



# THE SUNDIAL PAGE

## Bird in hand

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

One of the most famous stained-glass sundials, recently reported to have been stolen, for many years adorned a south-facing window in Nailsea Court in Somerset, now Avon, figure 1. Its familiarity is no doubt due to the fact that it has been copied and re-copied on many occasions by various hands up to the present time. Perhaps this is because, as its principal decoration, it features a bird, probably a skylark, that, with wings outstretched, appears to have just alighted on the frail upper branch of a tree; but which has its beady eyes firmly fixed on a nearby fly!

The sundial takes the form of a rectangular panel set in the leaded framework of a painted and stained glass oval, measuring 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>in (261mm) by 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>in (187mm) overall. The dial-plate is delineated with black hour-lines and half-hour marks on a white matt background, edged with a narrow black-and-white segmented border, highlighting the graduated divisions. A broad border in yellow stain, marked out with bold black-painted Roman numerals, denoting the hours, and small circular spots, marking the half-hours, provides a surrounding frame. A small heraldic cross within this border denotes the hour-line of 12 o'clock (noon). Across the upper horizontal length of the border the inscription 'Dum Spectas Fugio' ('Whilst you watch, I fly') proclaims the passing of time and life.

Within the area of the dial-plate, there is a central rectangular panel containing the scene of the bird, eyeing the fly. The bird is delicately painted, clearly depicting the crest and the fluffed-up layering of the feathers in various shades of brown. The fly, often included on such dials as a pun on 'time flies', is also delicately painted, but is perhaps nearer life-size than the bird.

In the space above the yellow-stain border of the dial, there is depicted a winged hour-glass, also symbolically representing the passage of time and the inevitable passing of life. This outer border is in a red 'float' stain offsetting the decorative foliage or ornamental cartouche. There is no visible signature or date; but the sundial is undoubtedly a fine example of the glass-painter's art of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Probably more is known about this



Figure 1. The Nailsea Court sundial – note the fly!



Figure 2. Sketch of the copy at Derby (1888).

Figure 3. Illustration from *A HISTORY OF ENGLISH GLASS-PAINTING*, 1912.



sundial because of the copy that was made of it in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the *STRAND MAGAZINE* (Volume III, January-June, 1892) pp 607-612, there is an article entitled 'Sundials' by Warrington Hogg, in which there is a sketch of a sundial 'in a stained-glass window at Derby', figure 2. The text states that 'The dial in the stained-glass window in the private office of E S Johnson, Esq, at Derby, is a modern but very fine one; it is an exact copy, painted in 1888, by Frederick Drake, of the Close, Exeter, the glazier to the Cathedral, who painted it from one taken out of an old manor house in Devonshire, dated 1660'.

It would, indeed, appear to have been an exact copy in almost all respects, except, perhaps, in fine detail and style. Also, this copy may well have been signed and dated by Frederick Drake, since, in his *YE SUNDIAL BOOK* (first

published in 1914) T Geoffrey W Henslow illustrates the dial with a sketch, with the caption 'Sundial in a window at Derby—dated 1888'. Glass-painter he may have been; but diallist Frederick Drake was not, since his Derby sundial could only have been accurate for the latitude of the manor house in Devon, for which the original was made.

In 1888, as a thriving commercial centre, Derby would have been abundantly furnished with well-regulated public clocks, those at the post office and railway station being linked to the Royal Observatory at Greenwich by the electric telegraph, keeping accurate Greenwich Mean Time. Mr E S Johnson had no need of a stained-glass sundial in his office. It can only have been commissioned for his pleasure and a little for show! However, the fact that he had the original copied from a known source, provides evidence of the provenance of the Nailsea Court sundial.

In 1912 there was published a work by Frederick Drake's son, Maurice Drake, entitled *A HISTORY OF ENGLISH GLASS-PAINTING*, in which there is an illustration by W Drake of 'A Jacobean Sundial, c1620, from Mr Radford's Collection', figure 3. Apart from the style and certain minor errors, it is exactly the same sundial! An antiquary, Mr A L Radford, FSA, is listed as living at Bovey House, Devon. Evidently he had a fine collection of stained-glass works and it is more than likely that he acquired the sundial that later found its way to Nailsea Court. It is probable, at that time, that he would have had a good idea of its provenance, if not its date. Thus, originally in 'an old manor house in Devonshire, dated 1660', it would have been constructed for the nearest degree of latitude, namely 51 degrees North, establishing, from the delineation of the dial-plate, a declination from South of 34<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> degrees East.

Warrington Hogg produced a delightful little work in 1914, *A BOOK OF SUNDIALS*, that ran to many editions and reprints, which also featured his sketch of the dial at Derby. However, more recently, in 1969, the dial was copied again by 'the Glass Masters' of New York, presumably from the plate in Maurice Drake's book. It is claimed that it is a replica of one executed by the English glass-painter, Henry Gyles of York (1645-1709). The date of the original sundial is uncertain. However, it is just possible that it could have been the work of Henry Gyles, perhaps c1670; but the 'replica' is certainly closer in style to the work of Walt Disney.