



THE SUNDIAL PAGE

An unsolved mystery

© Christopher Daniel, UK
chris.daniel@sundialdesign.co.uk

In St Mary's Church in the Berkshire parish of Bucklebury there is a stained-glass sundial which, curiously, is set into the north-facing window in the chancel recess, close by the so-called 'squire's' pew. Since the construction of the dial indicates that it declines some 15 degrees from the south towards the west, it is patently obvious that the sundial is not in its original situation and that, at some time during its history, it has been moved to its present location. The gnomon, which would have been fixed to the dial on the outside of the glass, no longer exists.

The sundial takes the form of a square panel of painted glass, featuring a heraldic shield at its centre. The shield is within a framed square of clear glass, with the inscriptions 'S: S: *me fecit* 1649' above the shield and 'Th: S. & St' below. A lifelike fly, a glass-painter's pun on the saying 'time flies', is depicted to one side of the shield. From the edge of the frame, the hour-lines radiate across a panel of translucent glass to a yellow-stained border containing Roman numerals. These denote the hours of the day, from nearly seven in the morning to nearly seven in the evening. The shield itself is charged with the arms of Stephens—*Per chevron Azure and Argent in chief two Falcons rising Or*—two gold falcons on the point of flight, in an inverted chevron in the upper third of the shield, on a blue background—with the difference of a Mullet Sable—namely a five-pointed star, which is the cadency mark, *ie* a small alteration indicating that the arms are those of a third son. In this case, the star is black, set on a silver background. Whilst heraldic terminology would describe matters differently, in lay terms the Stephens arms are portrayed on the left-hand side of the shield, as viewed from inside the church, in the same manner as one would read the sundial.

Likewise, the right-hand side of the shield is charged with the arms of the Stone family—*Sable a Fess between three Heraldic Tygers Or*—three gold tigers on a black background, with a horizontal gold bar impaled across the middle of the shield. These are the arms which were granted on 18th March 1581/2 to John Stone of London,

gentleman, described also as a haberdasher. The union of the arms of Stephens and Stone in this manner represents the marriage of Thomas Stephens (1558-1613) and Elizabeth Stone on 24th April 1595 at St Bride's Church in Fleet Street, London. Thomas Stephens was the third son of Edward and Joan Stephens of Eastington in Gloucestershire. He was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, took up law and became a legal practitioner at the Middle Temple, being credited as attorney to the Princes James and Charles. He was returned as the Member of Parliament for Weymouth and Melcombe Regis in 1593 and later,

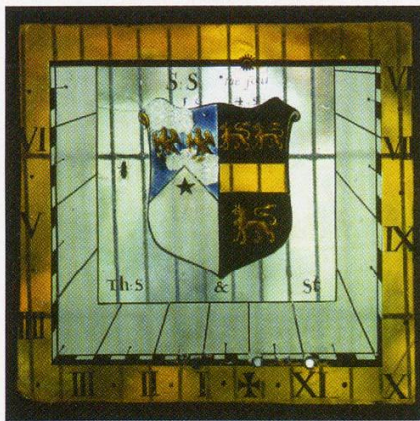


Figure 1. The stained-glass sundial in Bucklebury church.

under James I, obtained a court appointment. By all accounts, he must have become a wealthy man, since he purchased the manors of Cherrington, Over Lypiatt, Chipping, Little Sodbury and Old Sodbury, in Gloucestershire; but is described as being of Lypiatt in the record of his marriage.

This is the background to the coat-of-arms that adorns the shield and the sundial in the parish church at Bucklebury. The inscription 'Th: S. & St', *ie* 'Th: Stephens & Stone', below the shield, accords with this. However, the inscription *above* the shield, 'S: S: *me fecit* 1649' *ie* 'S: S: *had me made* 1649' is another matter. It is clear that someone chose to commemorate the union of Thomas Stephens and Elizabeth Stone some 54 years after the event! This raises several important questions: *who* had the sundial made and why, *who* was the maker of the instrument, and how does it come to be in its present location? Alas, one cannot answer these questions with much

authority, if at all, but one may speculate on the various possibilities.

The famous 'Countess's Pillar' sundial, erected in 1656 by Anne Clifford on a lonely grass-clad promontory by the roadside, just east of Brougham Castle in Cumbria, marked the place where the Countess had last parted from her mother 40 years earlier. Perhaps the Bucklebury sundial represents a similar expression of affection; but the only member of the family with the initials 'S: S:' appears to have been Sarah Stephens, daughter of Thomas Stephens' eldest brother Richard Stephens, the niece of Thomas and Elizabeth. The sundial itself is a fine example of the 'art of dialling' and the glass-painter's craft, such that the most likely artist of the period to have been commissioned to produce the memorial would have been Baptist Sutton (c1600-1667), the well-known London maker. (It is not inconceivable—although most unlikely—that one of those formerly under Thomas Stephens' tutelage at the Middle Temple, where Sutton had made a glass dial in 1627, might have commissioned Sutton to make the sundial.)

On the matter of how the sundial came to be in Bucklebury church, there is a thread of evidence that shows that Thomas Stephens' eldest brother, Richard, had a great granddaughter, Elizabeth, who married John Packer of Shillingford in Berkshire. They had a son, Robert Packer, who married Mary, a daughter and co-heir of Sir Henry Winchcombe of the Manor of Bucklebury. The manor passed to the son of this marriage in 1735; but, due to a fire, much of Bucklebury House was demolished in 1830/3. It follows that the sundial, which was no doubt originally made for a property in Gloucestershire, was probably moved to Bucklebury House some time after 1735 and that, having somehow survived the fire, it was placed in its present position in about the year 1830. Of course, all this is a matter of speculation: the true story still remains an unsolved mystery. ●

Footnote

I am much indebted to Thomas Woodcock FSA, Norroy and Ulster King of Arms, for the wealth of information with which he provided me on the above subject.