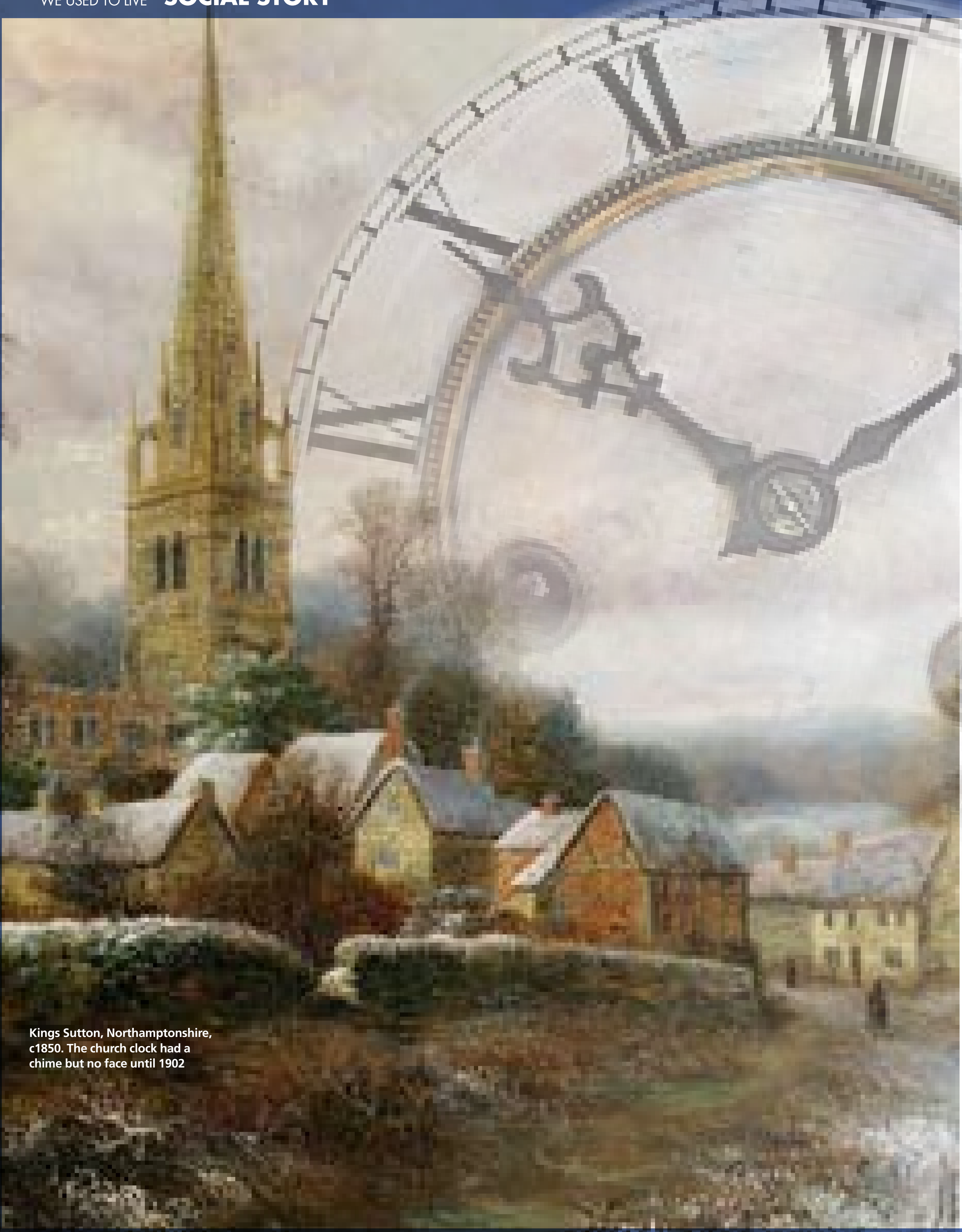


Kings Sutton, Northamptonshire, c1850. The church clock had a chime but no face until 1902

CORBIS/DREAMSTIME

The hands of time

Past historians have claimed that it was the arrival of industry that made accurate time-keeping necessary, but **Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift** argue that even our early rural ancestors understood the importance of time

THE CHURCH CLOCK and its unmistakable chime are often used in art and literature to represent the stability of rural or village life. This symbol has also become a convenient short-hand reference for artists, writers and film-makers to signal both normal and disrupted rhythms of everyday life – just think how effectively clocks are used in *Inspector Morse*'s Oxford and *Miss Marple*'s St Mary Mead.

When the poet Rupert Brooke sought to conjure an idealised image of the timeless English countryside, he settled on the village of Grantchester in Cambridgeshire, and the clock tower of its parish church. His poem famously ends:

“Stands the Church clock at ten
to three?
And is there honey still for tea?”

However, if *Grantchester* can be interpreted as epitomising the timeless tranquility of English village life, the metaphor of a stopped church clock also has ambivalent implications.

Nearly a hundred years earlier, farm labourer and poet John Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar* (eventually published in 1827) had equally readily seized on the church clock as a feature of working-class rural life. Clare envisaged schoolboys “viewing with jealous eyes the clock” in May, while in September a boy driving a harvest cart:

“with eager eye
Watches the church clock passing by
Whose gilt hands glisten in the sun
To see how far the hours have run”.

In other poems by Clare, clocks are similarly prominent. The village life left behind by the protagonist in *The Sailor-Boy* is characterised as “…my honest parents, the church clock and the village; …the lads and lasses, the labour and the tillage”. A sense that clock-times have become built into everyday life is caught by the opening of Clare's *Farmer's Boy*:

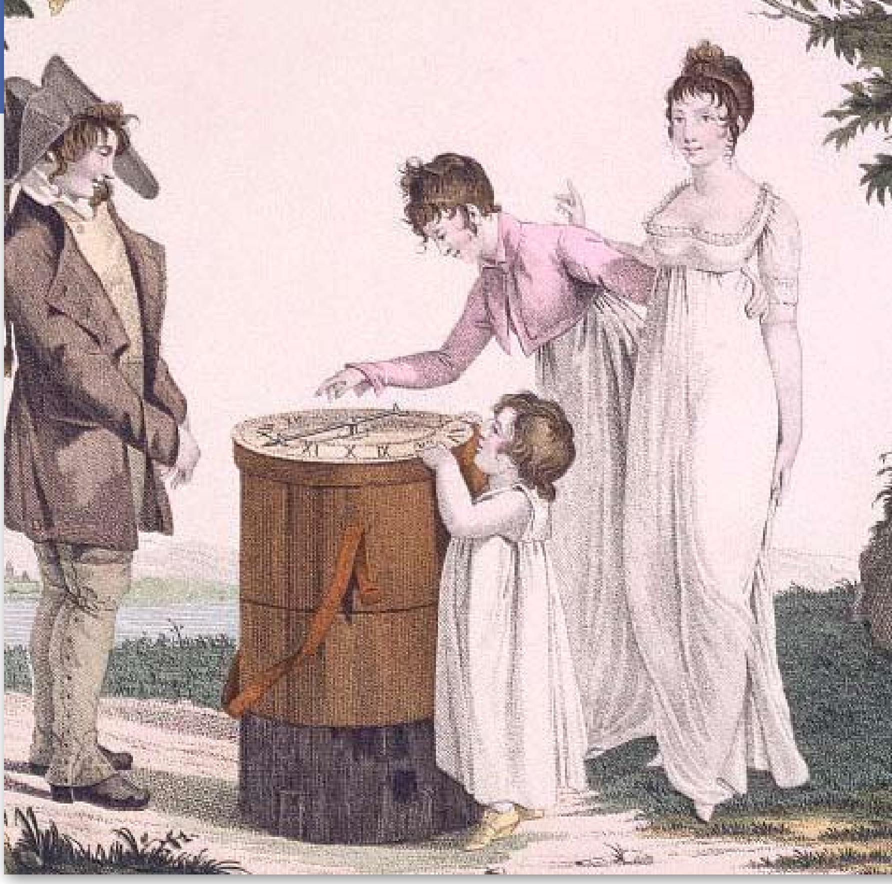
“He waits all day beside his little flock
And asks the passing stranger what's o'clock,
But those who often pass his daily tasks
Look at their watch and tell before he asks.”

The custom of recording dates and times of children's births in bibles was established before 1500

Brooke's depiction of the church clock as a stereotypical feature of 20th-century life is uncontroversial; however, Clare's account of its widespread use in rural life during the early years of the 19th century is more unexpected.

The historian EP Thompson argued that clock-time became embedded in everyday life as a result of tightly-disciplined working hours and the detailed requirement for the pace of human work to fit into the rhythm and pace of machinery. Thompson saw this more-or-less forceful imposition of clock-time starting to sweep away more natural, flexible time-senses from late in the 18th century and throughout the 19th. Factory work involved more precise control of time in the length ➥

The recording of dates and times of children's births in family bibles was established before 1500



A child operates a sun dial,1815

of shifts, in maintaining rhythmic bodily movements to 'keep up' with looms and other machines.

Yet Clare cites clock-time as part of the ancient rural fabric, rather than a recent imposition, with his matter-of-fact references to clock-watching (although for a lot of people clocks were something you heard rather than saw with many church clocks consisting of a chime but no dials).

GROWING REGULATIONS OF TIME

Industrialisation was not the only factor affecting changes in time-keeping practices – the Church, trade and markets, as well as related technology all imposed regulations of time onto the less structured, more flexible, 'natural' approach.

Time-keeping in this sense should not, however, be condemned as authoritarian, enslaving the general populace by binding them to an oppressive schedule. Work, religion and social discipline were certainly important, but these elements alone offer far too narrow a view of how people used time.

There are very definite circumstances in which people seem to have felt the need for exactitude in timing. Two such occasions, which are also of particular interest to genealogists, are births and deaths. Parents recording their children's birth times originally had astrological motivations, but it seems to have become part of a more general culture of appropriate description and dutiful recording. The custom of recording dates and times of children's births in family bibles was established before 1500, although the rarity of surviving examples makes it impossible to ascertain the extent of this practice.

The degree of precision (and hence the effort involved) in

Knowing the hour

People developed ways of telling the time

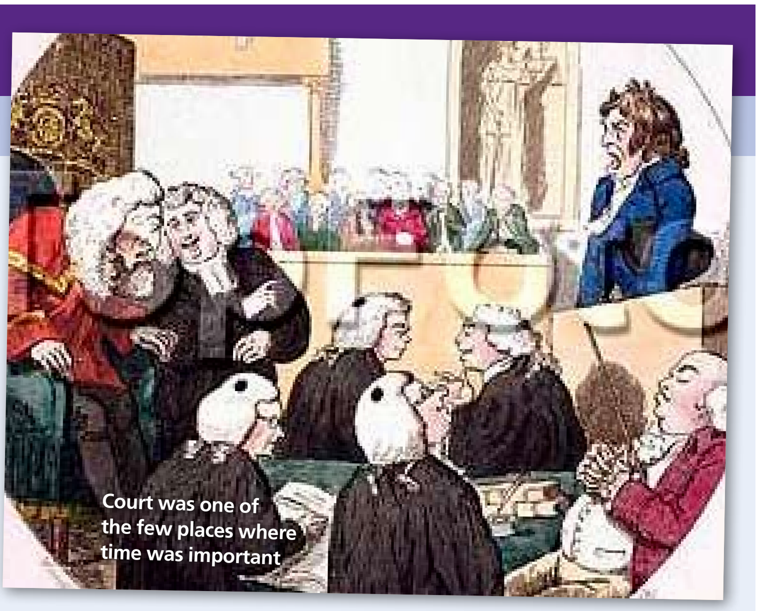
THE RARITY of contemporaries explaining how they knew the time is itself comment on how temporal information was woven into the fabric of everyday environments: lighting conditions, the position of sun or moon, plant and animal behaviour, people's biorhythms, or the rhythms of human activities.

Giving court evidence, people had to demonstrate how they knew the time

From about 1300, these cues were strengthened by mechanical clocks especially – but not exclusively – in towns. Early clocks of this type signalled the time with bells rather than dials. Hour-striking was simpler mechanically, and it 'broadcast' the time over a wider area, reaching many people.

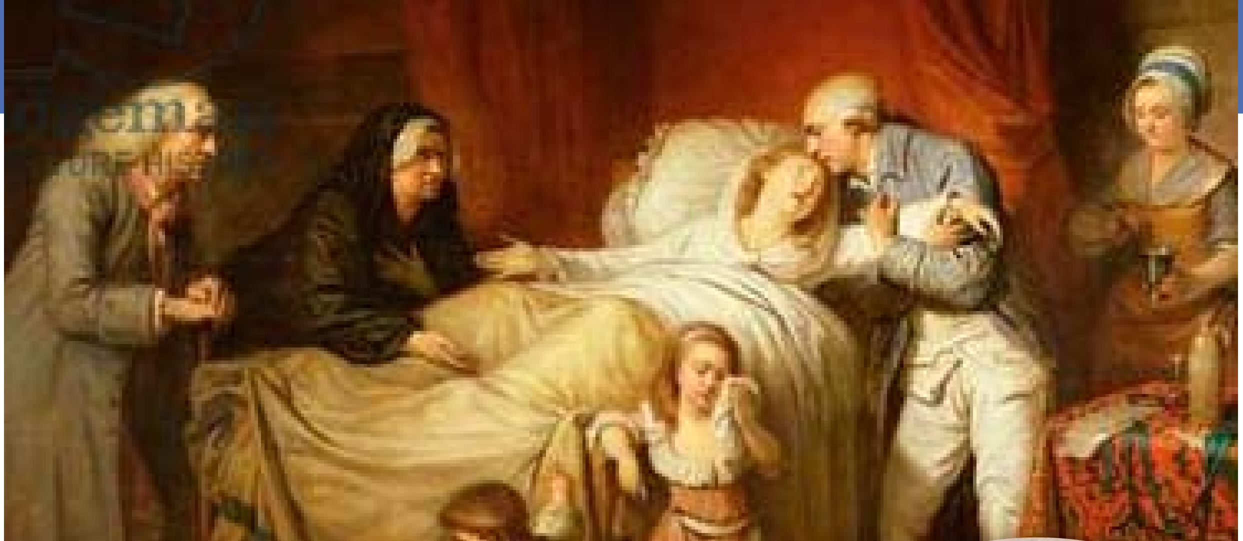
Court evidence is particularly useful, as a rare occasion when people needed to demonstrate how they knew the time, especially to sustain an alibi.

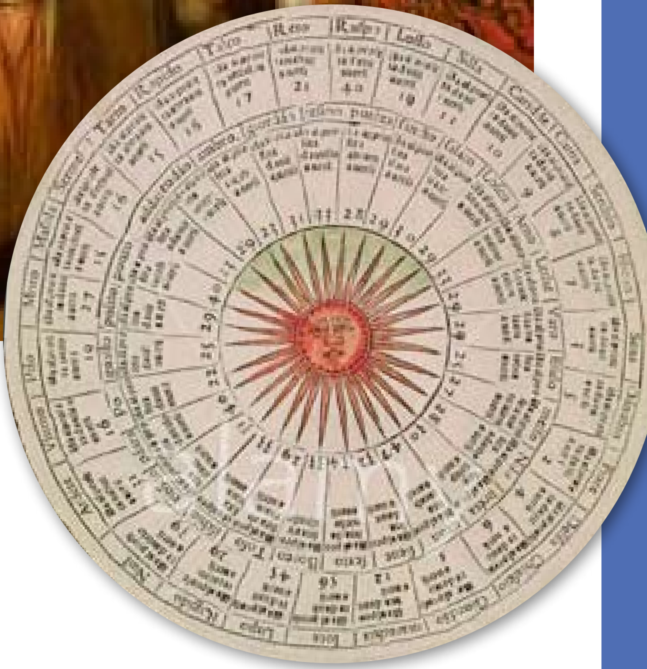
The range of sources available to the ordinary man of establishing a timeframe is striking. Besides bells, clocks, sun-dials and the shouts of watchmen, there were a number of indirect cues that could be gained from observing events that were recognised as occurring at particular times, knowing how long certain things took to happen, or being able to estimate how long ago a bell had been heard. Not least, it was possible – and increasingly common – for people simply to ask one another.



Court was one of the few places where time was important

CORBIS/TOPFOTO





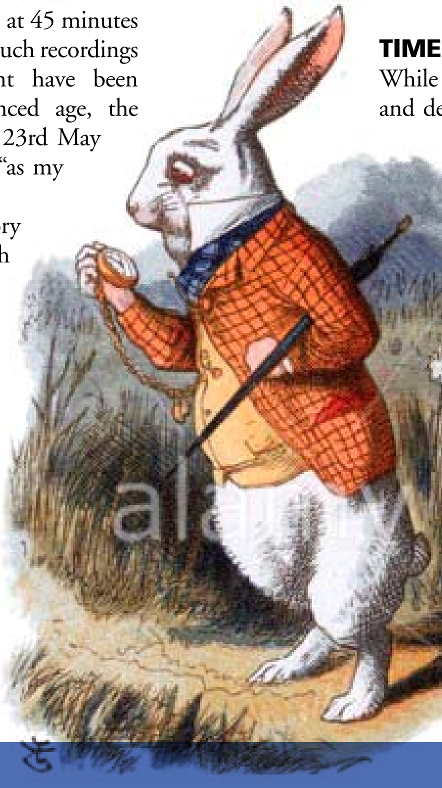
recording birth times seems to have varied with closeness of the relationship. Thus the 16th-century mathematician and astronomer, John Dee, gave birth-times to within a minute for his own children, and to within an hour for those of his friends.

When the London physician Simon Forman recorded his daughter Dorothy's birth, on "the 10th day of July 1605 at 40 minutes after 4 of the clock in the morning at Lambeth", his motives were astrological: the more accurate the time, the more reliable the prognostication. Conversely, it is likely that when Sir William Petty recounted to the antiquarian John Aubrey the tale of his birth in 1623, having been timed to a second in order for his horoscope to be done, he was poking fun at spurious precision!

Many diarists and autobiographers of this era recorded knowing their own birth time. In about 1600, for example, Simon Forman wrote that he had been born in 1552 "the 31st December, being a Saturday and New Year's Eve, at 45 minutes after nine of the clock at night". The motives for such recordings were not necessarily astrological: they might have been sentimental or affectionate. At a very advanced age, the antiquarian Elias Ashmole related his birth on 23rd May 1617, at nearly half-past three in the morning "as my dear and good mother has often told me".

Times of death lacked the prognosticatory possibilities that are associated with birth horoscopes, but also seem to have been well-established as part of appropriate description. Reported deaths in letters and obituaries show attention to time, though in most cases the nearest hour was judged close enough. The greatest precision was attached to close family dying away from home, where accuracy of reporting demonstrated the care and attention received by the deceased. Although Samuel Pepys had rarely recorded times as specific as a half- or a quarter-hour, his own death in 1703 was recorded as having occurred at "exactly forty-seven minutes past three of the clock in the morning by his own gold watch".

ALAMY



Above: An 18th-century deathbed scene. Times of death were carefully recorded Right: An astrological table of the sun Below: Tenniel's illustration of the White Rabbit, who was running late in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

As watches came into wider use, they rapidly became established as heirlooms or special gifts, to be passed to recipients from the death-bed itself – or virtually so, as demonstrated in the case of Charles I giving watches to the two men acting as his servants immediately prior to his execution.

TIME IN THE PERSONAL SPHERE

While it was widespread to give relatively precise times for births and deaths, other circumstances in which time mattered were limited to particular groups or people. Despite fragmentary documentation, it is clear that information conveyed by bells and clock-dials was used for personal ends, including socialising, meetings, entertainment, gambling and cookery.

In using public clock-times for their own ends, people made a trade-off between the effort necessary for precise timing, and the expedience of 'making do' with approximate time. Often the latter was judged sufficient, making use of hour-striking and the increasing chiming of quarter-hours, as signals for many activities and informal arrangements. This demonstrates contentment with temporal approximations, but by no means indicates an inability to measure time more exactly, if the occasion demanded.

It is this fact that renders instances of highly accurate timing (such as those of John

➥

alamy

One-handed clock at Bishop's Castle Shropshire

Dee and others) so striking. The requisite combination of clocks and astronomical instruments was extremely rare, and the calculations complex. It is revealing that in the 1580s, only a handful of people believed that timing in seconds mattered enough to justify the effort entailed in the necessary measurements.

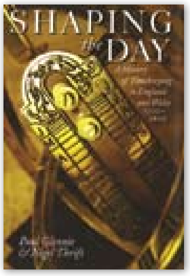
By the late 17th century, complete ignorance of clock-time and clocks or watches was rare, though still an anecdotal source of amusement relating to ignorant forebears or country bumpkins. For example, John Aubrey refers to the early 17th century, when maidservants at Holme Lacy in Herefordshire encountered a watch for the first time. Identifying the ticking object as a devil, one of them threw it out of a window into the moat. However, the proportion of the population that could plausibly be cast in such anecdotes – their behaviour the epitome of ignorance and inexperience – was in rapid decline.

A RELATIVE COMPARISON

A key point when considering the abstract concept of time, in relation to the lives of your forebears, is that how people referred to the time on a particular occasion is not necessarily evidence of how they used timing in general.

William Harrison, a vicar from Elizabethan Essex, wrote in his *Description of England*, that most people were familiar with minutes, but usually chose "not to descend below the half-quarter or quarter-hour" in telling the time, or making arrangements. That was perfectly acceptable and good "value-for-effort" most of the time. But approximate timing does not indicate indifference to time or effort. As John Clare knew well, the urgency of tasks like harvesting, came from practical uncertainties like the weather. The growing numbers and precision of clocks over the centuries were a result of these pressures, rather than the cause. ■

Paul Glennie is Senior Lecturer in Geography at the University of Bristol and **Nigel Thrift** is Vice-Chancellor at the University of Warwick



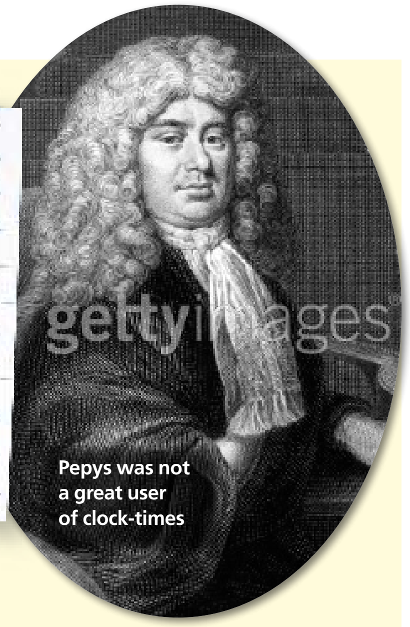
TAKE IT FURTHER

- ➡ ***Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales, 1300-1800*** by Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift, (OUP, 2009).
- ➡ ***History of the Hour*** by Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum (Chicago Press, 1996).

PERSONAL FILE

SAMUEL PEPYS

The famous diarist, who has given us an insight into life in Early Modern London, had his own way of keeping time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Pepys was not a great user of clock-times

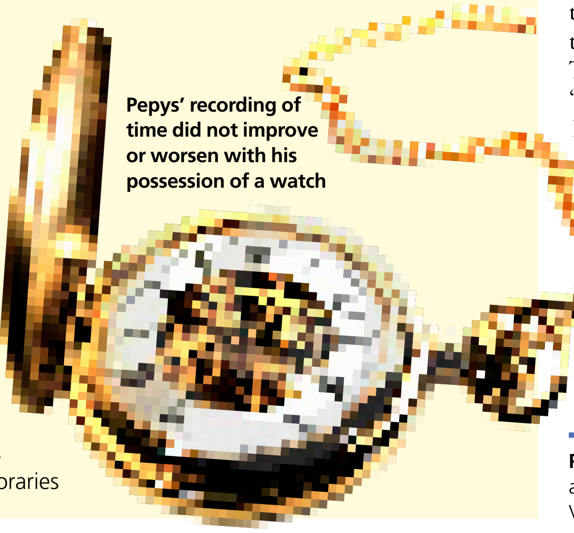
SAMUEL PEPYS' record of the 1660s, documenting the activities and contacts of a rising naval bureaucrat, has long been used as a source of details of the profound political, social and cultural changes of the period. Historians and contemporaries have seen early modern London as central to government, commerce, sociability and fashion. The range of activities created complex and distinctive senses of time, at the heart of which some historians have placed Pepys and his diary.

> Pepys unspecified language did not prevent him engaging in sequences of meetings

Pepys was fascinated by how timekeepers worked. Before Christmas 1665, he was "mightily pleased and satisfied" spending an evening watching Lord Brouncker take apart and re-assemble his watch: it was "very well worth my having seen". That September, Pepys used his new minute-watch to gauge his walking pace between Woolwich and Greenwich, finding himself "within two minutes constantly to the same place" each quarter-hour.

Placing Pepys at the cutting-edge of new time-senses seems premature, however. He was an energetic and disciplined diarist, with daily entries averaging several hundred words (sometimes written-up in batches from short-hand notes), whereas most of his predecessors and contemporaries were much terser, and often skipped days. But Pepys was not more explicit about times than his peers: indeed, some briefer diarists are much more explicit about times than Pepys' usual repertoire of 'morning', 'afternoon', 'evening' and 'night', sometimes prefixed by 'early' or 'late'. Interestingly, Pepys' use of clock-times does not increase with his 1665 watch nor does it decrease with the destruction of many church clocks in the 1666 Great Fire.

This unspecific language is not to say that Pepys was indifferent to clock-time, and did not prevent him from engaging in complex sequences of meetings and appointments with many people in many places, or getting impatient at delays. But we should not rely on this one source as being representative of what was going on throughout the wider society of the time.



Pepys' recording of time did not improve or worsen with his possession of a watch