm Gardner had strong Spanish connections and during and after the war restaurant products were difficult, if not impossible

to find. Plum suggested that Co gave a lot of surplus glasses and porcelain to the Spanish Club, where they lunched together every Saturday for many years. Co was very pleased to do this – he loved going to the Club.

Tompion 222

In Parts One and Two of this article it was noted that Ilbert had a talent for reuniting original clock and watch parts. He had the sharp eye and knowledge to recognise disassociated components and bring them back together. In 1949 he accomplished a triumph, bringing together, after a separation of unknown duration, the movement and case of one of Tompion's most noted clocks, the miniature bracket clock numbered 222.

In 1937 he had bought the movement of the clock, housed in a later plain-looking case at Christie's sale of the collection of Dr Douglas Heath.¹¹⁵ Its whereabouts before the sale are unknown except that soon after the sale a Mr W. Newton of Barnes wrote a letter¹¹⁶ to Philip Thornton of Great Haywood (who restored the repeating work). In the letter he mentions the clock and relates details of its acquisition by Dr Heath:

A lady said she had seen a Tompion marked £30 in a country dealers shop, he [Dr Heath] gave her the money & said buy it, shortly after he went and asked the dealer where he got it, "Oh" said the dealer, I gave 2/6 [2 shillings, 6 pence] for it in a basket of Kitchen Sundries, it had been the Kitchen clock in the house.

Twelve years after Ilbert acquired the movement, he saw a 'Tompion' that was for sale at Sotheby's.¹¹⁷ The movement was spurious but it was housed in a well-made and original looking case. Ilbert asked his friend Robert Foulkes to carry out some covert measuring in the saleroom after which there could be absolutely no doubt that 222 had originally fitted into the beautiful ebony case. On the day of the sale it was bought by the well-known

115. A wealthy Birmingham based skin specialist. The sale was held on 16 June 1937.

116. British Museum, Horology Study Room archives.

117. Sale of 8 July 1949, lot 62.

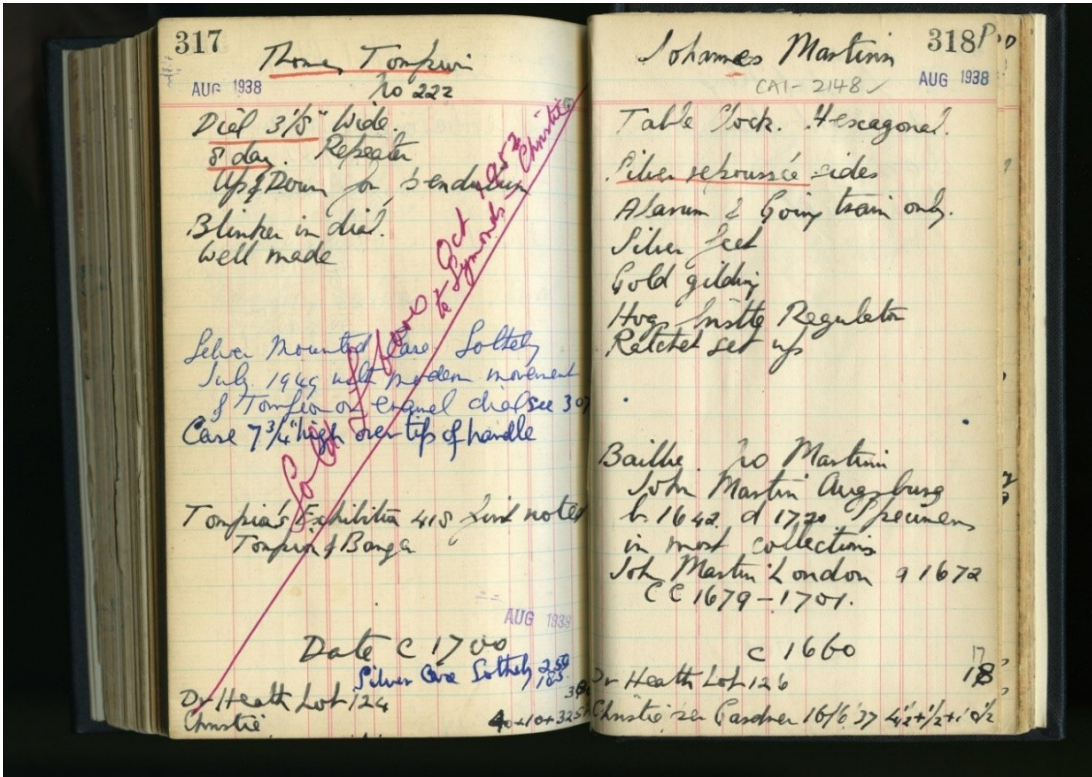


Fig. 65. Ilbert's ledger entry on the left-hand page 317 showing the original acquisition, later finding of the case and then in 1952 the sale of the clock to R. W. Symonds.



Fig. 66. Ilbert's photograph of the two clocks together back in their original cases. The Tompion movement was in the case on the left when acquired in 1937, and the clock on the left with an enamel dial was in the original case on the right when later acquired in 1949.

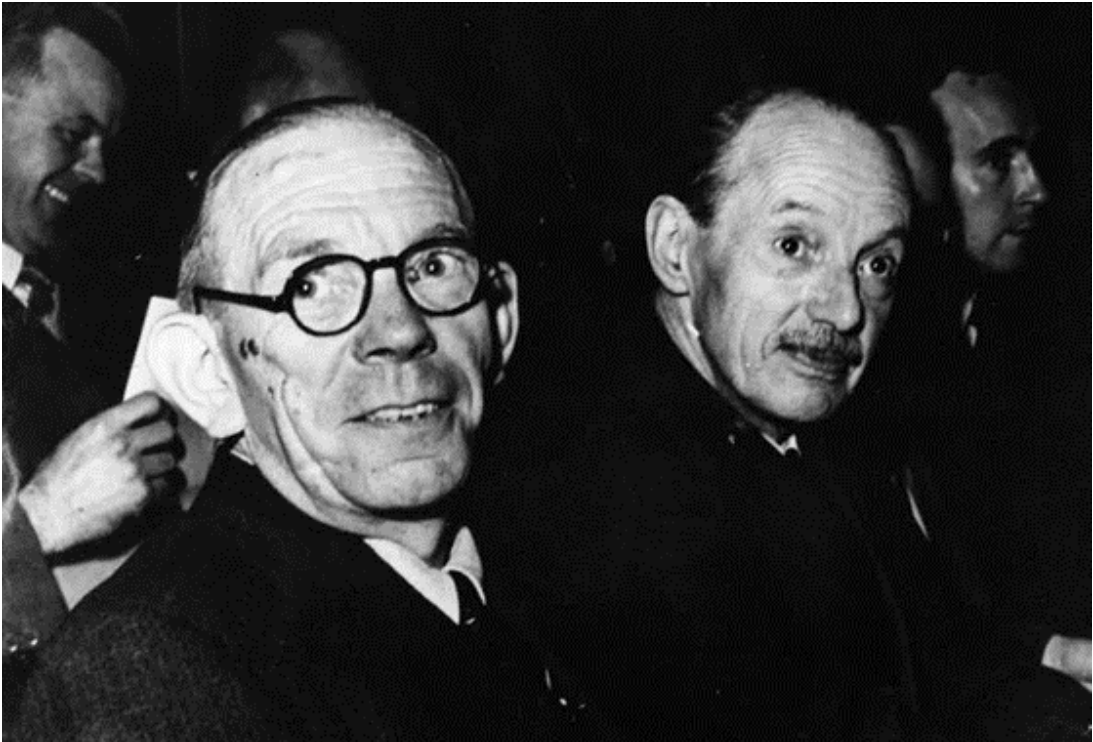


Fig. 67. Ilbert with Dr Torrens photographed at the showing of the film *Right on Time*, a promotional film made by Smiths Industries. The photo was first published in *The British Jeweller* November 1952.

clock dealer Ronald Lee. However very shortly after that it was in the possession of Ilbert and the two components were once again united. He notes in the ledger entry (Fig. 65) that it was 'Well made'. Later, in October 1952 he sold the clock¹¹⁸ to R.W. Symonds.¹¹⁹

Final retirement

Ilbert finally retired in the summer of 1952 on being made redundant from the Timber Control, though he still had business interests abroad and remained a director of the Assam Tea Company in India. In the following year on 6 February 1953 he boarded the P&O liner 'Canton' bound for Bombay. The following January having completed his business commitments he returned, flying home on the de Havilland Comet, the world's first

commercial jet airliner.¹²⁰ As a fifteen-year-old boy he would have read news reports of the Wright Brothers' first powered flight taking off in North Carolina in 1903, now he was flying home across the world.

Torrens

Before the war, Ilbert would go to stay with Torrens (Fig. 67),¹²¹ when the two of them passed nights working with only candles for illumination. 'Do you know', Ilbert once said, 'that he uses the same fat to harden his pinions and fry his bacon?'. He added, 'the fun I have had in that house!'. In the kitchen, culinary arrangements were somewhat primitive. The draining board was cluttered with chunks of water-of-Ayr stone, a Bunsen-burner, and even cyanide. The same yellow soap served alike

118. For £6,000, a vast sum at that time. He told Jacqueline Duncan it was for his retirement.

119. Author of *Thomas Tompion: His Life & Work* (London, 1951).

120. Jacqueline Duncan: 'We heard of a crashed Comet on the news and were frightened that he was on the plane, but he had taken the next one.'

121. On whom see Alun C. Davies, 'David Smyth Torrens, 1867–1967. An horological memoir', *Antiquarian Horology* (June 1984), 562–84.



Fig. 68. Group photograph including some of the founding members of the Antiquarian Horological Society, taken at the Science Museum on Friday 11 December 1953. From left to right, F. A. B. Ward, P. G. Dawson, R. K. Foulkes, C. A. Ilbert, C. B. Drover, H. Alan Lloyd, F. H. Knowles-Brown. Photograph Ilbert archive British Museum.

for washing up and to prevent scaling on steel pieces for hardening.¹²²

Formation of the AHS

On Thursday 1st October 1953 the fledgling Antiquarian Horological Society was formed in the dining room at 10 Milner Street. The story of the formation has been admirably told in this journal by Dr James Nye.¹²³ He notes that, although Ilbert was a very enthusiastic instigator, he was shy and retiring in his character and uncomfortable with any roles involving public speaking. He did write a short

article though titled 'A Tompion broadsheet in French', which appeared in the March 1955 issue of *Antiquarian Horology* and on Thursday 5 May 1955 he was elected first Fellow of the society in recognition of his involvement and contribution to it.

Editing the 7th edition of Britten.¹²⁴

In the foreword of his book *Collector's Collection*,¹²⁵ Cecil Clutton wrote of working with Ilbert on the seventh edition of Britten's *Old Clocks & Watches & their Makers*:

122. *Horological Journal* (Jan–Feb 1968), p. 17.

123. James Nye, 'The Antiquarian Horological Society An early history', *AH* June 2012, 457–468.

124. *Britten's Old Clocks & Watches & their Makers*, Seventh Edition by G. H. Baillie FBHI, C. Clutton FSA, & C. A. Ilbert FBHI (Spon Ltd., 1956).

125. Published by the AHS, London, 1974.



Fig. 69. Ilbert at Milner Street with his cabinet and some of his vast collection of watches. Photo Ilbert archive British Museum. The very valuable ones were up the road in a Harrods safe deposit box. The drawers, though not a registered object, are still in the Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory at The British Museum, housing various objects from that department.

I had been so fortunate as to be introduced to Courtenay Ilbert and had seen his collection. He was the only person I knew with the necessary knowledge to take on the job. I did not for a moment think that he would write the book, but if he would tell me what to say, I would put it on paper. To my surprise, Ilbert agreed. What I did not realise was that Ilbert was not capable of marshalling his knowledge in a way that could be presented in book form. Those who enjoyed his friendship know what an immensely retiring, kindly, eccentric and whimsical character he was. Among his many strange characteristics was an extreme reluctance to commit himself on almost any subject. He also had a cat to which he was deeply attached. When really pushed into a corner over anything where he had to make a positive statement his invariable escape-technique was to gaze at the ceiling, murmuring 'My poor cat. Oh; my poor, poor cat.'

This was not very helpful so far as the seventh edition of Britten was concerned. Remembering how confusing I had found Britten as a reference work I had decided, with Ilbert's agreement that most of it had got to be completely rewritten. What we kept was most of the chapter on the lives of famous makers and, of course, the list of makers. Full of enthusiasm, I went to Ilbert for briefing on the first chapter; only to be referred to the poor cat. The cat, however, was no more communicative than its owner. So, I went away and wrote a chapter as best I might by my extremely feeble burning light of knowledge; and produced it to Ilbert. It then became apparent that while he left a good deal to be desired as an imparter of knowledge, his critical powers were of the most acute order. This was incorrect; that was doubtful; the other that should have been included was left out. So I went away and wrote the chapter cut completely anew. It was not perhaps the

quickest way to write a book, but it was certainly learning the fast and hard way so far as I was concerned. I used to go to Ilbert's house, number 10 Milner Street, Chelsea after work, usually twice a week. After working for an hour we went out to dinner and then came back and went on until after midnight. In the whole course of writing the book I never knew Ilbert to have to look up a fact, or fail to produce a clock or watch from his collection to illustrate a point.

Clutton goes on to say how production was held up due to a motor-racing accident he was involved in and then Ilbert's illness held up production but that 'before he died I was able to place in his hands an advance copy of the seventh edition and I believe this gave him considerable happiness'.

It's been such fun

In 1954 one of the last auctions he attended was that of the Webster collection¹²⁶ where he acquired important watches, table clocks and longcases.

Ilbert was taken ill for the first time in December 1954. The following January, he wrote his will bequeathing Flamsteed's angle clock, made by Thomas Tompion in 1691, to the museum at Greenwich, and his library to the British Horological Institute.

Jacqueline Duncan recalls:

Go and I became close and that was good because I was there for him at the end. I spoke to him about the collection – what would he like done? His answer was clear. 'I would love it to go to the British Museum as a record of my life; the trouble is that by doing that, I shall be depriving all the people of the collecting and it's been such fun!'

Ilbert died aged sixty-seven on Monday the 19th March 1956 at Milner Street.¹²⁷ He is buried with his sister and mother in the cemetery

126. The collection of clocks and watches formed by the horological dealer Percy Webster was sold at Sotheby's in two auctions, held on 27 May and 19 October 1954.

127. According to his death certificate, from broncho pneumonia with complications.



Fig. 70. The gravestone in the cemetery of All Saints, Thurlestone, South Devon. The dark bar at the bottom is a tarnished, additional brass plaque bearing Courtenay's name. Photo by the author.

of the thirteenth-century parish church of All Saints, Thurlestone, South Devon. It is an atmospheric, tranquil location. A sea mist often rolls in and there is a constant cawing from the rookery in the pine trees above.

The fourth and final part of this article will follow in a future journal issue.