



THE SUNDIAL PAGE

A colourful reminder

Stained-glass sundials are rare, principally but not entirely due to their fragile nature. In the British Isles there are perhaps less than 40 examples still extant, almost all of which are in England, and most of which date from the 17th century. At this time, the Art of Dialling had probably reached its zenith, being a popular mathematical subject and one with which educated young gentlemen were expected

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to be conversant. Thus, stained-glass sundials were popular as useful scientific instruments, but they were also popular as a new means of expressing the art of the glass-painter. The glaziers and painter-stainers, having suffered in the extreme from the destruction of religious glass during the Reformation and during the puritanical period of the Commonwealth, were keen to exploit secular markets in heraldic glass, following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, and in the popularity of sundials. (Christopher St J H Daniel, 'Sundials in Stained-Glass in England and Wales', *CLOCKS*, Volume 10, No 10, April 1988, pp30-37.)

Whilst 17th century stained-glass sundials are colourful, the few 18th century glass dials that have survived take a simpler form. As with the 18th century 'black and white' utilitarian style, that came into fashion with vertical wall dials, so the glass dials of the period are plain by comparison with those of the 17th century. Furthermore, it would seem that few such glass dials were actually made during the 18th century and fewer still during the 19th century. Four or five examples have been recorded for the 18th century and only two for the 19th century, one dated 1815 and the other 1875, the latter being the work of Charles Kempe. There is one other of which I know, dated 1899 in Dumfries, I believe, in Scotland; but I do not know its actual whereabouts.

It might seem surprising that there was no revival of interest in stained-glass window sundials during the Victorian era, considering the number of churches that

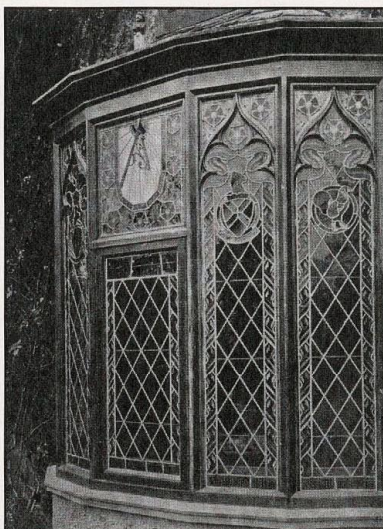


Figure 1. Exterior view of the window and the sundial at the Old Parsonage, Didsbury (photograph c1907).

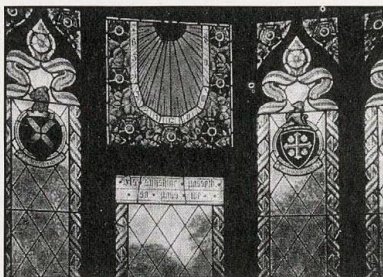


Figure 2. Interior view of the library window, showing the sundial at the Old Parsonage, Didsbury (photograph c1907).

were constructed or renovated by the Victorians; but it must be remembered that they lived in an age of great mechanical advancement, with their interest in such achievements to their credit as 'Big Ben', the railways and the electric telegraph. Consequently, Victorian and Edwardian stained-glass sundials are exceptionally rare, that is assuming that any Edwardian glass dials actually exist!

In the year 1904, in the third year of the reign of King Edward VII (1901-1910), Mr Fletcher Moss, a successful and prominent Manchester businessman, councillor, antiquarian and philanthropist, designed a stained-glass window, including a sundial, for the library of his house. This was the Old Parsonage at Didsbury, which he had bought in 1884, having lived there for some 20 years. He

thought that this was probably the best purchase that he had ever made, since he considered that his home had been a singular influence on his life and work.

The window may still be seen today at the Old Parsonage, which is now in the care of the local museum authorities, but, sadly, the sundial is missing. Whether it was removed for some reason, or damaged beyond repair, to be replaced with a plain window pane, is not known. What is known is that Fletcher Moss was meticulous in ensuring that his sundial was accurately constructed, although it is not known by whom this was done. Certainly he must have had friends who were in a position to carry out the calculations and delineation, assuming that he was unable to do this for himself.

However, he carefully records that 'The house faces 25 degrees west of south, or about SSW (warmest aspect)', *ie* he gives the declination of the window in which the sundial is situated. He also gives the latitude 53° 24' 45" North and the longitude 2° 15' 30" West of Greenwich, both values being to the nearest second of arc, adding that the local time is 9 minutes 2 seconds slow of Greenwich. (He also notes that the floor of the house is 125 feet above sea-level!)

The window is a colourful reminder of the somewhat flamboyant style of the Edwardian period, with heraldic devices in red, yellow and blue, with a seeming abundance of red Tudor-style roses and green foliage. The sundial was decorated in the same lavish manner, presumably in similar coloured glass. In the circumstances, it should not be difficult to reproduce.

Fletcher Moss mentions that the best answer to the oft-asked question 'Does it (the sundial) keep good time?' is: Since the days of Hezekiah there is no authentic record of the sun not keeping good time, but if he doesn't he could be reported to the Watch Committee. On the casement window below the sundial, there is the motto 'As sunshine passeth so pass we'. I can't say that I care for the motto but, with three stained-glass sundials 'under my belt', it would certainly be nice to reconstruct Mr Fletcher Moss's library window dial in the Old Parsonage at Didsbury.

Acknowledgement

I am indebted to Mr Roger Bowling for much of the background to Fletcher Moss and his dial. ☺