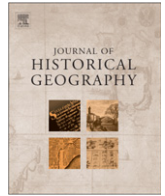


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Review

Paul Glennie, Nigel Thrift, *Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales 1300–1800*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, xiv + 456 pages, £35 hardcover.

For most people, the reckoning of the day and night in two sets of twelve hours, from noon and from midnight, in which each hour is equal in length and is subdivided into sixty minutes, and each minute contains sixty seconds, seems so obvious and necessary that it is scarcely accorded any attention. Given the pervasiveness of the system of 'clock time', which shapes so profoundly the lives and activities of almost everyone in today's world, it is remarkable that the complex history that lies behind the emergence of this standardised means of measuring time has been so often misrepresented and misunderstood. Although by 1300 clock time had emerged as an accepted metric for marking the passage of the day, earlier European societies measured time rather differently. The subdivision of the day into twenty-four hours of the same length is not, of course, a means of measuring 'natural time'. The latter depends on observing daily events (sunrise, noon, and sunset) and measuring the intervals between them. But the length of daylight and night-time match exactly at any given geographical location only twice a year (at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes), so the 'twelve hours' into which each period is divided will nearly always differ in length. Only after extended experimentation and selection, an increase in the use of time markers to structure daily life, and the emergence in the late-thirteenth century of mechanical clocks, did a shift occur towards the more dominant usage – so unquestioningly accepted in the modern world – of equal hours. The authors of this absorbing study suggest that clock time should be regarded primarily as a *practice* that reflected the needs of late-medieval and early modern society.

Though not eschewing explanations of their own of developing clock technology, Glennie and Thrift argue that historians of horology – perhaps dazzled by the undoubted technical imagination and virtuosity of those who invented and perfected mechanical devices for measuring time – have usually tended to regard clock time as a simple matter of ordinary common sense and have 'ignored all the embodied, situated, and concerted work' that lies behind its adoption (p. 29). The authors also point out that social, cultural, and economic historians have too readily swallowed the pronouncements of E.P. Thompson, articulated in his much-cited paper, 'Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism' (*Past & Present* (1967) 38:1 56–97), regarding the intimate connection between clock time and England's industrial revolution in the later eighteenth century. While the clear evidence presented in the book regarding the explosion from the late-seventeenth century of personal clock- and watch-ownership might itself be highlighted to challenge Thompsonian interpretations, Glennie and Thrift further show that the use of precise clock time was 'both assumed and promoted' very much earlier: in the regulation of production and the conduct of markets; in the scheduling of church and civic

events; in the arrangements made for communications; and in the organisation and staging of recreational activities.

Reflecting their longstanding connection with, and interest in Bristol, the authors devote an entire chapter to manifestations of clock time in the early modern and medieval city. While such sustained focus on a single place might at first glance appear anomalous and a little self-indulgent, Bristol's evidence prefigures the conclusions drawn elsewhere about the increasing public availability of clock time to all inhabitants from at least the late-medieval period. 'Knowledge of the time' had by then already become a routine part of daily life in Bristol. In this city, at least, widespread time consciousness did not therefore, as E.P. Thompson sought to argue, await the arrival of industrialisation. Such conclusions drawn for Bristol ought perhaps to stimulate others to conduct similarly detailed, place-specific, comparative research elsewhere.

Aware, however, of the likely charge that Bristol's experience may not reflect that of the country as a whole, the authors thereafter broaden their own gaze. A raft of evidence is produced to confirm the ubiquitous existence in England well before the eighteenth century of public clocks and bells that marked time in local communities, and featured prominently in the ordering of everyday life. The authors thus trawl for evidence of clocks on late-medieval and early modern civic buildings, on parish churches (drawing on an exhaustive novel survey of churchwardens' accounts extant for the period c.1400–1700), and (mostly using published work on probate inventories) timepieces in private possession. While acutely conscious of flaws in the available data, the authors nonetheless offer an important geographical picture of the availability and visibility of public and privately-owned timepieces. They show that the number of church clocks increased notably during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that more frequent ringing or chiming, and the installation of large dials on towers, was also commonly occurring. The private possession of clocks generally appears to have risen markedly between the 1670s and the 1720s. It is persuasively argued that the oft-drawn distinction between timekeeping in rural areas compared with towns has been somewhat overstated.

Evidence of the ways in which clock time featured significantly in the everyday life of town and country is then offered by means of a series of fascinating vignettes. Though caution regarding interpretation is again urged, cases are presented that range *inter alia* from the accurate documenting not just of the date, but also the precise time of the birth of children; to exactness about the timing of events given in evidence in court hearings; to the habit of noting the time of writing on individual personal letters; to the careful recording of the arrival time of letters and packets received in the provincial post rooms of later sixteenth-century England. A growing societal *desire* and *need* to 'keep time' is demonstrated. Chapters on the quest for improved accuracy and increased precision in measuring time, the role in sea faring of clock time, and the

brehtaking advances in chronometry and clock making that culminated in the work of John Harrison add enormously to the richness and depth of the book.

While in some ways this is, at heart, a revisionist text that challenges old orthodoxies about how soon clock time featured strongly in everyday life, and pushes its adoption much further back into the past than has so often previously been assumed, it is in fact much more than that. The book is full of thought-provoking evidence that will prove useful to historians and historical geographers pursuing a wide range of social and cultural enquiries. Though there is some unevenness in the style and the text occasionally lapses into strikingly obscure and pretentious prose, it is

mostly accessible and engagingly written. Notwithstanding the inclusion of some choropleth maps that either lack any key or offer an explanation of shadings only within the caption, the book is well produced and very effectively illustrated. In their conclusion, Glennie and Thrift modestly acknowledge that further work on the development of timekeeping and the construction of the 'temporal environment' is still needed, but this reviewer warmly congratulates them on the handsome start that they have made.

Mark Brayshay
University of Plymouth, UK