

Book Reviews

The Mastery of Time

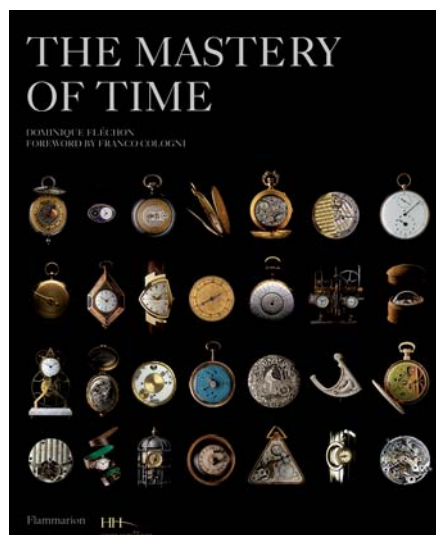
Author: Dominique Fléchon

Publisher: Flammarion

ISBN: 978-2-08-020080-8

Price: £65

Available from: All good bookshops
or sales@thameshudson.co.uk



This latest book from the Flammarion stable does not lack ambition. Its subtitle, 'A History of Timekeeping, from the Sundial to the Wristwatch: Discoveries, Inventions, and Advances in Master Watchmaking' gives us a clue as to how widely the net has been cast. Inevitably, a net spread over so large an expanse will not catch everything, a fact openly recognised in the Foreword, but, nevertheless, it is an impressive achievement. The last part of the subtitle also points to the ultimate destination of the book.

The text is divided into six sections, each section with several chapters beginning with 'Horology, A Child of Astronomy'. In fact, it begins even earlier than that, earlier than astronomy or time itself, the opening sentence being, 'Some 13.7 billion years ago, when the universe did not yet exist ...'. It is another indication of the scope of this book. Moving rapidly on to more recent times, ie the time of homo sapiens, much of the rest of this section concentrates, rightly, on early man's need to know his position within the annual cycle, rather than within the period of a single day. Stonehenge puts in its usual appearance here, although with an unusual aerial image, but also less well known (to us) early observatories like that at Goseck at Saxony-Anhalt. The development of the 365 day calendar in its various forms in the Ancient World in the Middle East, in India and China is comprehensively

covered, before moving on to the division of the day and the introduction of the sundial, clepsydra and, finally, the mechanical clock.

The second section, 'From Clock to Watch', embraces two centuries which saw the appearance of dramatic and elaborate public clocks. This was followed by their reduction in size for domestic purposes and finally, with the development of the spring driven movement, the personalisation of time measurement instruments. This is followed by 'Achieving Precision', which certainly covers the principal developments up to 1800, but also does not overlook the different decorative styles of this period. It is indicative of the brevity required to contain this history within a book of manageable proportions that the whole John Harrison story is completed in just 200 words.

The final three sections are concerned with ever decreasing time scales and make up almost half of the book. 'During the Industrial Revolution 1790-1918' looks at the impact of industrialisation on the craft-based horological industry, the entry of America into horological manufacture and the introduction of the many specialised timekeepers for military or sporting use. 'Wristwatches; From the Practicality of Mechanics to the Accuracy of Quartz 1920-2000' follows the history of the wristwatch for the rest of the 20th century and ends with the Swatch and the supremacy of quartz.

The final chapter, 'Precious and Technical Fine Watchmaking from 2000 to the Present Day', perhaps the *raison d'être* of this book, concentrates on the rebirth of traditional watchmaking with descriptions and illustrations of the finest examples of the watchmaker's art in the 21st century.

There are other books which cover much similar territory as this one but for a book to encompass such a vast subject in just 450 pages is no mean feat and the author has achieved it in a way that eminently readable and beautifully illustrated. It is, perhaps, not one of those books to be read cover to cover like a novel but one to be dipped into at random. There is something new to be learned on almost every page or, indeed, something to be challenged. If you are looking for the history of time from before time existed to the present, you could do worse than *The Mastery of Time*.

Alan Middleton FBHI

The Smiths of Derby A Journey Through Time

Author: Maxwell Craven

ISBN: is 978-0-9570846-1-2.

Price: £25 plus £3.50 P&P in the UK.

Available from: Smith of Derby Ltd.

112 Alfreton Road, Derby DE21 4AU

or sales@smithofderby.com

Tel 01332 345569

www.smithofderby.com

The Smiths of Derby A Journey Through Time



Max Craven

Anyone who undertakes heavy turret clock work is likely to have encountered a Smith of Derby flatbed movement. I worked on one at Chertsey Church that was installed in 1894. After a century the only repair work needed was two bushes in the going train, witnessing it to be solid, dependable and exceptionally well made.

As one of the principal companies making turret clocks in the 19th century, Smith produced thousands of clocks that were installed in churches, town hall, hospitals and the like. Their turret clocks are a familiar sight through the UK and in many countries of the past British Empire. Their distinctive sycamore like design of the hour hands identifies the Smith parentage and echoes their roots in the Whitehurst dynasty.

But a turret clock is a lot more than cast iron and brass and this book by Maxwell Craven wisely makes no attempt to address the hardware. There are no pictures of clock movements, escapements, pendulums or catalogue pages. Instead, the book is all about the company, the family and the staff who worked at the benches to make it all happen. The company activities are mirrored by the need for public clocks to reflect the social system into which a clock is sold. This book is all about



people and if readers approach it with that in mind they will not be disappointed.

An obligatory chapter and family tree tells us that John Smith, **see photo above**, was born on 21 December 1813, probably at Hognaston, Derbyshire. The family was mainly involved in the metal trade: braziers, whitesmiths etc. In 1827, at the age of 14, John entered an apprenticeship with John Whitehurst II. Around 1840 John fell out with the factory manager and left, and in 1849 he was established as a manufacturer of clocks and watches in Nuns Street.

After the death of John Whitehurst III, the company was taken over by Roskells in 1857, finally closing in 1862. John never claimed to be Whitehurst's successor, yet such was the reputation of Whitehurst that John assumed the role, probably by being an excellent craftsman and businessman. By 1864 John was advertising clocks, watches and turret clocks, and some time after 1864 moved into a house in Queen Street that the company retained until 1999.

Oral tradition passed on by an early apprentice, Will Haynes, who joined the company in 1869, tells that the first turret clock was for Hleanor Parish Church in 1868. A catalogue of 1877 advertises watches and a whole range of clocks, as well as an electrical department.

By 1866, the name Steam 'Clock Works' was appended to indicate they were modern and used the latest in equipment. Certainly for operating large lathes and turret clock wheel cutting, steam power was a necessity

John Smith died in 1886 and the business was taken over by the sons Frank and John. Their era was marked for innovation, with six patents taken out in only two years. The company was

very pro-active and searched out newspaper and magazine cuttings for information on new buildings and construction work. As soon as they had a lead they were offering their services. Providing clocks for the railways was another thread; products were mostly dial clocks and maintenance contracts enhanced the trade.

Not surprisingly, the company had dealings with Lord Grimthorpe. One famous job was the building in 1883 of a huge turret clock for St Paul's Cathedral, under the direction of the Lord. Relations must have been very amicable since Frank's eldest son was christened Alan Dudley Grimthorpe.

There are plenty of anecdotes in the book. One 1903 incident tells... *'the parish clock is a notoriously bad timekeeper'*. Astonishingly, this was the excuse offered at Deptford Police Court by a local pub landlord who was summoned to appear before the beak for opening his premises before the legal time. Apparently it was generally agreed – case dismissed. The cutting had in its margin, 'written to vicar of St Nicholas' 3/10/1903.

Foreign commissions were inevitable, one example was an estimate sent in 1891 to the sub-continent for supplying *'six large station clocks'* for the South Indian Railway, which was duly accepted.

Frank Smith died suddenly in 1913, which left the company with a problem. Loyal staff ran the company until Frank's son Alan was old enough to get involved. The Great War had a profound effect on all companies, including Smith, but they survived and carried on. The chapter 'In the Field' is a fascinating record of the experiences of the clockmakers who were out on the road installing and repairing clocks. Travelling by train or bus, their tools and rope tackle were sent on in advance by train. Money would be sent by Postal Order or registered as cash. Sometimes they would be travelling for months, communication with the works was mostly by telegram or letter card. In the field, the men were always looking for new business. One example is when a dial was repainted and gilded after the clock had been serviced, the materials having been despatched by train.

Many names are mentioned that still ring a bell today. One was Ron Dove, well known to bell ringers for his *'Dove's Guide to Bell Towers'*. A humorous poem by Eric Ladd recounts the tedious nature of setting dials all to the same time and the need to go up and down a tower many times. Chris Newton was



another; he was an excellent photographer and recorded the work that Smith did in the 1950s on the Salisbury Cathedral Clock.

The life and times of Howard Smith and his son Nicholas are well recounted in the later chapters; not surprising since this is well in living memory and much material would have been supplied by Nicholas. During this time, the company progressed into the electric era, saw the introduction of automatic winding and later electronics and automatic pendulum regulation.

Under Nicholas' chairmanship, the Company branched into wider fields and started to produce feature clocks, or 'kinetic art', **see photo above**. New ventures include feature clocks and high-class domestic clocks, under the Whitehurst label, for events such as the recent royal wedding. The story ends with the Ganzhou Clock in China, the world's largest dials driven by a mechanical clock.

The book ends with an appendix that lists the Smith genealogy, Smith accounts and a list of Joyce directors. A bibliography also lists related books. Footnotes on each page list the sources, and that saves a lot of entries in the appendix.

This review was carried out whilst the book was in word format, the printing being under planning, and as such I cannot comment on print quality, binding, layout and the index.

In all, the book is highly recommended as it gives a deep insight into how a Victorian and 20th century turret clock business was run. There is a good number of illustrations, most of which are of people or places. For me, the best parts are the tales and anecdotes of the staff. The price has got to be very reasonable for this 250 plus pages book when compared with most horological books produced today.

Chris McKay MBHI