

## SIDNEY BETTER - WATCH SPRINGER & TIMER

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*As the Second World War progressed there was an urgent need for more deck watches (known as Chronometer Watches) for the Navy. Although the traditional English watchmaking industry had finally expired in the 1920s, nevertheless Sidney Better (1877-1950), a dedicated and determined immigrant watch springer and timer living in the East End of London, managed to supply a small number of these watches by various means. This article chronicles Better's life and also examines the long held belief that he made the Northern Goldsmiths tourbillon watches, concluding that there is no evidence to support this assertion.*

In the late 1930s, as storm clouds gathered over Europe again, the state of the watch trade caused Harold Spencer Jones, Astronomer Royal at the Royal Greenwich Observatory, to voice concern. The Observatory was responsible for organising the repair and maintenance of naval chronometers including deck watches and in 1938 Spencer Jones reported:

The position regarding the repair by the trade of the high grade instruments necessary for navigational use is still unsatisfactory. The public demand for high grade watches is now very small and this has led to the almost entire elimination of the highly skilled craftsmen, not only in adjusting but in other branches of the repairing trade. The present position is such that the illness of one key craftsman can seriously hamper all the firms undertaking Admiralty repairs.<sup>1</sup>

Spencer Jones' words clearly show how slight the trade in English made precision watches had become. In the years just before and after 1900 the Coventry trade had been given a fillip by Bahn Bonniksen's karrusel watch. Bonniksen's watches enjoyed considerable success in observatory trials and in London small numbers of superb precision watches were being finished (often with Swiss input) but this late revival was not sustained and the industry was mostly finished by the mid 1920s. Even Bonniksen, who was a dedicated supporter of the watch trade, saw what was coming and offered

his stock of movements for sale in 1912 to devote himself to other inventions.<sup>2</sup>

The collapse of the English precision watch trade had another serious consequence which became apparent following the declaration of war in 1939. The Admiralty's stock of deck watches became depleted as it was reduced by enemy action and an increased demand caused by the need to supply new and requisitioned ships. These high quality centre seconds watches had mostly been made in the traditional way from 'rough movements' (i.e. partly finished movements supplied by Prescott movement makers) which then passed through many specialists' hands before completion. The remnants of the industry were now incapable of supplying the need which was eventually met by large numbers of deck watches brought in by some means from Switzerland. Nevertheless a very small number of English made deck watches were supplied to the Admiralty.

It is true that in relation to the need these watches represented a mere token but the initiative was taken not by one of the renowned London or Coventry firms but by Sidney Better, a watch springer and timer working out of the bedroom of a London County Council flat in London's East End, the most heavily bombed area of the capital. Working alone often late at night he organised the dial and case making, jewellery, finishing, springing and timing, as necessary - a brave effort for a working man with limited resources operating with all the disruptions and uncertainties of wartime.

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1. A.J. Meadows, *Greenwich Observatory* Vol. 2 (London: Taylor & Francis, 1975), p. 65.
2. Advertisement in the *Horological Journal*, February 1912.

Although Better's wartime efforts have never been recognised, he has been lauded for an achievement which I believe was never his. We have read many times that he made the series of one minute tourbillon watches sold by The Northern Goldsmiths Company of Newcastle upon Tyne just after the First World War. Research suggests, however, that he came in at the tail end of the enterprise and timed three of the watches, but no evidence has ever surfaced to substantiate the claim of a greater role.

In attempting to document Better's life information has been collected over a period of some twenty years from a variety of sources and assembled into a story. Inevitably assumptions and suppositions have had to be made to fill the gaps but these should be evident from the text and none require impossible things to be believed. Workers in the watch trade generally lived their lives in quiet anonymity but Better had something more about him and his story deserves to be told.

## EARLY YEARS

When I first became interested in Sidney Better I discovered that in spite of his reputation nothing of any substance was known about him and, furthermore, there did not seem to be any obvious lines of enquiry that I could pursue. This was to change when in 1988 Rodney Law and I paid a visit to Richard (Dick) Oliver the last of the Clerkenwell watch case makers then living in retirement in Woodford Green, Essex.<sup>3</sup> We had an enlightening conversation with the genial Oliver who was still full of enthusiasm for his craft. In the course of our conversation I chanced to ask him if he had ever heard of Better. He replied that they had known him well but not until the Second World War as Better had used the Coventry firm of Traherne until then for his case work.<sup>4</sup> Oliver had an extraordinary memory and said that Better had lived with a family by the name of Harradine near Shoreditch Church. There were not many people with this surname in the London telephone directory and I was soon able to establish contact with Stanley Harradine, a surviving member of the family. He confirmed



Fig. 1. Sandford Buildings, where Sidney Better lived and worked for more than thirty years.

Oliver's memory and was able to tell me more about Better. Oliver also recalled that Better's first employment was in a watchmaker's shop in Hoddesden, Hertfordshire.

Oliver's recollections provided important clues for searching the historical record. The 1901 Census records Better boarding with the Jelf family in Cheshunt, which is close to Hoddesden. He was stated to be a watchmaker (general), an Austrian Subject and an employed person. Documents in the Public Records Office show that he was born in Kraka, Galicia in Austria (now Krakow, Poland) on 11 December 1877. We do not know what influenced him to come to England. However Galicia was one of the poorest regions in Europe and there was mass economic migration westwards until the First World War. Perhaps he was part of this movement? Religious intolerance may also have played a part. By 1911 he had moved to the East End of London where he was to remain for the rest of his life. The 1911 Census shows him

3. Richard Oliver, obituary *Antiquarian Horology* Autumn 1989, see also Philip T. Priestley, *Watch Case Makers of England*, *NAWCC Bulletin Supplement* No 20, Spring 1994.

4. See *Watch Case Makers of England* (previous note) for information about the Traherne firm.

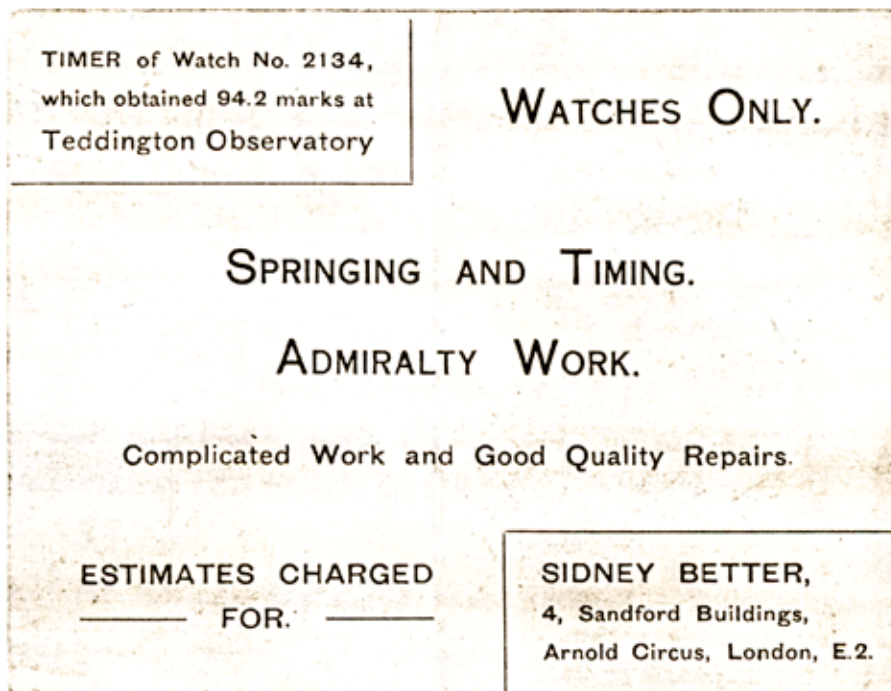


Fig. 2. Better's tradecard, giving his Sandford Buildings address and showing that he was the timer of Watch No.2134 (a Northern Goldsmiths tourbillon).

boarding at 22 Laleham Buildings, Shoreditch with Mrs Ada Mary Jenkins, a widow and her unmarried daughter Ada Florence Jenkins, a shorthand typist. He was stated to be a 'Practical Watchmaker' and was still an employed person. In 1914 when the War came, Austrian nationals automatically became 'enemy aliens' and were routinely sent off to internment camps. Such was the public panic about foreign spies Better would have been very fortunate if he had escaped internment, at least for a period.

Whatever Better had experienced at the outbreak of the war, by August 1916 he was advertising his services in the *Horological Journal*, published by the British Horological Institute: 'Sidney Better, Springer and Timer of Watches for Observatory Trials. 4 Sandford Building [sic], Arnold Circus, London E2.' (Figs 1 and 2). Timing watches (sometimes called adjusting) was a lengthy process requiring a methodical approach. After the watch had been adjusted for time in positions it had to be adjusted for varying temperatures, a process which carried the risk of affecting the previous adjustments. Calm nerves and skills of the highest order were required. Better must have had some success in this field before placing

the advertisement perhaps working as a timer for one of the reputable London firms. His advertisements continued until February 1920, the later ones included an added reference to rating chronographs which were by then popular with the motor racing fraternity and also with the police taking an interest in speeding motorists.

Better's advertisements and successes were drawing attention to his abilities. His star was clearly rising as by 1918 he was working on Admiralty watches (including deck watches officially known as Chronometer Watches even though most of them had lever escapements) and records at the Royal Observatory Greenwich show that between then and 1923 large numbers of watches passed through his hands for repair and timing. It was an achievement for an individual working on his own account to have access to this work alongside such renowned firms as Johannsen and Kullberg. Unhappily for Better, his Admiralty work came to an end in 1923 when it appears that as a matter of policy some of the stock of deck watches was regarded as surplus and therefore sold. The Greenwich records also show that Better was returning watches unfinished during that year. He had been able to charge



Fig. 3. The movement of a typical Northern Goldsmiths tourbillon (No.2052).

well for his work and this change must have represented a significant loss of regular income.

Whilst he was still working on the Admiralty's watches in the early 1920s, Better, who rarely turned down the offer of work, timed three one-minute tourbillon watches made by The Northern Goldsmiths Company. These were then entered in the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) 'Kew Certificate' Trial. The reports published in the *Horological Journal* show that the first two nos. 2137 and 2135 were submitted during the 1920/21 trial year and were awarded marks of 91.3 and 89.0 out of 100 respectively. A further tourbillon No.2134 was entered during the 1921/22 trial year and was awarded marks of 94.2, the highest marks ever awarded to an English made watch in a Kew Certificate trial.<sup>5</sup> Better's trade card (Fig. 2) soon carried the claim 'Timer of Watch No.2134 which obtained 94.2 marks at Teddington Observatory'. Better was rightly proud of his achievement, but the statement on his business card also reveals his contribution. He had timed the watch. If he had done more he would surely have claimed it. His achievement would naturally have been discussed in trade circles but somehow over the years it came to be exaggerated in the retelling to the extent that he became regarded as the maker of the watches. This belief was firmly established

by the time it found its way into print in the third edition of Clutton & Daniels monumental work *Watches* published by Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1979.

### THE ORIGINS OF THE NORTHERN GOLDSMITHS TOURBILLON WATCHES

As the belief that Better made the Northern Goldsmiths tourbillon watches (Fig. 3) is now so well established it is necessary to divert from the main theme to shed some light on the true origins of these watches. During the First World War the Northern Goldsmiths Company of Newcastle upon Tyne supplied centre seconds lever escapement deck watches (i.e. 'Chronometer Watches') to the Admiralty. These were numbered from 2000 and the highest number so far noted in the records at Greenwich is 2288. The first one was delivered in December 1915. Numbered in the same series were at least fifteen one minute tourbillon watches with lever escapements for retail sale. The lowest tourbillon number so far noted (from the horological literature, auction catalogues, etc) is 2047 so it seems clear that from the start the firm were hedging their bets by having some very expensive watches in hand for affluent and technically appreciative customers to purchase when the war ended. This was not the first time the Northern Goldsmiths had supplied the Admiralty but because they wanted to be seen doing something directly for the war effort they decided that the work would be done in Newcastle and the available evidence shows that the deck watches and tourbillons were finished there. Some of the tourbillons are engraved on the upper plate 'This Watch was made in Newcastle-upon-Tyne by the Northern Goldsmiths Company' but this claim failed to deter the growth of the Better legend.

The company employed Leon Forestier a highly experienced watchmaker for the project and he moved to Newcastle for the duration of the war.<sup>6</sup> Forestier was Swiss by birth and trained at the Geneva School of Watchmaking. After graduating he was persuaded to come to England to work for Rotherham & Sons of Coventry as an instructor, this was around 1895. Following

5. From the NPL Kew Certificate records now at the Royal Observatory Greenwich.

6. Mrs D.D. (Peggy) Ball (daughter of Forestier) advised me in June 1991 that Forestier was in Newcastle from early 1915 (possibly even late 1914) until 1919. There is other evidence to suggest that he may in fact have left in 1920.

this he worked for Newsome & Co. for ten years timing some of Newsome's very successful deck watches including No.151340, a centre seconds karrusel which Newsome claimed was the best watch ever tested at the Greenwich Deck Watch Trials. It was awarded a Trial Number of 17.4 in 1905.<sup>7</sup> After leaving Newsome he became a maker in his own right and, following some successes in the deck watch trials, the Admiralty were buying watches directly from him by 1915. Forestier was also a watch materials dealer with good Swiss connections as he was able to supply Guillaume balances for marine chronometers. However, by the time the war had started, conditions in the Coventry trade had deteriorated to such an extent that he had opened a sweet shop with his wife in order to augment the family income.<sup>8</sup> The Northern Goldsmiths' offer of employment on precision watches must have seemed an unmissable opportunity.

The official history of The Northern Goldsmiths Company records that the tourbillons were made by Forestier and Smith.<sup>9</sup> In practice the deck watches and tourbillons were made in the traditional way but by Coventry men working in Newcastle rather than Coventry.<sup>10</sup> The rough movements probably came from Prescott, the traditional source of rough movements,<sup>11</sup> and Forestier would have overseen the project and done the springing and timing. Smith made the tourbillon carriages probably incorporating Swiss made escapements. He or his family owned a public house in Primrose Hill Street, Coventry<sup>12</sup> and it is not clear whether he moved to Newcastle with the other Coventry men. Nothing else is yet known about Smith except that Forestier claimed that he was the only man in England known to him who could have

made the tourbillon carriages.<sup>13</sup> However the success of the project to make the deck watches and tourbillons was due mainly to Forestier's commitment, experience and contacts.

Following the end of the war the Northern Goldsmiths no longer needed to wave the flag and the watchmaking facility began to be wound down. The last deck watch purchase noted in the records at Greenwich was in March 1920. The tourbillons could now be offered for sale and so were entered for the NPL Kew Certificate Trials, the reports published in the *Horological Journal* gave details of nine of them that obtained 'especially good' certificates during the 1918/19 and 1919/20 trial years. A further two obtained 'especially good' certificates in this period but were not included in the published reports (see note 5). Forestier left Newcastle to return to Coventry during 1920 as the owner of his rented property wished to return home, and by September of that year Northern Goldsmiths, having lost their timer, were advertising for one to work in Newcastle.<sup>14</sup> Whether they found one or not, Better working in London secured the job of timing the last three tourbillons. The 'record' watch, No.2134, which he timed was sold to a Mr P. Freeman for 200 guineas on 14 July 1922 (see note 9). Some years later the company bought it back and it stayed in their ownership until sold at Sotheby's, London in July 1990. Some of the tourbillons, including the three timed by Better, had Guillaume balances which Forestier was able to obtain from Switzerland following the end of the war.

Did Better and Forestier meet when Better took over the timing of the last three tourbillons? Forestier would naturally have wanted the watches to do well in the trial and he might

7. Forestier's advertisement of May 1907 in the *Horological Journal* claims that he was the 'adjuster of the record deck watch 17.4'. Newsome & Co's advertisement in the *Horological Journal* c.1905/6 features the 'best watch ever tested at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich' which had a trial number of 17.4.
8. Reference to the sweet shop from Mary Montes, *Brown Boots in Earlsdon: a study of a watchmaking community, its rise and fall* (Coventry, 1989), p. 51.
9. Information from the *The Story Of The Northern Goldsmiths Company* published by the company, 1975. Mr G. Baglee of Northern Goldsmiths advised the author in 1989 that he only knew of one copy of the company history which would suggest that it had a very limited circulation.
10. 'my father.....was asked to choose his own team to work with him': extract from letter dated 1 May 1991 to the author from Mrs Peggy Ball.
11. One of the deckwatches in a private collection is marked 18 on the pillarplate (i.e. size 18) suggesting a Prescott origin.
12. Information from Mrs Peggy Ball, 1 May 1991.
13. Information from letter in author's possession from Forestier's son Marc to Mrs Peggy Ball 2 July 1991.
14. *Horological Journal*, September 1920.

have wanted to give Better the benefit of his experience with the tourbillons. We may never know but it is tempting to speculate that they did meet and subsequent events suggest that this was a real possibility.

### BETTER FINDS AMBITION

We can only surmise the path of Sidney Better's life following the loss of the Admiralty work around 1923. He was well placed to capture any timing work that was available and with Clerkenwell being within walking distance no doubt sufficient repair work on high grade watches and chronographs could be found to keep him in business. It seems, however, that his previous successes had stirred his ambitions as a letter which has survived in copy form shows.<sup>15</sup> This letter dated 18 February 1931 was to Major Sir John Prestige, a noted watch collector, from F Burch in his capacity as Observer, Watch Tests Division at the NPL and runs as follows:

Dear Sir John,

Perhaps you will recall that some time last summer, when on a visit here, we discussed the possibility of obtaining some fine English tourbillon watches, and I undertook to place you in touch with a man I knew to be making these.

I have now been able to see Mr. S. Better whose card is enclosed, and he informs me that he has eight fine watches of this class about 75% completed and he would be glad to know whether you are interested in them.

Mr. Better's work is of the very highest class as is evidenced by his successes in the N.P.L. tests for which he holds the record for an English-made watch. This particular watch was one of his tourbillons and secured the very creditable total of 94.2 marks.

Trusting this information will be of use to you.

I am, Yours truly,  
(signed) F Burch

This letter was no doubt intended as a thoughtful if tardy act by Burch to obtain some business for Better in a difficult period. As an historical document it may be misleading. The reference to 'one of his tourbillons' indicates that a mere decade following Better's involvement with the tourbillons his part was being exaggerated. But what does 'eight fine watches of this class' mean? Is it credible that a working man in the Great Depression would be making eight tourbillon watches without a customer in view? It does not seem likely and it is almost certain that they were in fact karrusel watches which Better had obtained in part finished form. These might be considered 'of this class', i.e. having 'revolving escapements' (a term sometimes used in observatory reports). Indeed, there are no tourbillons dating from this period which could be attributed to Better.

Sometime around this period Better began an association with F.J. Camm who was editor of the monthly magazine *Practical Mechanics* issued by the publishers George Newnes.<sup>16</sup> Camm (brother of Sir Sydney Camm the aeroplane designer) was a prolific writer and editor who had wide ranging technical interests. He became interested in precision timekeeping and the June 1937 issue of *Practical Mechanics* included an article giving precise details of how watches were tested at the NPL. This was followed by a series of eleven articles entitled 'Watch Repairing and Adjusting'. The seventh article in the series (August 1939) explained in detail the way in which a watch was adjusted for a Kew Certificate. An illustration showed a Class A Kew Certificate issued to F J Camm for a Ditisheim 'Solvil' keyless open-face watch No.739748 which was awarded 78.00 marks on 19 May 1939. The watch had in fact been adjusted and entered by Better for the NPL test towards the end of 1938 on behalf of Guinard & Golay, the importers, but it had failed! He entered it again with the above results (see note 5). Better was clearly of assistance to Camm in the preparation of these articles which formed the basis of a book *Watches Adjustment and Repair* published by Newnes in 1940. Better received no acknowledgement

15. This copy letter was given to the author by Dr Alan Shenton in 1989. He probably obtained it from T E White (Tommy White) the Isleworth watch adjuster who was on good terms with F. Burch (Freddy Burch) of the NPL.

16. See Gordon G. Cullingham, *F.J. Camm, The Practical Man* (Windsor, 1996).



Fig. 4. The F.J. Camm centre seconds karrusel watch as illustrated in his book *Watches Adjustment and Repair*.

which was possibly cause for relief as some dubious repair techniques were included which one can only surmise came from another source.

The book includes an illustration (Fig. 4) of a free sprung centre seconds lever escapement karrusel watch signed 'F J Camm Windsor 148643' and also engraved 'Kew A Certificate 86.3 marks Especially good'. The certificate was issued to Camm on 1 March 1940 but in fact the watch had again been entered by Better and there can be little doubt that he supplied the watch (see note 5). Was this one of the 'watches of this class about 75% completed' mentioned by Burch in his letter to Sir John Prestige? It seems very likely and there is a further possibility. The watch number and type is entirely consistent with the watches entered by Newsome for the Greenwich Trial of Chronometer Watches (e.g. 148644 of 1914). Where did this movement (and other similar ones to be described later) come from? Was Forestier the source if, as previously suggested, the two men had met in 1920? Forestier, after all, had been associated with Newsome for many years and this was an example of the very type of watch he had worked on. Perhaps he had them because they were unfinished and, owing

to the interruption of the war, had remained unfinished. It is not difficult to imagine the situation. Forestier was a man with a family having to start up in business again in Coventry. If earning a living as a watchmaker had been difficult before the war it was not going to be easier afterwards, the work in Newcastle had after all been a special situation owing everything to wartime demands. Better on the other hand was a single man being well paid for his Admiralty work. Did these circumstances lead to Forestier selling the unfinished watches to Better? There is no firm evidence and we can only speculate. The Camm watch appeared in a Sotheby's sale for 21 November 1960 and was sold to Maggs for £46. It would be of interest if any member knows of the watch and could supply the maker and date of the silver-gilt case.

Greenwich records show that by 1935 they were again using Better's skills in servicing and timing the Navy's deck watches. The difficulties Greenwich were experiencing by relying on outside firms were solved by directly employing craftsmen and a Chronometer Section was formed in order to maintain the chronometers and deck watches. The Section was moved to Bristol at the beginning of the war but not being a Greenwich employee Better did not go. Was he invited? We do not know, and perhaps not - one former Chronometer Section employee remembered that Better was not popular as he was 'big-headed' and that 'he worked too hard'.<sup>17</sup>

These comments perhaps reveal something about Better's personality which compelled him to supply the Admiralty with the much needed deck watches - an ambitious project for one man bearing in mind the constraints imposed by wartime and the near extinction of the base of traditional specialist skills as noted by the Astronomer Royal. Time was of course of the essence. Some of the first six watches were karrusels and must surely have been included in the 'watches of this class about 75% completed' mentioned by Burch. Two years were to pass before Better was able to supply five more watches and it is likely that these were finished from rough movements involving considerably more work to arrive at the finished product.

17. Conversation with David Evans formerly of the Chronometer Section as recalled by Anthony Randall.

## THE BETTER DECK WATCHES

Nos.151348, 151351 and 151352

Greenwich records show that these watches were sent to the 'R.O workshop' on 31 March 1941, but do not record a date of purchase.

151351 is a lever escapement centre seconds karrusel which suggests the other two were the same. As previously noted for the F.J. Camm watch these numbers are in the sequence of numbers used by Newsomes for their deck watches (e.g. 151350 of 1914) and the previous comments apply as to their possible source.

151348 was issued in June 1941 to Hunt Class Escort Destroyer *HMS Puckeridge* which had been launched the previous year. *Puckeridge* took part in 'Operation Torch' the Allied landings in North Africa. The watch was cut off the books on 6 September 1943 as *Puckeridge* had been sunk on the way to Gibraltar by the German U-boat U617.<sup>18</sup>

151351 was issued to J1171 (unidentified) in September 1941 and then served on Navy Trawler *Polo Norte* from May 1942 to February 1944. The watch was then issued to *ORP Slazak* in May 1945. This was a Hunt Class Escort Destroyer (formerly *HMS Bedale*) lent to the Polish Navy. The watch next saw service with S class submarine *HMS Solent* from December 1946 until June 1948. The watch was sold in July 1953 to Malcolm Gardner and was later offered as lot 187 in the Auktionhaus Kegelman sale of 6 December 1980.

151352 was sent to Gibraltar in September 1941 and saw service with Motor Launch *121*. It was sold in 1948 to Ashley & Sims.

No.97631

Purchased 15 May 1941. Little is yet known about this watch and it could be a Yeomans karrusel (see 93539). The watch briefly saw service on *HMS Camellia*, a Flower class corvette, December 1942 - March 1943. Presumably sold at some point but no record of this.



Fig. 5. Deck watch No.2485. Image © NMM.



Fig. 6. The movement of No.2485. Image © NMM.

No.2485 (Figs 5 and 6)

Purchased 23 August 1941. This is a free sprung lever escapement centre seconds watch. It has a right angle divided lift

18. Histories of naval craft were taken from the Internet.





Fig. 7. Top lid and engraved ivory plaque of the deck box for No.93539.



Fig. 8. Movement of centre seconds chronometer karrusel No.93539.

escapement and the pillar plate is stamped with the movement number 2485 also JP and 20 x 2 indicating that the size 20 rough movement was made by Joseph Preston of Prescott. It was almost certainly a complete movement when Better obtained it. The dial signature S. Better in script was added after manufacture. The movement is gilt apart from the upper plate which still shows the radial marks left by the movement maker's water of ayr stone. The movement, probably dating from before the First World War, was therefore waiting for the retailer's name to be engraved on it before the upper plate was gilt and the watch made ready for sale. So it stayed in suspended animation, unsold and unused, probably for a quarter of a century until Better had his name and address engraved on it and prepared it for Admiralty service. Serviceability was probably the only important issue at the time and so the upper plate remained ungilt. The movement is housed in a chrome plated case (usually silver) which in turn fits into a brass drum with screw bezel contained in the usual two piece wooden box used at this period. The top of the lid carries a round plaque engraved

S Better in script together with the number 2485 and CW with the Broad Arrow.

2485 served for a period on *HMT Switha* circa 1943 (a Royal Navy Trawler designed for minesweeping and harbour defence) and is now included in the National Maritime Museum collection at the Royal Observatory Greenwich.

#### No.2563

The dial only of watch No.2563 exists. The dial feet do not have pin holes drilled in them, almost certainly evidence that the watch was not finished. The dial was fired with the inscription in capitals 'Sidney Better London 2563' together with the Broad Arrow.

#### No.93539 (Figs 7-10)

Purchased 12 September 1941. This is a centre seconds chronometer (i.e. spring detent) karrusel. This is such a rare type of watch that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is in fact Yeomans 93539, a chronometer karrusel which was entered in the 1909 Trial of Centre Seconds Keyless Pocket Chronometers



Fig. 9. The karrusel carriage of No.93539. The foot of the spring detent can be seen in the lower part of the image.



Fig. 10. Dial of No.93539 with now rather faded Better name and number.

at Greenwich (a section of the Annual Trial of Chronometer Watches). Yeomans, a Coventry manufacturer, made mainly for the trade and the retailer's name would normally have been added to the movement later. The fact that this was not done at the time suggests that the watch was not sold either to a retailer or the Admiralty. It seems likely, therefore, that this watch was unused when Better obtained it and had his name and address engraved on the upper plate. Better's name in script on the dial is indistinct (see Fig. 8) showing that it was applied in ink after the dial was made, strong evidence that this was a complete movement when it was obtained. Did it go to Forestier for some reason and so reached Better in the same way as has been speculated for the others? Perhaps it developed a fault or its performance was regarded as capable of improvement. It did not perform spectacularly well in 1909 with a trial number of 53.9. Nevertheless the escapement, with its tiny polished detent, is a wonderful example of craftsmanship. Unusually the escape wheel appears to be of steel.

The records do not show any navy service or date of sale. Charles Allix sold the watch on 11 February 1970 and it is now in a private collection. It featured in Bobinet's Exhibition of English Pocket Chronometers held in December 1976.

#### Nos.2, 6, 7, 12 and 14

No.12 was purchased on 11 June 1943 and the others on 8 November 1943. As a dial numbered 20 survives it is clear that these centre seconds lever escapement watches were planned to be part of a series of at least twenty watches.

No.14 (Figs 11-13) is as yet the only known complete survivor from this series. This has a double roller right angle divided lift escapement with the safety roller nearest to the balance, an unusual but not unknown 'upside down' arrangement. The brass and steel compensation balance is free sprung. The movement is contained in a silver case, glazed on the escapement side, which in turn is contained in a lacquered brass case with screwed glazed bezel mounted in a two piece wooden box. Both silver and brass cases carry the movement number.

An unfinished movement No.8 also survives. This is stamped JP and 20 x 2 on the pillar plate. Where would Better have found twenty rough movements of exactly the type he required? If as speculated he had obtained movements from Forestier in the early 1920s were these part of the purchase? Alternatively did Harry Pybus (of Joseph Preston of Prescott) have them in stock or did he know where to find them?



Fig. 11 (above) Movement of Better No.14.



Fig. 12 (left) Dial view of Better No.14.

Pybus certainly supplied Sanfrid Lundquist of Kullbergs with frames (probably for marine chronometers) about that time.<sup>19</sup> There are holes in the movements which are unused, in particular a screw hole and three steady pin holes next to the balance cock. Does this suggest that the movements were originally intended to be finished with chronometer escapements?

Having somehow obtained the rough movements Better had to finish them. In order to deliver the watches as soon as possible the

19. *Antiquarian Horology*, 30/1 (March 2007), 52.



Fig. 13. Two piece mahogany box and plaque of Chronometer Watch No.14.

best way to proceed would be to use whatever remaining specialists he could find and only do the work himself when they were not available. He had dials made (Willis for example was still in business) and was no doubt also able to get cases made. He may have been able to find supplies of hands, balances and balance springs. Probably the more difficult areas would be the jewelling and obtaining the escapements. As just five out of a possible twenty watches were supplied it seems that there were considerable problems in finishing the watches and he may have had to do some of the work unaided. This would perhaps not be surprising as years had passed since the necessary skills were last routinely practiced in nearby Clerkenwell.

The unfinished movement No.8 (Fig. 14) shows an unusual combination of jewel settings on the pillar plate which may reflect some of the

Fig. 14. Pillarplate of unfinished watch No.8. Note jewelling (see text.)



difficulties. There is one screwed jewel setting, one screwed brass setting where one would expect to see a jewel hole, one rubbed in jewel and three jewelled pivot holes with English settings but Swiss type end stone settings. Does this suggest that Better or his jewel setter were having some trouble finding supplies and had to use what was available? There may well have been a shortage of high quality jewel holes in view of the huge wartime requirement for gauges and instruments of every variety.

How was the work in progress funded? Did Camm provide financial support? We are unlikely ever to know for certain but Camm was well connected and would have been in a position to do so. No more watches were delivered after these five. Perhaps there was no need to complete the others after Swiss watches in large numbers had arrived, or perhaps the end of the war came before Better was able to complete them.

No.2 saw service between October 1944 and May 1945 with *HMS Alisma*, a Flower class corvette based in the Mediterranean. The watch was then issued to the newly launched rescue tug *Turmoil* in August 1945 and remained with the ship until May 1949, then being sold to the watch and chronometer dealer R.J. Low in 1953.

No.6 was issued in December 1944 to *HMS Opportune*, an Oribi class fleet destroyer which saw considerable activity in the North Sea during 1945. The watch was returned to Portsmouth in May 1946 and sold to Ashley & Sims in 1948.

No.7 saw service between January 1945 and October 1945 on *HMS Cleveland*, a Hunt class escort destroyer deployed in the Mediterranean. The watch was issued from Portsmouth to the battleship *King George V* in April 1946 and was returned ashore to Plymouth in December 1946 from the battleship *Duke of York*. It was sold to Messrs C & J Gillard, Christchurch in 1948.

Nos.12 and 14. There is no record of these being issued to ships. No.14 exists in a private collection.

## LIFE IN BETHNAL GREEN

By 1916 Better was living at 4 Sandford Buildings, Arnold Circus, London, E2 in the

north-western part of Bethnal Green near the Shoreditch boundary (see Fig. 1). He stayed at this address for the rest of his life. Sandford Buildings was part of the Boundary Estate built by the London County Council around 1900 to house slum dwellers whose homes had been demolished. Sandford Buildings, on the perimeter of Arnold Circus, faced a large mound in the centre, created from the rubble of the slum demolition, on top of which sat a bandstand which still exists. In Better's time the earlier residents were largely refugees from religious persecution in Europe, later added to by refugees from Hitler's Germany. Better lived with the Harradine family consisting of Frank and Ada, their son Stanley and his brother, and both of the boys' grandmothers, one of whom was the Mrs Jenkins Better was boarding with in 1911. Together they occupied flats 3, 4 and 6. One of the bedrooms in flat 4 was used as Better's workshop and so he slept on a foldaway bed in the lounge. Frank Harradine worked at nights cleaning buses while his wife Ada Harradine (formerly Jenkins) was a trained typist and would do Better's business correspondence for him.<sup>20</sup>

What do we know of the man himself who was known to friends as 'Bill'? No photograph has been found but he was dark haired, had a moustache, was fairly short and had a limp. He was strict and one of the Harradine brothers was obliged to sign a notice presumably regarding youthful noise. Dick Oliver recalled that Better had a habit of giving those he wished to please or influence a small gift which was sometimes fresh fish. The key to this apparently curious habit may be ice! A watch timer has to have a supply of this for his ice box and in those days ice came from the fishmonger who naturally had to be kept happy hence the surplus fish. He was clearly wedded to his work but found light relief in betting on the horses and young Stanley would often be sent off to get a copy of the *Sporting Life*. Better frequently lost money. He was never naturalised and so when the war came he was regarded as an 'Enemy Alien'. His case came before a tribunal in October 1939 and as a result he was exempted from internment as he was stated to be 'A resident of long standing in U.K. Of excellent character'. Nevertheless the

20. From the author's telephone conversation with Stanley Harradine (then 74 years old) in December 1988.

authorities deprived him of his radio, a loss soon rectified by Frank Harradine.

Stanley Harradine recalled that Better had a hand driven lathe ('a large wheel and a small wheel'), a common arrangement for a watchmaker. Better often worked at night because it was quieter and, if he dropped a part on the floor, would not leave the workshop until it had been found even if a meal was waiting for him. He could make a watch wheel in half an hour and Stanley remembered that he would make wheels from silver threepenny pieces.

Better had of course to visit Greenwich to collect and deliver watches and Stanley would occasionally accompany him, having to wait outside whilst the business was done (this would probably have been in the period up to 1923). Better would sometimes go by tricycle and Humphrey Smith recalled that having arrived at the top of the hill in a state of near exhaustion Better would need to be revived by the gatehouse keeper with a mug of tea.<sup>21</sup> The gatehouse was demolished by a wartime bomb.

Better was highly regarded by Dick Oliver the Clerkenwell casemaker who said that he was very demanding and that they were not always able to meet his exact requirements. He recalled that Better would redial and recase good movements (e.g. Longines) which had been taken out of gold cases and even suggested that Better could make silver dials and cases himself. He redialed watches for F J Camm with the latter's name on the dial and these included a Vacheron ladies watch and a Swiss pocket watch. After Better's death Oliver obtained various items from his workshop, these included a silver dial signed F J Camm and an enamel wrist watch dial signed Better in ink. Better would take on too much work and take money in advance which Oliver thought was a mistake

(his own father would never allow this). Oliver recalled that he was able to find a customer for a gold cased karrusel of Better's.

Sidney Better died on 25 February 1950 and was buried in the East Ham Jewish Cemetery. There was no will and no doubt his effects were quickly dispersed amongst the Clerkenwell trade in order to pay expenses. Dick Oliver recalled that Better's box chronometer had already gone by the time he arrived at the workshop - sold for about £30.

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21. From the author's telephone conversation with Humphrey Smith, date not noted. He was in charge of the time service and chronometers at Greenwich from October 1936.