

Horsham Society

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Time to look again at our sundial

Lord, it is time, the summer was too great; lay your shadow on the dials and let the winds run free... so wrote Rainer Maria Rilke in one of the best loved short poems of the twentieth century.

The Lord laid the sun's shadow, according to Isaiah, back ten steps on the stairway of Ahaz, to prove he was the lord. As Ahaz is dated 842BCE we can observe that the sun dial is both a very ancient instrument and one also held in affection, certainly sufficiently so to produce a charming poetic point. Sundials do go back much further than Ahaz, to Babylonian and Egyptian days, making them at least two and a half thousand years old.

Our sundial in Horsham's Sensory Garden at the back of Park House is not yet half a century old and has, alas, already suffered the ignominy of wanton destruction. The central triangular block carries a bearded face on one side, a side which once sported a gold disc as an eye, and now the block and face have been mindlessly vandalised; the gold disc of course has long gone. What could be done with what's left?



The Horsham Park Sensory Garden in 2007.

The sundial stands on a raised plinth of stone and brick with a ring of seventeen granite cubes carrying the numbers for the hours on the horizontal faces and the letters on the vertical ones to spell out: *horas non numero nisi serenas*, 'I don't count hours unless they're happy ones'.

Now that the shadow-casting sculpture is broken off a shadow no longer reaches the time blocks, so the installation is dysfunctional. We hesitate to suggest a replacement for fear of the same

the sun and its path around its parent body forms a slightly irregular ellipse.

Luckily for us, these problems have long been recognised and numerous patterns have been calculated for sundials in our latitudes. A winding metal strip laid on our plinth could show the correction needed to adjust the shadow reading to the more familiar clock time. On only four occasions during the year would they be identical; on all other days, we would read off from the implanted strip the corrections to give us true time.

And what would we use for the gnomon? Why, simplest of all is not to construct anything at all. We could reduce a segment of the plinth to make access steps and the beholder would cast his own shadow and become his own gnomon. Nothing for vandals to wreck and our sundial restored to use. Isn't that a pleasing prospect?

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 259038.

destructive fate as the present one has met. We need a vandal-proof affair.

Perhaps there's a possibility but first we need to glance at the needed components of a sundial, namely the dial face and the gnomon. The function of the gnomon is to cast the correctly angled shadow on to the measured dial and it may be any shape or size. Its orientation will, however, determine the pattern of the time markings on the plate. This isn't a simple affair because the earth is tilted at an angle to