

David Thompson:

Curator of Horology

British Museum



With 30 years experience as a curator in the Horological Section of the British Museum, David Thompson has responsibility for about 7,000 objects. David, who recently became a recipient of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers' Harrison Gold Medal for services to horology, specialises in the history and technology of watchmaking in the 16th and 17th centuries and is currently working on a catalogue of early watches made before the introduction of the balance-spring in 1675. *QP* finds out more about the man and his work.

Tracey Llewellyn

Thomas Tompion's year-going table clock with quarter repeat, 'The Mostyn'. London, circa 1690.



David, you are head curator at the British Museum and a leading authority on the history of timekeeping. How did your career start?

The first time a timepiece ever caught my eye was in the mid-1960s - I must have been about 15-years-old when I noticed a silver-cased pocket watch in an antique shop window. It cost in the region of £5 and I managed to persuade the shop owner to take a deposit and let me pay for the rest as and when I could. Later on (in 1972) I was in an apartment in Prague when I had my 'road to Damascus' moment. One wall of the apartment was covered in clocks and I just thought 'I want to do that'. Back home in Oxford, I started buying cheap clocks and taking them apart. I then discovered a clock and watchmaking course at Hackney College and in 1977 my wife agreed to move to London and become the main wage earner while I completed the two-year course. Of course I did train as a clock and watchmaker, however, I would not really call myself a watchmaker now, I am more of a horological historian.

You now have the dream job for a horophile - how did it come about?

While at Hackney I heard through one of the lecturers that a job was coming up in the British Museum's Horology Section. I wrote

to the museum in April 1979 but didn't hear anything back. I went on to graduate that summer and started working for a clock restorer called Bill Galbraith. I was with Bill for about 10 weeks when, out of the blue, I got a call from the Museum asking me if I was still interested in a six-month contract working as a Museum Assistant. With a promise from Bill that I could have my old job back if everything went pear-shaped, I started the new job in August 1979 and have so far managed to drag my six months out to 30 years.

The collection of clocks and watches here at the British Museum is known as the finest in the world. How did it come about?

We are extremely lucky to have had a couple of amazing benefactors who enabled the section to be created in the mid-nineteenth century. Archaeologist Sir Charles Fellows was an early collector and in 1874 his widow Lady Harriet donated 92 pieces to the Museum mostly dating from the 17th century. Then in 1888, Octavius Morgan bequeathed his entire collection to the nation, requesting that they reside in the British Museum and strangely not 'one of the new museums in Kensington'. We acquired 239 objects in this way - the best known of which is the carillon clock made in 1589 by Isaac Habrecht.

Right: Louis Vautier's gold and enamel cased verge watch. Blois, circa 1630-1638.

Below: Thomas Mudge's Marine Timekeeper No.1. London, 1771-1774.



Right: American Electrical and Novelty & Manufacturing Company's Ever-Ready ticket clock. New York, circa 1930.



And in 1958, we acquired the incredible collection of civil engineer Courtenay Adrian Ilbert. Approximately 2,300 watches and 210 clocks, including the Drummond Robertson collection of Japanese clocks, was bound for the sale rooms when a donation from Sir Gilbert Edgar CBE (chairman of H Samuel Watches) and a public subscription plus a Treasury grant allowed the collection to be bought by the Museum in its entirety.

And in 2008 a new gallery devoted to clocks and watches was opened. This must have been a hugely exciting time?

The new gallery gave us space to exhibit a lot more of the collection and it would never have happened without the support of Sir Harry and Lady Carole Djanogly. It was a dream for me - as well as my colleagues Paul Buck and Oliver Cooke. Although we are still only able to exhibit a tiny proportion of the 4,500 plus pieces we own, we now have the space to tell the whole story, from the very first mechanical timepieces, through the 19th-century American mass production up to the plastic quartz wall clocks and radio-controlled wristwatches of today.

Are all the pieces restored to working order?

No. Restoration work is rarely done. We conserve, we do not restore. How can I return an Arnold piece to the state its maker

intended when I cannot be certain what his intentions were when he set out? Earlier works that have been restored have not always been done that well, so our philosophy is that if it's broken, it's broken. Should restoration ever be done then it must be documented and must always be reversible.

When did timekeepers become an object of desire as opposed to an instrument of function?

I think they have always been objects of desire and status. The earliest references to mechanical timekeepers date back to the 13th century. The Old Town Hall Clock in Prague originated in 1410 - the Apostles and other pieces have obviously been added since - and was always meant to impress. Today it is not uncommon for people to clap when they see the clock perform - and these are sophisticated, 21st-century audiences, the majority of who cannot even tell the time from the clock as it is told in Bohemian hours with sunset marking the 24th hour and the end of a day.

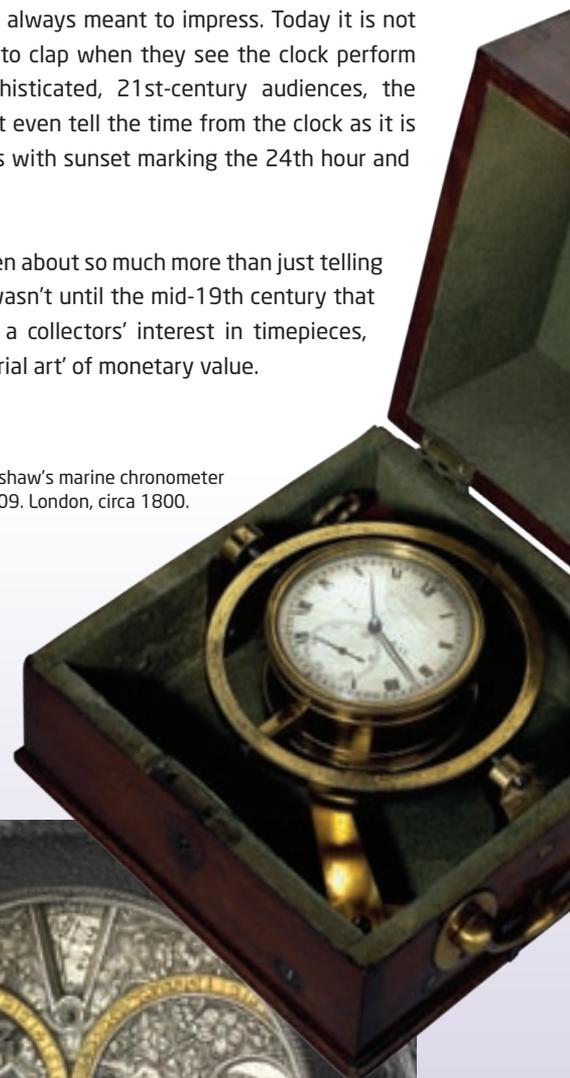
Clocks have always been about so much more than just telling the time, however, it wasn't until the mid-19th century that people began to take a collectors' interest in timepieces, seeing them as 'industrial art' of monetary value.



Curator of Horology, David Thompson.

Thomas Earnshaw's marine chronometer no.509. London, circa 1800.

Jean Baptiste Duboule's silver-cased, hour striking verge coach watch with calendar and alarm. Geneva, circa 1650.

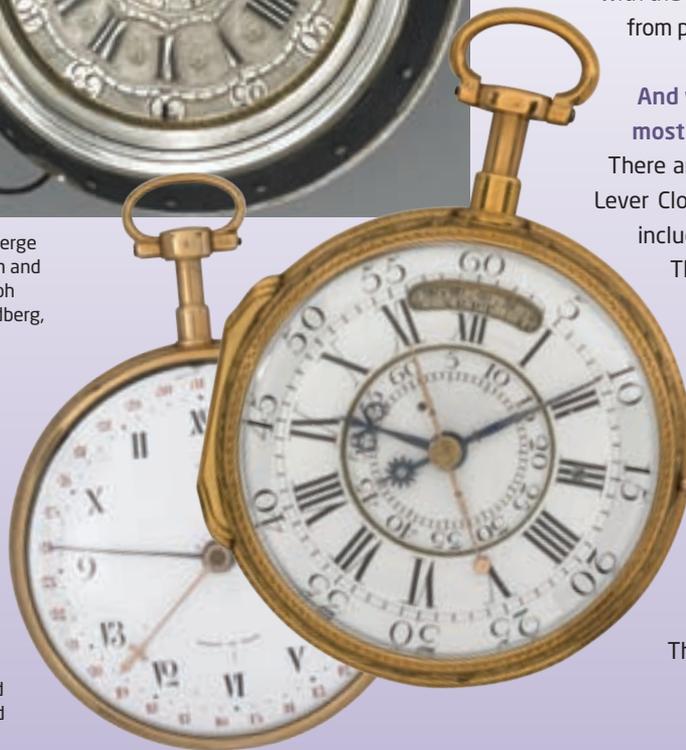




Above: A silver-cased verge coach watch with alarm and quarter repeat by Joseph Spiegel (Legeips). Friedberg, circa 1745.

Right: Jean-Antoine Lépine's gold-cased cylinder watch with date indicator. Paris, 1788.

Far right: A gold-cased, month-going cylinder watch with equation of time indication, dumb half-quarter repeat and stop lever by Ferdinand Berthoud. Paris, 1760.



So out of all the pieces here, could you pick one favourite?

No, there are too many fantastic artefacts. But one of my favourites would have to be the Thomas Mudge Lever Clock from 1748. It contains the first example of a detached lever escapement - something that is still in use today. If you wear a mechanical watch, then the lever escapement in it is based on Mudge's design from almost 300 years ago. The clock also contains a lunar indication with the lunation having a period just .00127 of a second from perfect - a truly remarkable achievement.

And what would you say are some of the most important pieces in the collection?

There are so many iconic pieces, including the Mudge Lever Clock already mentioned. Others would have to include Mudge's Marine Timekeeper No.1; the Thomas Tompion 'Mostyn' year-going table clock that will work for a year on a single wind; the Thomas Earnshaw chronometer that sailed with Darwin on the *Beagle*; and a mid-15th century spring-driven chamber clock, which is one of only two in the world and is an item on indefinite loan from the V&A.

The oldest watches we have here date back to the 1540s, although these are relics. The oldest complete watch we have is from the

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David Duggan

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1560s and the oldest wristwatch dates back to around 1900. Our collection contains a large number of important milestone pieces. We don't collect a certain brand - although to look at the Ilbert collection you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise as it contains at least 50 genuine Breguets as well as quite a few fakes.

Which maker do you appreciate above all others?

This question is almost impossible to answer. If pressed I would have to say Harrison as he was the first to realise how to

construct a practical machine capable of finding longitude at sea. He proved it could be done and he changed history. But there have been so many greats - Tompion, Mudge, Earnshaw, Arnold, Breguet, Berthoud and many more - and none should be left out.

Is there one piece that you would really like to have in the collection?

It would have to be the missing Harrison watch. We know it existed as it is well documented and to find it, see it and exhibit it would be a coup. ☺

Further Information: www.britishmuseum.org

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