

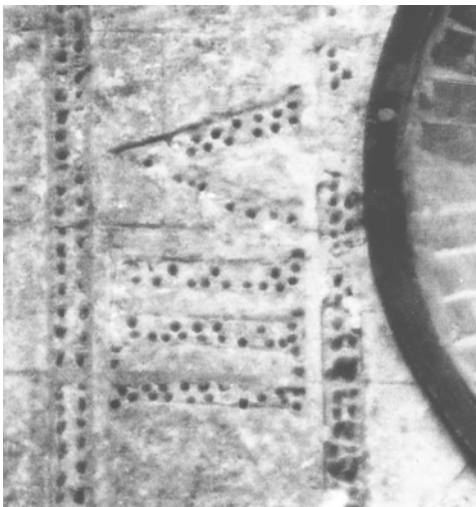
The Holes and History of the Beccles Church Dial

OR

“Maybe the lead fell off, the stucco didn’t stick and to hell with this dial let’s buy a clock.” – Roger Bowling, 2nd June 2005

PATRICK POWERS

Readers of last month’s Bulletin¹ will remember that I drew attention to the discovery, first by John Lester and later by Ian Butson of a series of holes drilled into the stone of the numerals and other furniture of the dial on St Michael’s Church in Beccles in Suffolk – see the figure. In that article I expressed puzzlement since it must have been extremely laborious to drill these holes and particularly since the church records appeared to suggest that the sundial was pierced for a clock face early on and possibly even as early as the 1640s.



Within only a day or two of publication of that article both Roger Bowling and Harriet James came to my rescue with the information that the holes had almost certainly been drilled for the purpose of holding an original lead infill. Roger made the valid point that with such large numerals a ‘V’ groove engraving would have needed to be very deep (“quarrying not

carving!” was his description) and, since Roman times, the preferred method has been to inset the numerals only slightly, drill holes within them and hammer lead in.

The technique usually uses smaller holes and so it might be wondered if at Beccles, the use of larger ones perhaps with less lead than would then be necessary obtain a good key, was responsible for the loss of the lead and for the later attempted replacement by stucco. Whatever, a further visit to the church made recently by Ian Butson has shown no residual trace of lead at all today.

No record exists of the date of installation of the sundial and, even though the tower is known to have been built between 1515 and 1550, it is thought it wasn’t finished at the time (there are no battlements for example) because the Reformation was in full flood. So, when after the 1550s the sundial was installed, is anyone’s guess.

Ian suggested that I might contact the curator of the local museum and I am glad I did so. He kindly sent me a chronological summary of what entries they have to record both the dial and the clock. The *Feoffees Accounts* are rather confused between dial (sundial) and dial (clock) but they do allow me to correct the suggestion in my earlier article that the clock was inserted through the sundial in or around 1640.

The Church record for 1640 does indeed say that "*John Brand undertakes by the Feast of St Michael, Archangel next to make and set up one good, able and sufficient clock to be placed in the Steeple in the place where the old clock now standeth...*" So an even earlier clock existed, perhaps implying that the sundial might be dated nearer to 1550 rather than not.

However, the sundial and the clock appear to have coexisted because references are made to both over many years. It seems that the clock faces were originally positioned below the sundial

In 1865 we read: "*TOWN CLOCK. Who has management of this? And, why does he not attend to it properly? The time is never right. Perhaps after all the truth is we want a new Town Clock...*"

By 1870 authorisation was given for the dials to be illuminated and "*It is unanimously resolved that the illuminated dials to be placed on the Church Tower be raised to the same height as the Sun Dial on the South side and that a third dial be erected on the East side...*"

So, from this we may perhaps conclude that the sundial was installed sometime after 1550. We read that it was 'repaired' in 1660, "*amended the sundial and made arms for the King...£4*", and one wonders if this might have been the time when stucco infill was tried?

However, it is clear from the above that the sundial was not pierced until 1870 when the illuminated dials were installed.

The Town Council may have had cause to regret the destruction of the sundial for, only one year later it is reported that "*The Town Clock struck 200 or 300 instead of 11 at 11pm. The Parish Clerk stopped it*". And, in the "*Review of the year 1882*" we read "*THE CLOCK: The Chairman of the Sanitary Committee reported that it was beyond repair, but the official timekeeper repaired it at a trifling expense*".

I am much indebted to Roger Bowling for his amusing and succinct, though essentially correct, summary of the likely history of this dial (see the subtitle above), written even without the Church records to hand!

Room does not permit the reproduction of any more snippets of clock history but I can copy what I have of the Church Records to anyone who might be interested.

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¹ The Curious Holes in the St Michael's Church Dial, Beccles. Patrick Powers, BSS Bulletin, Vol 17 (ii), June 2005. pp64-65.