



THE SUNDIAL PAGE

'Umbræ Sumus'

© Christopher Daniel, UK
 chris.daniel@btinternet.com

It is an interesting fact that at least 24 of the known existing stained-glass window sundials

in Britain date from the 17th century. Only one dates from the 16th century, whilst three date from the turn of the 17th/18th centuries. Two 19th century stained-glass dials have been recorded and some half-a-dozen modern dials reflect the 20th century 'Renaissance' in the design and construction of sundials in general.

However, only two recorded stained-glass sundials date from the mid-18th century, both by the same maker, namely John Rowell of Wycombe (or High Wycombe). The first of these, dated 1733, is at Arbury Hall near Nuneaton in Warwickshire and the second, dated 1734, is at Purley Hall near Reading in Berkshire. Both dials, at the time of their being recorded, were in very good condition ('Sundials in stained-glass', *CLOCKS*, Volume 10, No 10, April 1988, pp30-37).

The dial at Arbury Hall is set into a window facing on to a courtyard and declines from south by about eight degrees west. It comprises a rectangular white or plain translucent panel, featuring a painted butterfly and a fly, contained within a yellow stained border in which the hours are marked in Roman numerals from VIII (8am) to VI (6pm). This is bounded by another border in translucent glass, which is delineated with the hour-lines, half-hours and quarter-hours. The dial is painted in such a way that it is depicted as being supported by an ornamental corbel that is inscribed 'J. R. Fecit 1733'.

Arbury Hall is the ancestral home of James Newdegate, the 4th Viscount Daventry, and has been the Newdegate family seat for over 400 years, since Tudor times. Set in the midst of beautiful rolling parkland, with landscaped gardens, lawns, lakes and woodland, the house was modernised or 'gothicised' in the 18th century by the then owner, Sir Roger Newdegate. It is considered to be one of the finest surviving examples of early Gothic Revival architecture in the country and it was during this 'Renaissance' period that John Rowell was commissioned to make the sundial.

Purley Hall is situated about a degree of latitude to the south of Arbury Hall, *ie* some 60 miles or so distant. The present Jacobean house was built in 1609 by Francis Hyde, being known as Hyde Hall up until 1720 when, the property having been sold, the house

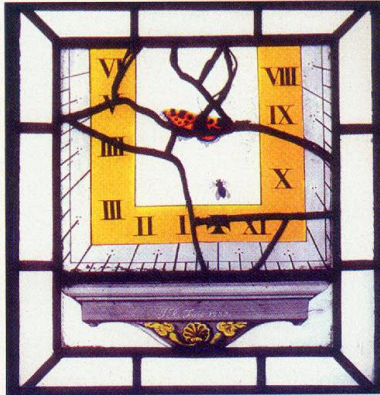
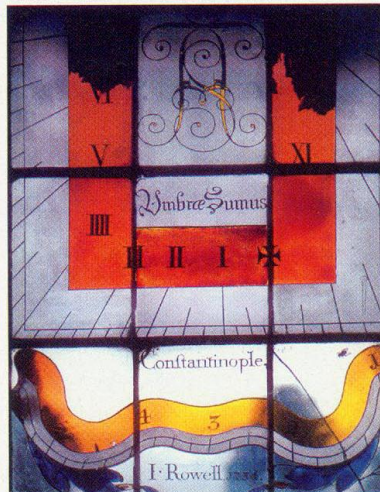


Figure 1. The Arbury Hall sundial by John Rowell, dated 1733 (note the butterfly and the fly).

Figure 2. The Purley Hall dial by John Rowell, dated 1734 (note the fly, a pun on 'Time flies').



was renamed. The new owner was Francis Hawes, a director of the South Sea Company. Hawes set about enhancing the property, improving the house and the garden, but in 1721 the 'South Sea bubble' burst and the South Sea Company crashed. This might have been financially disastrous, but Thomas Hawes, the younger brother of Francis,

bought the property, which he owned for 32 years until 1753, when he gave it back to his elder brother. Both brothers were keen landscape gardeners and it is evident that both spent time and money improving the house. Both were patrons of John Rowell, the plumber-glazier who made the sundial in 1734 and who, in this same year, painted two of their family coats-of-arms in other windows.

The sundial differs from the Arbury Hall dial in that it declines some 27 degrees west of south. The rectangular border, containing the Roman numerals denoting the hours, is a warm wine-red colour, with a yellow stain scroll below the main dial containing Arabic numerals denoting the equivalent time in Constantinople. John Rowell, according to Horace Walpole (1719-1797), 'found out a very beautiful and durable red, but he died in a year or two and the secret went with him'. Compared to many glass dials, this is surprisingly plain, featuring the joint cipher of Francis and Thomas Hawes, the letters F and T interlaced with the letter S. Below this is the Latin motto 'Umbræ Sumus' ('We are a Shadow'). The dial is signed by Rowell and dated 1734. He has also included a fly in the bottom right panel, a common practice among those who painted stained-glass sundials, regarded as a pun on 'Time flies'.

What is remarkable about John Rowell (1689-1756), who evidently moved from London to Wycombe, *ie* High Wycombe, with his family around the turn of the century, was that he started business as a plumber and glazier, but had the talent to develop these arts to the extent that he became recognised as a water engineer and a fenestral artist. While he took up painting on canvas perhaps about the year 1718, it was not until the 1730s that he started painting on glass. However, his enthusiasm led him to advertise in 1733 that he was reviving 'The Ancient Art of Staining Glass'. He became well respected and much in demand in every aspect of his business, but particularly as a glass-painter, moving to Reading in 1741. Most of his fenestral commissions were to paint religious scenes for churches and heraldic work for secular patrons. His two sundials survive not only as testimony to his skill as a glass-painter, but also to his ability in the mathematical art of dialling.