

Signs & Symbols: Sundials 1



Orpington dial

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Sundials are thought to have been used to mark the passage of time from the very earliest man.

As early as 3500 B.C. the Egyptians began building slender, tapering, four-sided obelisks which served as timepieces. The moving shadow of the obelisk formed a type of sundial, and markers arranged about the base separated the day into divisions as well as indicating the longest and shortest days of the year.

Have you ever noticed on a sundial that the shadow thrown by the stick, its proper name is a gnomon, only goes half-way round the circle, unlike the hands on a proper clock? As the sun only moves from east to west its shadow can only move in that one direction also, which will be therefore only be 180 degrees. (Whoops! - We've just gone back a few hundred years to when we thought the sun moved round the earth. Of course it doesn't really, it just appears like that.) The shadow will always move clockwise – which is where we get that expression from.

Before mechanical clocks began to be commonly used in the fifteenth century many churches had a sundial on the wall to show when the 'Mass' would take place. They were constructed differently and vary in form, size, detail and position in the many ways. But they all have a central hole in which the gnomon or style was fixed and from which lines, if any radiate. One line is usually marked better than the others – the usual hour of the mass in that church. In Medieval days the walls of churches were coated with a form of cement and lime washed both inside and out. Mass or Scratch dials were then painted in the scratched lines near the main door or the priest door at about four to five feet above the ground. **

Since then many churches have had parts rebuilt or porches added, so the mass dial can end up almost anywhere inside the building, even on a north wall.

This month

See if you can find a church with a Mass Dial. See how the Mass has the most important mark. If you could put another mark on it, what time of day would it be and why?

**By The Rev Dr Jo White
a vicar in Derbyshire**

** further information <http://www.sundialsoc.org.uk/massdials.htm>

**Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the
lamp because the dawn has come.**

anon