

# A SUNDIAL SEARCH THAT FOUND A TOPOSCOPE

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This article is based on a presentation made at the 2016 BSS Liverpool conference.

It all started with an email that arrived one morning from our esteemed Registrar, John Foad. Attached was a section of the 1909 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map of the Wirral peninsula, situated on the other side of the River Mersey from Liverpool (Fig. 1).

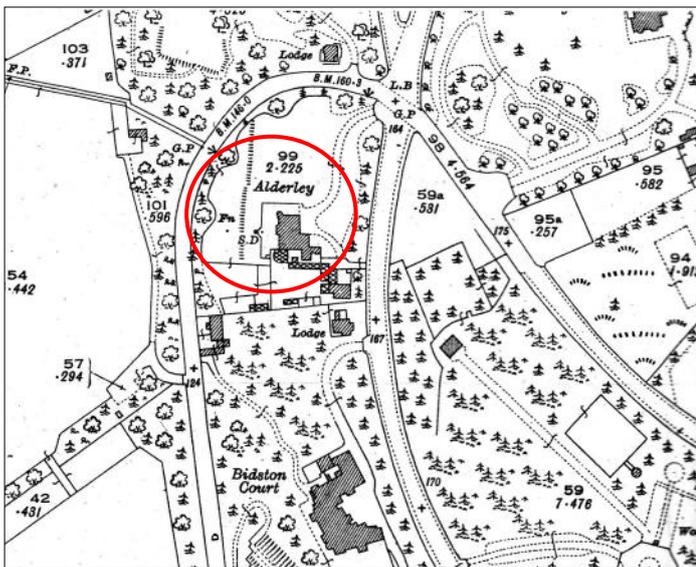


Fig. 1. 1909 Ordnance Survey map.

On the map, John had spotted a small dot with the letters “S.D.” next to it in the grounds of a house named Alderley. He wondered if the S.D. indicated “sundial” and, if so, was it still there? I went to have a look.

There is a low hill, the Storeton Ridge, that runs up the east side of the peninsula, and at the northern end there are a



Fig. 2. Sundial on pillar.

number of prestigious houses which command views to the west encompassing the river Dee and the Welsh hills beyond. Alderley was one of these.

As is the case these days, the large house had been converted into a number of flats, so I knocked on several doors until I found a resident and got permission to explore the grounds. At the back of the house, in the position indicated on the map, I was delighted to see a sandstone pillar complete with sundial (Fig. 2).

However, my delight soon turned to dismay when I saw that the sundial was a modern, garden centre reproduction. It wasn't screwed into place and could be lifted off, so I did. Underneath was a bronze plate engraved in the form of a toposcope. For the uninitiated, a toposcope is a marker, usually erected on a hills or other high place, which indicates the direction of, and often the distance to, notable landscape features which can be seen from that point. The toposcope had engraved on it the initials WEC, the date MCMXLV (1945) and the maker's mark, CHADBURNS LIVERPOOL together with the company logo (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Initials, date and maker's mark.

I had not heard of Chadburns, so I thought I should see what I could find about them. I discovered that the founder, William Henry Chadburn, was both the inventor and manufacturer of the ship's telegraph. There are many images of Chadburns' telegraphs available, most of them showing the same logo, so I was confident that I was investigating the correct company.

Charles Henry Chadburn (Fig. 4) set up business at 71 Lord Street, Liverpool in 1845 as an optician and scientific instrument maker. He must have been successful, as he became optician to HRH Prince Albert! There is a painting of his original shop in the Liverpool museum where there is a section dedicated to the city's instrument makers (Fig. 5).

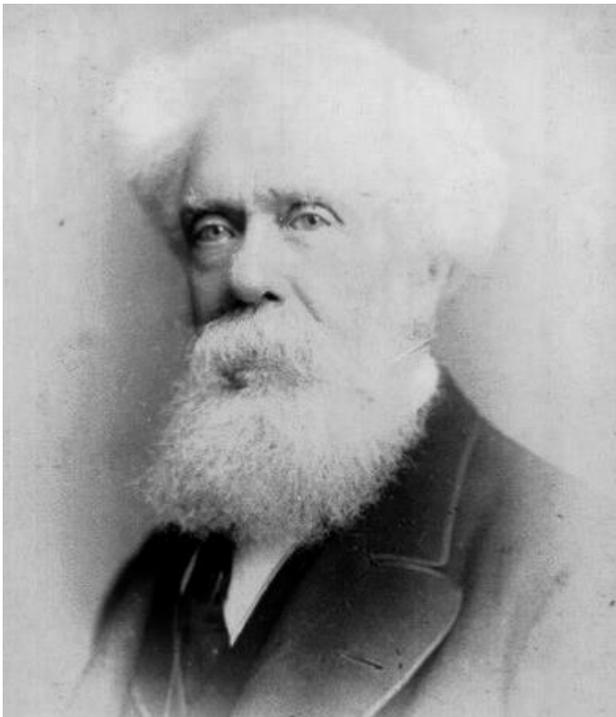


Fig. 4. Charles Henry Chadburn. Photo: Priestly & Son, Egremont, Cheshire.

He made a variety of instruments, including sundials, and Doug Bateman has one of them in his possession (Fig. 6). The photograph shows the dial details enhanced with the use of talcum powder. The bronze dial, diameter 8 inches, made between 1845 and 1861 (the death of Prince Albert) has the equation of time showing local mean time – GMT was not introduced until 1880. He does not appear to have been a prolific dial maker, as there are only two other Chadburn sundials in the BSS Register (SRN 1011 and SRN 7407).

On 1st September 1870 he applied for a patent in the names of C.H. Chadburn and W. Chadburn, his son, then aged 24.<sup>1</sup> He developed the business, which grew into a thriving and large enterprise.



Fig. 5. C.H. Chadburn's shop in Lord Street, Liverpool. From a watercolour by W. Herdman, 1867. Reproduced courtesy of Liverpool Libraries and Information services.

I thought that the initials WEC on the toposcope might refer to a descendant, possibly his grandson William E. Chadburn. A visit to our local library dashed my hopes, as the Birkenhead Street Directory for 1945 showed that the occupier of Alderley at that time was one William E. Corlett, solicitor.<sup>2</sup>

So why, I wondered, did a big engineering company like Chadburns make a one-off toposcope for William E. Corlett? In 1945, Chadburns would not be making single bespoke instruments.

I found a first reference to Corlett in the *Alpine Journal*, which reported his death, at the age of 90, in the 1960 issue, so he would have been 75 when the toposcope was made for him.<sup>3</sup> William Ernest Corlett was a well-known Liverpool solicitor, a partner in Bremner Sons and Corlett of 1 Crosshall Street.<sup>4</sup> He was a philanthropist and there is

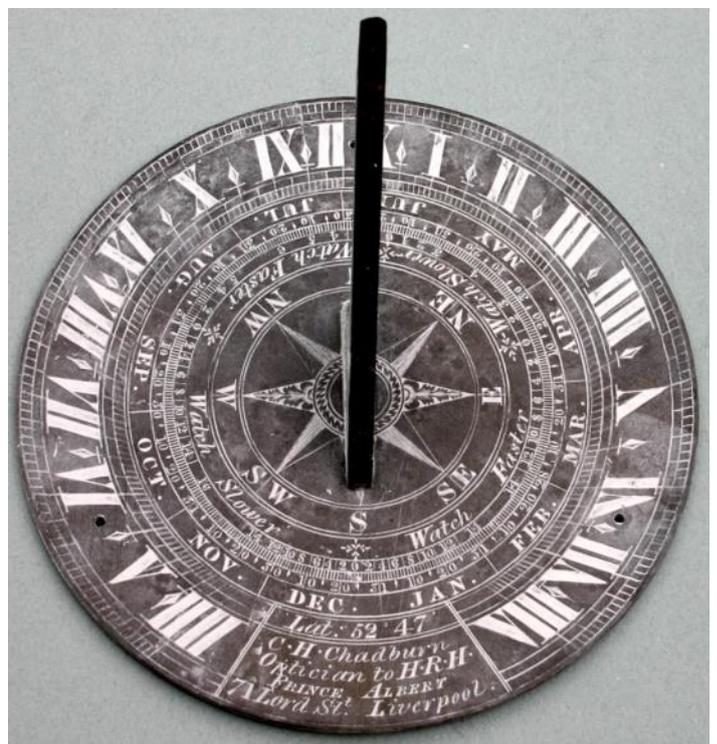


Fig. 6. Doug Bateman's Chadburn dial. Photo: Doug Bateman.

a plaque on the rear of the Liverpool Bluecoat Chambers, which records that his “generous gift in 1927 ensured the preservation of this building”.

I discovered that Chadburns still had an office in the area so I went to see if they could offer any explanation. I found that they had ceased manufacturing in the year 2000. I met with their last employee who was still manning their office to respond to any queries. He remembered a Mr Chadburn arriving at the office in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce. He said that Chadburns would not make a one-off bespoke item for anyone unless it was as a gift to someone who had either performed a special service to the company, or who had been a personal friend of the owner.

Sadly, despite my best efforts, I have been unable to establish a definitive link between Corlett and Chadburn, but I can offer what I believe is a likely explanation.

Records show that the Chadburns' factory was bombed on 7th May 1941 when all records, tooling and stock were destroyed. Production was scattered over five premises for five years which were not restructured into a single premises in Park Lane, Bootle until 1945.<sup>5</sup> At the time, they were heavily involved in ships' telegraph production in support of the war effort.

It seems most likely that William Corlett was Chadburns' solicitor. He would have been heavily involved in the acquisition of premises following the bombing and also in their subsequent relocation. Corlett would have been well past retirement age – he was 75 in 1945 – but in wartime he would have continued working. Following the works relocation and the end of the war, I suggest that he finally

retired and Chadburns made him the toposcope as a retirement gift.

I guess we will never know for certain.

Grammatical note: Chadburns did not use an apostrophe in their company name.

## REFERENCES

1. Chadburns Ships' Telegraph Society.  
*<http://chadburnstelegraphs.com/>*
2. Birkenhead Street Directory 1945.
3. *Alpine Journal* 1960, p. 229.  
*[http://www.alpinejournal.org.uk/Contents/Contents\\_1960\\_files](http://www.alpinejournal.org.uk/Contents/Contents_1960_files)*
4. *The London Gazette*, 23rd November 1951 – 6155.
5. See ref. 1.

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