



# THE SUNDIAL PAGE

## Sundials of the British Isles

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The title of this article is the title of a new book on sundials, which, by coincidence, was published on the day of the autumnal equinox! This is not a review of this work, since I am one of the 28 contributing authors of the book and it would hardly be appropriate for me to comment on the merits or faults of the publication. Nevertheless, just as I wrote a piece about the new colour edition of my own *SUNDIALS* book, produced by Shire Publications Ltd in June 2004, ('One of a multitude', *Sundial Page, CLOCKS*, Volume 27 No 7, p29, July 2004), in which I explained something of the background and purpose of my book, so I think that it might be of interest to readers to discuss the scope of this new addition to sundial literature.

As the title unambiguously states, this is a book about the sundials that are to be found in the British Isles. Unlike the *REGISTER* of the British Sundial Society, it is not a catalogue of all the known sundials that exist in Britain, but a selection of those judged to be the best, the most interesting, or worth including for other reasons. The book is not divided into chapters in the usual sense, but into 12 regions, including Scotland, Ireland, Wales and nine smaller regions of England, one of which is the London area.

However, there are additional specialist chapters, one covering the early dials of Britain, one concerning stained and painted glass sundials in windows, and one dealing with portable dials. The authors of the work are all members of the British Sundial Society, all living in or having knowledge of the sundials in the regions about which they have written, or being specialists in the particular fields covered. Nevertheless, it must be said that this new book is neither a British Sundial Society publication nor a sponsored work of the organisation, although it is understood that any profits from the sale of the book may be donated to the Society's funds.

*SUNDIALS OF THE BRITISH ISLES* was the inspiration of Michael J Cowham, the editor and publisher of the book, a member of the British Sundial Society, who had published his first book a year earlier in 2004. This was a work on portable sundials, in which Mike Cowham is a specialist, entitled *A DIAL IN YOUR POKE*, the title being derived from a

passage in Shakespeare's play *AS YOU LIKE IT* (Act 2, Scene 7).

Evidently, when teasingly questioned by a friend as to what would be the subject of his next publication, Mike could not resist the instant response that it would be about sundials of the British Isles! However, his own reaction provided him

with an immediate challenge, which, with characteristic pride and spirit, he took up with enthusiasm, recruiting members of the BSS to undertake the task of selecting, photographing and writing about sundials in particular regions, and setting a timetable that he fixed with military precision. Within little more than the space of a year, the work was done and the book was published—quite an achievement!

Lavishly illustrated, this colourful work can be described, in the best sense of the term, as a 'coffee table' book. Indeed, it must be the first English coffee table book on sundials ever to have been published, although I think that it was conceived as a work that might follow in the tradition of the famous 19th century *BOOK OF SUNDIALS* by Mrs Alfred Gatty. This was a remarkable book, first published in 1872, which ran to four editions, the last of which, published in 1900, was a monumental work, which came to be regarded as the 'bible' on the subject of sundials. Although principally devoted to the collection of sundial mottoes, it was nicely illustrated and provided valuable references to sundials throughout the country and elsewhere in other parts of the world. The later editions were supplemented and edited by Horatia Eden, one of Mrs Gatty's daughters, and Eleanor Lloyd, her great friend, and contained an appendix on the construction of sundials by J Wigham Richardson. Consequently, this was a reference work to which everyone turned when it came to matters concerning sundials. There has never been another book quite like it!

Whilst *SUNDIALS OF THE BRITISH ISLES* does not pretend to be 'Mrs Gatty', it contains a wealth of information about the sundials in these islands, both written and pictorial, with interesting historical background material, such that it is likely to become a worthwhile work of reference in its own right. It may also prove to be a useful companion to the *REGISTER* of the British Sundial Society and to those who choose to explore the different regions of the British Isles looking for sundials. It is a book that one can read through, or just 'dip into' and find little treasures, such as the stained-glass sundial in Merton Church, Norfolk, with the spider in its web waiting to catch an unsuspecting fly. It is an attractive book that would make a good Christmas present for someone who is interested in the historic heritage of the British Isles, if not in the subject of sundials itself. ●



Figure 1. The ornately framed stained-glass sundial in the parish church of St Peter, in the grounds of Merton Park Hall.

Figure 2. A detail of the sundial, showing the spider in its web waiting to catch the fly. The painted fly was used by 17th century stained-glass artists as a pun on the expression 'time flies'.

