

Book review

'Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales 1300 – 1800'

Paul Glennie & Nigel Thrift

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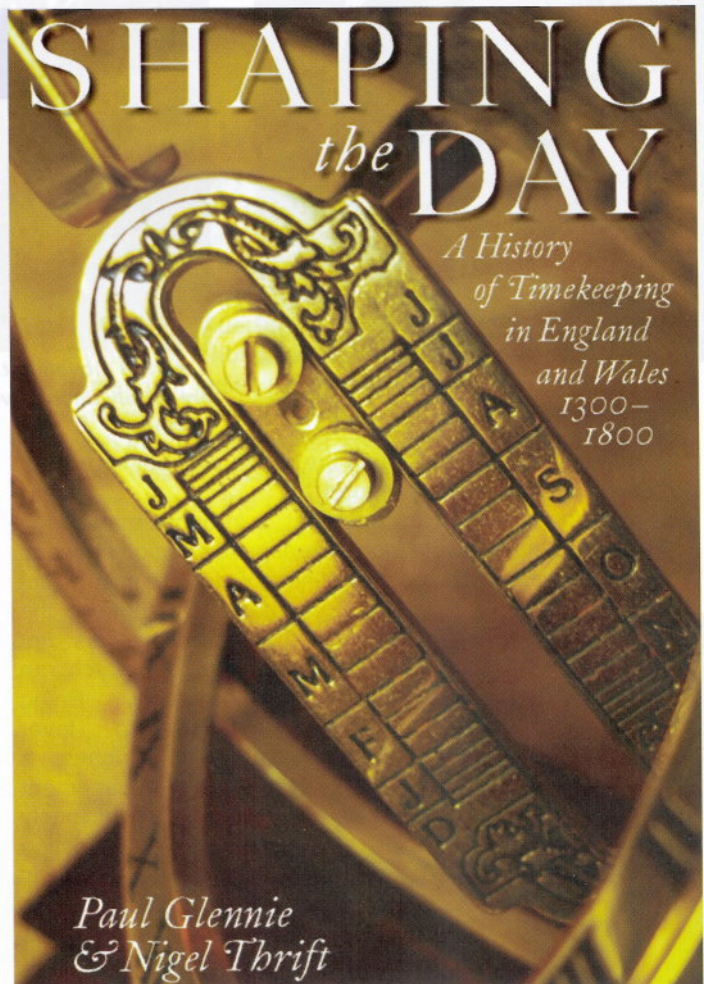
'Shaping the Day' is a rich and detailed study of the practice of telling the time. Nowadays, the ordering of our days using the time by the clock has become second nature and barely worthy of consideration. The form of that clock-time – the division into hours, minutes and seconds; the presence of clock hour-hands rotating twice per day – has passed into our sub-conscious. Our access to time in our daily lives is now unremarkable.

Glennie and Thrift have devoted a considerable period of their research as academic geographers into how, and how long ago, people used clock-time to shape their days. Their particular concern is to revise the view held by the scholar E. P. Thompson in the 1960s that the industrial revolution of the late-eighteenth century ushered in a new era of clock-watching by the masses. Not so, argue Glennie and Thrift. As their study of the period 1300 to 1800 demonstrates, 'a commonsense about time' in everyday life came about much earlier than Thompson maintained. Their ambition with this book is to treat the practices of timekeeping on their own terms: to examine a wide and diverse range of sources (few originally intended to provide evidence about time-use) to try to recover the role of clock-time in daily life which, then as now, was so common and 'embodied' as to be unworthy of explicit mention.

This is a long and detailed academic work. The first three chapters contain an intensely theoretical analysis of the historical approach they have taken. Even the authors recognize that many readers will not wish to engage in this part of their work. Whilst they hope readers will read the first chapters, the structure of the rest of the book makes clear that they have assumed the worst, as the theoretical framework of their study is repeated frequently and at length throughout the subsequent eight chapters; useful for readers who choose only to dip into certain chapters, frustrating for those who read the book from cover to cover and have to sift historical content from repetitions of the book's ambitions.

Yet the book rewards the reader's efforts. The first 'empirical' chapter is a case-study looking at clock times in medieval and early-modern Bristol, a period covering several centuries and permitting therefore a close analysis of continuity and change in one localized area. The next chapter expands the localized study of Bristol into a more generalized discussion of pre-modern England. Public 'turret' clocks receive greater prominence in Glennie and Thrift's study than private clocks and watches – a welcome reminder that public timekeepers have shaped our day over a long period, whatever the state of ownership of private clocks in the home. Nevertheless, a close study of private clock and watch ownership is present too and draws heavily on the many excellent local studies of clock makers of the sort very familiar to *HJ* readers.

The following two chapters examine the general public awareness of clock time (from agriculture to schooling, cooking to conception), and the relative precisions of timekeeping available and meaningful in different everyday contexts. The modern form of the standard analogue clock dial is discussed here. Then, the authors approach a specific thematic case-study: the use of time at sea and in the solution



of the longitude problem. The 'seafaring times' chapter is a welcome broadening of the technology of maritime timekeeping from the obvious sextants and nocturnals to the less-obvious seaweed, tides, standardised chanting and repeated experience of time cues. The 'pursuit of precision' chapter reminds us that accuracy and precision are two different things – that any given clock-time can be precisely measured yet be wholly inaccurate.

The final chapter before the conclusions concerns John Harrison's early work. The authors wish to understand how Harrison came to be technically remarkable, and wish to place him in a wider context of clock making, trading, repair networks and craft knowledge that is more meaningful and historically satisfying than the 'lone genius' figure portrayed in popular accounts. As geographers, Glennie and Thrift are interested in who was working in Lincolnshire when Harrison was there, who knew whom, and what kind of work they were carrying out. Essentially, how did Harrison learn his skills, and how did he build his reputation as a clockmaker?

There is a great deal of interest in this book, and many thought-provoking questions posed. It is a fresh take on the existing published output of time historians and horology specialists. It requires a substantial dedication of time and effort to extract the full meaning of the authors' ideas, and specialists in some of the areas it covers will wish to engage energetically with some of the conclusions arrived at as well as to revise some of the underlying facts and assumptions. The theoretical framework is often intrusive. But as a provocative and thoughtful new look at timekeeping it is an important academic book and a reminder to all with a deep interest in the subject that we must continue to publish good historical studies on which future generations of researchers can build.

David Rooney