

Bob Frishman

Preserve and restore 27 Queen Street, Derby, England

Antiquarian Horology, Volume 47, No. 3 (September 2026), pp. 370–375

The AHS (Antiquarian Horological Society) is a charity and learned society formed in 1953. It exists to encourage the study of all matters relating to the art and history of time measurement, to foster and disseminate original research, and to encourage the preservation of examples of the horological and allied arts.

To achieve its aims the AHS holds meetings and publishes books as well as its quarterly peer-reviewed journal *Antiquarian Horology*. The journal, printed to the highest standards fully in colour, contains a variety of articles and notes, the society's programme, news, letters and high-quality advertising (both trade and private). A complete collection of the journals is an invaluable store of horological information, the articles covering diverse subjects including many makers from the famous to the obscure. The entire back catalogue of *Antiquarian Horology*, every single page published since 1953 (except the most recent volumes), is available on-line, fully searchable. It is accessible for AHS members only.

For more information visit www.ahsoc.org

ANTIQUARIAN HOROLOGY

AHS | THE
STORY
OF
TIME

NUMBER THREE VOLUME FORTY-SEVEN SEPTEMBER 2026



The September 2026 issue contains as usual 148 pages, and includes these articles:

From Genesis to Revelations, the first clocks at the new St Paul's reconsidered,
by James Nye

Keeping and killing time: changing the clocks on transatlantic liners, 1900–1946,
by Kirsten Tambling

The metronome or musical time keeper: two late Georgian designs from north-west England,
by David Bryden

Remembering S. C. T. : unravelling the history of an early twentieth-century wristwatch,
by Jessie Bitti

Preserve and restore 27 Queen Street, Derby, England, by Bob Frishman

Forty-five years with *Clocks*, by John Hunter

Preserve and restore 27 Queen Street, Derby, England

Bob Frishman*

The house at 27 Queen Street, Derby, was built in 1669 by John Flamsteed's father. During its long history, it was the home of among others John Whitehurst, Joseph Wright and the clockmaker John Smith. It is currently in a derelict state and a local group hopes to acquire, preserve, and restore the site.



Fig. 1. 27 Queen Street, 22 October, 2025. Photo by the author.

Where is the single location in England – and in the world – where one may stand at a building directly associated with the first Astronomer Royal John Flamsteed FRS, the eminent clockmaker and Lunar Society elder member John Whitehurst FRS, renowned artist Joseph Wright ARA, clockmaker John Smith and the

ongoing firm he established, and American founding father and statesman Benjamin Franklin?

The answer: 27 Queen Street, Derby.

This historic blue-plaque edifice, built in 1669 by the father of John Flamsteed, is presently in derelict condition and inhabited

*Bob Frishman (bell-time@comcast.net) has been engaged full-time in horology restoration, collecting, dealing, scholarship, writing, and lecturing for more than four decades. Author of several previous AH articles and reviews, he is an NAWCC Silver Star Fellow and a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.



Fig. 2. 27 Queen Street, 1952, Howard Smith's Rover parked in front. Photo Smith of Derby.

by squatters. Fortunately, it was saved from likely demolition after Smith of Derby in 1998 sold it to developers and relocated to new premises on Alfreton Road. In 2024 it finally received Grade II listing and protections. An energetic local committee, Friends of 27 Queen Street, is actively engaged in an effort to acquire, preserve, and restore the site, and they deserve support. Readers may begin by joining their eponymous Facebook page or by contacting Committee Chair Karen Springer at Karenruthspringer@icloud.com.

In October 2025, I lectured at the Derby Museum & Art Gallery about my biography of eighteenth-century Philadelphia clockmaker Edward Duffield and his connections to Derby. While there, I was befriended by committee members Juliet Hemingway and Steve Ramsden. I invited Juliet to describe their important work to my mid-day audience. Steve generously gave me a tour of the adjacent village of Duffield, the homeland of Edward Duffield's forebears that I had long wished to visit.

Duffield's ancestors may never have walked the floors of 27 Queen Street, but one who most certainly did was Benjamin Franklin, a lifelong Philadelphia friend of Edward's.

Franklin's most extended stay in England was 1757 to 1775 (he returned briefly to Philadelphia during 1762–1764) as he battled unsuccessfully to resolve the Pennsylvania colony's disagreements with the Penn family and Parliament. He visited Derby and Whitehurst in 1759, 1760, 1771, 1772, and 1774 as he travelled out of London in his



Fig. 3. Howard Smith (1907–1983) in panelled room of 27 Queen Street. Photo Smith of Derby.

private four-seat 'chariot' driven by his black 'servant' Peter and accompanied by his great-nephew and personal secretary Jonathan Williams Jr. During the warmer months, on his 'rambles' he explored older curiosities and newer industrial wonders in the north and in Scotland, and communed with luminaries who became his friends and correspondents. Early conversations with the younger Matthew Boulton and Erasmus Darwin in Birmingham led, on Franklin's urgings, to the formation of the Lunar Society.

He commissioned at least three Whitehurst longcase clocks that featured tidal indicators devised in consultation with James Ferguson and proposed for use in American ports. Whitehurst made prototypes of the American's 1757 innovative three-wheel 4-hour-dial wall clock that, despite Ferguson's improvements in 1771 and later, failed to attain popularity. Back home in Philadelphia, Franklin continued to correspond with Whitehurst, as cited in my Duffield book's chapter on Franklin, and he arranged for Whitehurst's 1786 election to the American Philosophical Society that Franklin founded four decades previously.

Tracing the building's residents, we know that, before John Flamsteed (1646–1719) left his father Stephen's home for his London Royal appointment in 1675, he already had made useful modifications to Immanuel Halton's 'reflex' sundial, created a three-foot quadrant, published a 1673 equation of time compilation along with solar tables and notes on lunar eclipses of fixed stars, established coordinates for a town map using his north-south zero-degree meridian line that preceded the longitude standard in Greenwich four-

and-a-half minutes earlier to the east, and completed five barometers. He inherited the home in 1688.

John Whitehurst (1713–1788) moved from Iron Gate to Queen Street in 1764 when he engaged architect Joseph Pickford to remodel the house. He produced more than a hundred clocks and instruments, and by the 1760s he began fitting his clocks with round engraved silvered dials that were far cheaper than his competitors' standard composite alternatives. At the same time, he was seriously occupied with other intellectual pursuits as well, including the geology of his region and the many interests of his Lunar Society colleagues Darwin, Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood, James Watt, John Baskerville, Peter Perez Burdett, Dr. Williams Small, and Joseph Priestley who met on Mondays closest to the full moon, mostly at member homes in Birmingham or Lichfield.

James Ferguson lectured in Derby in 1764 and 1771; tickets were sold by Whitehurst, further documenting these two men's close connections.

Whitehurst provided movements for Boulton's elegant ormolu clocks that were sold to Russia's Catherine the Great among others. Whitehurst also crafted in 1771–2 the complex machinery for Matthew Boulton's two famously unique clocks, one geographical and the other sidereal, designed with input from Ferguson. For both of these costly pieces it proved very difficult to find potential buyers, some of whom criticized the absence of a seconds indicator, a feature that Whitehurst objected to adding after the movements were completed.

The geographical clock, with top-mounted daily-revolving globe by Nathaniel Hill, sold finally by local lottery and is in a private collection. Goodison (p. 110) described it as 'curiously French in many details.... Eight-day movement with half-second pendulum and a thirty-tooth escape wheel, the unusual recoil escapement covering three teeth'.

The twenty-four-hour-dial sidereal clock, also described in detail by Goodison (pp. 119–123), spent eleven years in Russia hoping for a buyer, but returned unsold. Its current location is Soho House, Boulton's former mansion that is now one of Birmingham's museums. A photo of the clock accompanies a report of a visit there in April, 2015, by the AHS Midlands Section (see *AH* June 2015 p.281.)



Fig. 4. *John Whitehurst* by Joseph Wright, c.1785, Derby Museum & Art Gallery, private collection. Photo by the author.

Many more Whitehurst standing, wall-hanging, and turret clocks may be examined in the Derby Museum and in the nearby Museum of Making that occupies a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Derby Silk Mill that is considered the world's first modern factory.

He resided in Derby until 1775 when he moved to London following his Royal selection as Keeper of Stamps and Weights, despite his professed sympathy for the growing complaints of the North America colonies. His nephew, who continued the clockmaking business, sold the property in 1790.

The artist Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797), whose major exhibition of 'candlelight' paintings is at the National Gallery in London until 10 May 2026, returned to Derby from London in 1793 and, in declining health, rented the building. He was visited there in January 1796 by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and died in August of the next year in one of the home's wood-paneled rooms.

Wright's 1781–82 portrait of John Whitehurst shows the sitter not with clockmaking tools but instead with geological images: a drawing of the strata of Matlock High Tor on his desk and an erupting volcano, probably Vesuvius that Wright had visited, in the background. A 1791



Fig. 5. John Whitehurst 30-hour long case clock, c.1770, round dial, Derby Museum & Art Gallery. Photo by the author.



Fig. 6. *A Philosopher Lecturing on the Orrery* (detail), Joseph Wright, 1766, believed to be John Whitehurst, Derby Museum & Art Gallery.

written description of Whitehurst by William Hutton, quoted by Craven (p. 174), adds to our impression of the man: 'He was near six feet high, straight, thin and wore his own dark grey bushy hair; was plain in his dress, and had much the appearance of a respectable farmer.'

A strong case has been made that the red-robed man standing in Wright's 1766 iconic painting *A Philosopher Lecturing on the Orrery*, is Whitehurst. The contemporary architect and Wright acquaintance James Grandon was quoted by Nicolson (p. 115), 'The lecturer introduced [into the Orrery] was the celebrated Mr. Whitehurst, an eminent watch-maker, of Derby, and well known for his knowledge of mechanics, etc.'

The building had varied public functions until occupied in 1856 by clockmaker John Smith (1813–1886) who was a former apprentice to Whitehurst's nephew John Whitehurst II. Smith



Fig. 7. Franklin three-wheel clock, Derby Museum & Art Gallery. Photo by the author.

of Derby then used the site to become a leading public clock manufacturer, and his company has been owned and managed by a succession of his descendants. In the early twentieth century, a road-widening scheme forced the removal of the original front elevation, and a sympathetic replacement was designed by architect C.H. Aslin. This major alteration impeded the preservation listing of the building.

Adding to the historic importance is the

home's retention of its entire lengthy rear property, the last intact 'burgage plot' remaining in Derby, that was originally cultivated and later filled with Smith's workshops. The committee has ambitious plans to restore this area with gardens, mural quadrant, telescope, orrery, and cherry trees. For the building interior, they envision an appropriate renovation that would include a planetarium, library, café, and meeting room.



Fig. 8. Whitehurst mill clock, c.1811, Museum of Making, Derby. Photo by the author. The upper dial marked 'ENGINE TIME' indicates the weekly hours when factory machines were running. The dial on the left, marked 0-100, and on the inner ring 0-10 counterclockwise, is believed to show revolutions of the engine.

In 2024, I spoke about my Duffield book in an upstairs room of the Benjamin Franklin House on Craven Street in London. This is the only existing residence anywhere that he occupied. I could look out of the same windows that he did nearly three centuries ago. I hope that someday soon I may do the same at 27 Queen Street in Derby.

References:

Maxwell Craven, *John Whitehurst: Innovator, Scientist, Geologist, and Clockmaker*, Fonthill Media Limited, 2015.

Friends of 27 Queen Street Derby, brochure and Facebook pages, 2025.

Bob Frishman, *Edward Duffield: Philadelphia Clockmaker, Citizen, Gentleman, 1730–1803*, American Philosophical Society, 2024.

Nicholas Goodison, *Ormolu: The Work of Matthew Boulton*, Phaidon, 1974.

John R. Millburn, *Wheelwright of the Heavens: The Life and Work of James Ferguson, FRS*, Vade-Mecum Press, 1988,

Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of Light*, The Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art, 1968.

Jonathan Powers, *Franklin and Whitehurst: Enlightenment Collaborators*, Quandary Books, 2025.

Jenny Uglow, *The Lunar Men: Five Friends Whose Curiosity Changed the World*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.