

WEST SIDE STORY

The Historical Background to the West-Facing Sundial on Big School

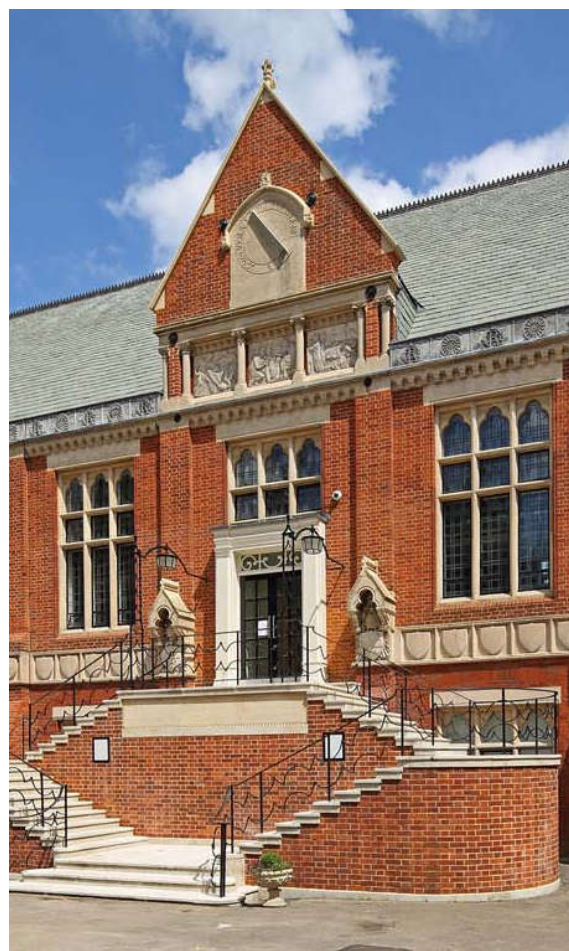
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Since the dawn of civilisation, mankind has endeavoured to organise his seasonal calendar by the sun, moon and stars. In particular, the sun has enabled him to regulate his working and social day. The fundamental device that provided him with the means to do this was the sundial, the invention of which is lost in the mists of antiquity, although the earliest reference to such an instrument goes back to the middle of the second millennium BC. The principle purpose of the sundial is to determine the time from the apparent motion of the sun. Dials were commonplace in ancient Graeco-Roman times and many were set up in public places to indicate the hours of the day. Indeed, there were complaints from members of the populace that they 'hacked the day into pieces'.

Sundials come in all shapes and sizes. Most people think of them as being of the common or garden *horizontal* kind. But more common was the *vertical* sundial, that was incised or placed on a wall, where it would have been more visible to the passing public than other forms of dial. In the British Isles the earliest known sundial in this form is to be found carved into the ornate pillar of a remote 'stumped' cross in Cumbria, a product of the golden age of Anglo-Saxon art, probably dating from the late seventh century AD.

It is salutary to note that during this current millennium the sundial has been an essential scientific instrument, if not the principle means of determining time, for nearly nine hundred and thirty-four years. With the coming of the railways and the electric telegraph in the nineteenth century its use began to decline, but only with the advent of modern electronic communications and advanced time-keeping systems, was it finally eclipsed by other instruments.

In recent years the sundial has made something of a come-back, principally as a scientific embellishment to a building, or as a focal point in some development scheme. These are not just reminders of the importance of the sundial and the esteem in which it was once held in earlier centuries: essentially they are a vital part of our heritage. Many are being allowed to deteriorate and fade away. Some, however, are well-cared for. One such instrument is the west-facing sundial on the face of Big School.



One might think that a wall-sundial should face south. Seldom is this the case, for most walls *decline* from South towards East or West. Indeed, a direct south-facing sundial may be somewhat dull due to the uniformity of the hour-lines. This is not so with a *declining* sundial, especially one that faces well towards East or West, for there are many variables that make such dials interesting and unusual.

Highgate School is fortunate to possess just such a dial, reminding one not only of the importance of time in our daily lives but of our national heritage.