

Noon Cannons – A Sundial Conceit

Piers Nicholson

The picture (right) shows my recently acquired noon cannon being fired for the sixth time at the recent BSS conference at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. The noon cannon is oriented to true North with the aid of the small sundial at the right hand side of the picture. The sun's rays are focused by the magnifying glass, which is adjustable so that the focused spot of light is directed exactly onto the touchhole of the cannon.

Nowadays, one is not allowed to buy 'black powder' (gunpowder) unless one has obtained a special licence for it, but there is a black powder substitute called Pyrobex,



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successful firing, I also put a little of the explosive powder in the dimple surrounding the touchhole. The smoke in the picture is from this explosive igniting; it is followed very quickly by a flash, and then more smoke from the mouth of the cannon.

As a method of marking noon, it does not offer great accuracy, and it does of course require

considerable individual preparation for each occasion. However, it is very much more fun than using an alarm clock.

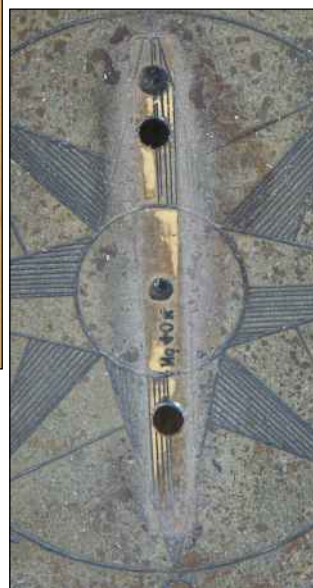
My noon cannon was made by F. Barker and Son of London for the American firm of Abercrombie and Fitch of New York, and the gnomon is set to an angle of 40° showing that it was intended for the American market.

Confirmation is given in tiny mirror-writing hidden underneath the gnomon. The dial is mounted on three pad feet and measures 24.8cm in diameter. Originally they were supplied in plush lined carrying case and examples with the case do occasionally come up for auction (for example, at Christies on 21 June 1990).

The sundial is set in a compass rose, and then two scrolls enclosing the motto

"The hours unless the hour be bright
It is not mine to mark
I am the prophet of the light
Dumb when the hour is dark"

There is also an elaborate table of Equation of Time corrections round half the circumference of the instrument, centred on the noon cannon.



J. Davis

which will work equally well. While this does not require a licence, one may have to go to Bisleigh to get it. And then it is recommended that you keep it in a box made of wood and 2 inches thick!

To prepare for a firing at noon, the sundial is first lined up to true north, which can be done the day before. The cannon is

filled to about half its length with explosive, and a small piece of wadding (such as a twist of tissue paper) is rammed in after it to ensure a good bang. To ensure a

A few noon cannons dating from the mid-17th century are known. These are typically mounted on a marble base, like the one below by Rousseau, now in the collection of C. St. J. H. Daniel.



C. Daniel

The 18th century appears to have been the heyday of the noon cannon. Since then, demand for noon cannons seems to have had a marked decline. There does not seem much possibility of reviving this innocent diversion. In England, any firearm however small has to be sent for proofing to the Worshipful Company of Gunmakers in the City of London, and there are severe restrictions on offering new noon cannons for commercial sale. One



H. James

purpose-made example is the noon cannon and armillary sphere made in 1968 by the workshops of HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth (SRN 4350). It is a memorial to Baron Chatfield (1873-1967) and features a lens which swings against a date scale.

There are also some examples of modern noon cannons in other countries, such as this interesting example (right) made by the commercial dialmaker Malcolm Barnfield in Johannesburg, South Africa (www.sundials.co.za) for Ms Janie Wells of Fairview of Tennessee, USA.

I have always been fascinated by noon cannons, ever since I read about the romantic first 'White Rajah' of Sarawak



J. Wells



P. Kimball

who defeated the rebel uncle of the Sultan of Brunei with the aid of the single cannon mounted in the bows of his yacht, the 'Royalist', and was rewarded with the gift of the whole of Sarawak. In his capital, Kuching, a cannon was fired every day at noon, ostensibly so that people could set their watches, though it probably also served to remind people how they had come under the rule of a benevolent line of white Rajahs.

Noon cannons are still fired in some parts of the world, though not in the now-democratic Kuching. The picture shows the noon cannon being fired in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the locals delight in the surprised reactions of the tourist to the loud bang echoing over the downtown area. Nearer home, there is also a noon gun fired every day in Edinburgh.

*Author's address:
9 Lynwood Ave
Epsom, Surrey
KT7 4LQ*

sundials@pobox292.demon.co.uk

See also pages 127 and 140.