

There's 'Good News' and then there's 'BadNews'...



Just about anyone interested in sundials knows how important it is to look up rather more than usual if you are to spot vertical sundials.

But to see the great decliner in the apex of the roof of the old Union Chapel in Ampthill, in Bedfordshire, now the Baptist Church, really does require you to look up; it is high in the apex of the roof above a plaque declaring the date of building and that of its extension. The whole mount has been re-bricked using engineering bricks rather than ones of the original colour.

It is easy to visit Ampthill many times over a few decades and still never notice it there.

The discovery of a rarely seen great declining dial therefore is rightly good news, as is the fact that clearly the dial in question has recently been carefully re-painted.

So, what then might be the bad news in the heading to this page? Well, it is simply that the delineation is seriously incorrect! Just look at a close up of the dial face.

The dial faces approximately 80 degrees East of South and is at 52.03 degrees N in Latitude so it should display the local meridian's solar time between something like the hours of 03:45am and 12:45pm.

So how come the dial is painted without a vertical noon line and shows a line for 01:00 am? Just as worrying, is how can it be that the drawn hour lines are at such strange angular spacings and the gnomon does not lie along the expected time line of 06:32 am?

The answer almost certainly lies in 'Restoration Drift', the way in which successive repaints made on top of lost detail simply do not follow the correct delineation.

The diagram below roughly shows the correct layout of the hour and half hour lines for this dial and the cross on it indicates the correct position of the gnomon.

How sad that the opportunity for repainting did not include consideration of the dial's proper operation.

