

Showtime at Oxnead: The timekeepers depicted in *The Paston Treasure*

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The Paston Treasure (Fig. 1 and front cover) is a remarkable, large still life painting commissioned from an unknown (probably Dutch) artist in the early 1660s, by a member of the wealthy landowning Paston family of Oxnead Hall in Norfolk. This year the painting is the centrepiece of an important exhibition masterminded jointly by the Yale Center for British Art and Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery, the home of the painting and where the exhibition is to be held between 23 June and 23 September.¹ Three horological devices are carefully depicted in the painting and this article discusses the objects themselves and their significance in the crowded still life ensemble of the work. Three equivalent pieces, loaned for the exhibition and illustrated in this article, represent the kind of object depicted in the painting.



Fig. 1. *The Paston Treasure*.

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1. The exhibition, which also ran at Yale earlier this year, brings together nearly 140 related objects, five of them treasures actually depicted in the painting and brought together for the first time in three centuries. There is an associated catalogue, *The Paston Treasure, Microcosm of the Known World* (Yale University Press, 2017; this article is a version of the author's contribution to the catalogue) and an on-line film, narrated by Stephen Fry, *The Paston Treasure: A Painting Like No Other*, see: <https://tinyurl.com/Pastonfilm>.



Fig. 2. A close up of the watch and the watch key in the painting.

Introduction

Extensive research (both historical and practical) carried out in recent years on this enigmatic painting reveals that it was commissioned at Oxnead by either Sir William Paston, (1610–1663) or by his son Sir Robert Paston, first Earl of Yarmouth (1631–1683). In 1638/39 Sir William went on an extended tour of Europe during which time it is believed he collected many of the fine things seen in the painting. Staunch royalists, William and son Robert spent much time abroad during the Interregnum and although the family suffered heavy penalties imposed by Cromwell, William, and then Robert, continued to collect. The Pastons also provided financial support for the exiled future King Charles II, for which Robert was knighted in 1660 and made Earl of Yarmouth in 1679. It was probably to celebrate their prosperity and demonstrate their love of collecting, their learning and fine taste, that *The Paston Treasure* was commissioned in the early 1660s. Sadly, the prosperity of the family did not last, and by the mid-1670s the Pastons were in serious debt. Robert had a great interest in practical alchemy, with his own laboratory at Oxnead Hall, and at this time worked hard in a search for ways to

create gold from base metals to save the family fortunes. Of course, all came to nought and from this period he began selling parts of the family collection to make ends meet.

The Paston Treasure has so many fine and interesting pieces depicted in its amazing ‘decoupage-like’ assemblage, that it is not possible here to discuss them all, even briefly, and this article confines its attention to the horological objects. The reader interested in a broader view of this fascinating work, discussion of its many mysteries, and the detailed scientific and historical research carried out on it, is referred to the exhibition catalogue.

The watch

On the table, immediately to the left of the little girl with the musical score, is placed a fine watch in an enamel case, its cover open to reveal the dial in equally fine enamel (Fig. 2). Tied to the bow at the top of the watch is a blue silk ribbon, at the other end of which is a gilt-brass crank winding key, typical of the period. The watch is shown sitting in a further, leather-covered protective case, also typical of its kind, the open lid revealing the fine red velvet-lined interior. The watch is French, dating from about 1635–1640, its



Fig. 3. The watch by Josias Jolly in the exhibition.



Fig. 4. The dial of the watch in the exhibition.

case and dial of the type generically known as of Blois enamel and almost certainly created in either Blois, Chateaudun or Paris. The extent of the pure white enamel ground evident on the case identifies this as of a relatively early period in the development of such watches in France, later examples boasting a considerably greater palette of colours in the enamels.² The case of such a watch, invariably in gold, was usually fully covered with enamel incorporating painted scenes, usually either floral, or of biblical themes, or from classical mythology, the images sourced from known paintings, or prints taken from them. The enamel work would cover the front bezel (retaining the glass protecting the dial) and the back of the case, but also fully inside, forming the counter enamel, and over the dial itself.

The enamel-cased watch chosen for the exhibition (Figs 3 and 4), kindly loaned by Simon Bull, is what must be an almost identical timepiece, c.1635–42, signed by Josias Jolly (French, based in Paris, 1608–1642). The dial depicts a pastoral scene with a river flowing through it. The watch is exhibited in an appropriate red velvet-lined

case with a silk ribbon and brass crank key, precisely as in the painting.

A Blois enamel watch at this period represented the epitome of luxury and style - one of the 'must-haves' among small articles of precious personal jewellery; watches of this type were virtually alone in showcasing this art, then at its height, and represent some of the most magnificent examples of enamelling ever produced.³ The timekeeping capability of this object (such as it was - a watch at this period was only capable of keeping time to within about +/- 15 minutes a day), was entirely secondary to its value as an *objet d'art* and it is unlikely these precious objects were ever routinely used for time-of-day determination. Being such poor timekeepers, they were never normally fitted with a minute hand, and it is a single hour hand, with a long tail, which is shown in the painting. Nevertheless, so highly prized were such watches that, twenty-five years later, when perhaps the Paston treasure was assembled for the painting, it would certainly have still been something to treasure and be proud of.

While the watch cannot be identified in any of the surviving Paston household

2. Simon Bull, '17th century Watch Enamels: The Apogee of a Delicate Craft', *Eclat International*, 20, 1990, pp. 122–128.

3. Clare Vincent, 'Some Seventeenth-Century French Painted Enamel Watchcases', *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol.37, 2002, 89–106.



Fig. 5. Close up of damage to the watch case.



Fig. 6. Close up of the watch dial in the painting.

inventories, it would have been an exceedingly expensive purchase and is most unlikely to have been the kind of prop a travelling artist would have brought with him to Oxnead. If it was indeed Paston property, as seems most likely, it was in all probability acquired by William Paston when on his travels on the Continent collecting works of art between 1637 and 1639. Perhaps it was then sold after the painting was completed, when the financial difficulties began to make themselves felt at Oxnead in the later 1660s.

Such is the care taken by the artist in rendering this image, that we are even shown slight damage which the enamel of the case has sustained (Fig. 5). The gold cases of these watches were relatively thin and the enamel fired onto the surface then contributed to the structure of the case. If such watches sustained damage by being dropped or knocked, the enamel would invariably break off the surface, usually either near the six o'clock or twelve o'clock positions on the rim of the case, or both. Given that the Paston watch would have been about twenty-five years old at the time, it is perhaps not surprising that some damage had occurred on this tremendously fragile article. On close inspection of the image, the watch clearly shows loss of enamel, revealing the gold substrate below at the six o'clock position, revealing the extraordinary determination of the artist to depict what was really there.

The fidelity of depiction provides further detail to marvel at. Close inspection of the painting on the dial (Fig. 6) allows one to hazard a guess as to what might have been depicted. The image appears to show a

harbour scene, with blue sky above and blue water in the foreground. A classical building rises up to the right, with a structure in red below, possibly on the water, while a grey rocky outcrop on the left might be imagined with a seated figure, arm outstretched. While incomplete, further marks in grey in the clouds above might just represent a pair of wings. It is of course entirely conjecture, but it is just a possibility that here the artist was loosely depicting a scene of Perseus descending to rescue the chained Andromeda from the clutches of the sea monster Cetus. It was an image frequently represented in contemporary paintings and their respective prints, and was certainly one Robert Paston was familiar with. The third surviving household inventory (pre-dating 1673) includes reference to 'A fine limd picture of Andromeda chained to a rock. Of each side of it the pictures of Sir Robert Paston's and his ladies...'.⁴

The sand-glass

Placed at the back of the scene, on an ebony box alongside the extinguished candle, a silk handkerchief and a clay pipe, stands a sand-glass (Fig. 7). Given its size, this is probably a 30-minute glass and is probably either French or Italian in origin and relatively new at the time of the painting. As with the watch, it may well be an instrument William Paston acquired on his travels in the late 1630s. Probably having a frame of boxwood and with five, finely turned columns, it was evidently of very fine quality (many were made in much more primitive undecorated wooden frames) but is otherwise quite standard in its construction,

4. *Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1844, 151.



Fig. 7. Close up of the sand-glass in the painting.



Fig. 8. The sand-glass shown in the exhibition.

having the usual blown glass ampoules, tied together at the junction, bound with putty and thread, and filled with red sand.⁵ The object chosen for the exhibition (Fig. 8) is kindly loaned from the collections of Charles Frodsham & Co. Ltd, London. It is probably contemporary with that shown in the painting, and while it is of a rather more basic, undecorated construction, it represents the type very well.

While its presence in the painting may have been intended principally to support the underlying Vanitas theme (see later in this article), it would nevertheless have been a functional and useful object for interval timing. Such instruments were routinely used in marine navigation for measuring the speed of the ship, and in short-term timekeeping in civil use such as for church sermons, school lessons, in the kitchen and in timing many other kinds of process. A sand-glass would certainly be of use to one with scientific

interests – perhaps this is one of the few objects depicted in the *Paston Treasure* that link to Sir Robert's alchemical work, and may have served as a laboratory tool in the following decades?

The wall clock

Arguably, the most interesting horological object shown in *The Paston Treasure* is the wall clock in a square ebony frame orientated in the form of a diamond (Fig. 9). Situated right at the back of the picture, the clock is apparently suspended by what appears to be a gilt-metal mount at its apex, from a loop in the mouth of a wooden stag's head. According to results of physical study and X Rays of the painting,⁶ the clock and stag's head together were the last to be painted, superimposing the image of a woman, herself superimposing a depiction of a plate. The quality of the work is somewhat inferior to the remainder of the painting and suggests hurried last-minute

5. A. J. Turner, *Time Measuring Instruments* (The Time Museum, Rockford, 1984), pp. 75–84.

6. Spike Bucklow & Jessica David, 'Making the Paston Treasure', in the exhibition catalogue (n. 1), pp. 76–87.



Fig. 9. Close up of the clock in the painting.

changes, as described by Bucklow and David. Why the painting was changed remains a mystery, but the choice of the clock as an alternative is interesting, as there is much more to this object than the obvious link to the overt Vanitas theme discussed later.

The ebony case of the clock tells us it probably dates from the early 1660s with a movement almost certainly controlled by a pendulum, making this something of a 'state of the art' instrument and of considerable philosophical interest. The introduction of the

pendulum clock as a practical timekeeping device in 1656 by the celebrated Dutch scientist and mathematician Christiaan Huygens had caused a great stir in philosophical circles as its use improved the timekeeping capability of mechanical clocks by several orders of magnitude. Earlier clocks, controlled by a balance wheel – a larger version of what was in the Blois enamel watch – were, like the watch, incapable of consistently keeping time better than about +/-15 minutes a day. With a pendulum, the new clocks could keep time to within seconds a day and were the subject of great excitement in London when clockmaker Ahasuerus Fromanteel (1607–1693) announced their availability at his premises the following year in the London newspaper *Mercurius Politicus*.⁷ Fromanteel had sent his son John to the Netherlands to work with Huygens's clockmaker Salomon Coster and now the clocks were being produced in London.

It is known that William Paston was interested in such early technologies and both Paston and Ahasuerus Fromanteel (who had strong family connections in Norwich) were part of the circle of the great seventeenth-century 'intelligencer' Samuel Hartlib (c. 1600–1662).⁸ An anecdote published by the mathematician and surveyor William Leybourn (1626–1716) reveals that Fromanteel designed and built 'mechanical recreations', including a clockwork automaton for 'Sir Parston'. If this is Sir William Paston – which seems likely – this is important evidence of his interest in such early technologies. Leybourn states:

About the year 1649 or 50, one Fromanteel an English Man (though of Dutch Parentage) made here in London for Sr. Parston a little Figurine Silver, of a woman in Dutch Habit, holding upright in her two Hands a Silver Cup, which would hold about the tenth part of a Pint of Wine. This Figure Sir Parston called his Froe (in respect of her Habit) [presumably his version of the Dutch for woman, which is vrouw, JB] and

7. Marchamont Nedham (ed.) *Mercurius Politicus*, London, 1658; for a reproduction and transcription of the advert see *Antiquarian Horology* September 2009, 619–20.

8. Rebecca Pohancenic, 'The Intelligencer and the Instrument Maker: early Communications in the Development of the Pendulum Clock', *Antiquarian Horology*, Vol. 31, No. 6 (December 2009), 747–58, and Rebecca Pohancenic, 'The Theorist & the Instrument Maker: early Communications in the Development of the Pendulum Clock', *Antiquarian Horology*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (June 2010), 191–200.

after Dinner (for the Entertainment of his Friends) while his Servants were at their Dinner, would call for a Bottle of Wine, and his Froe to wait at his Table in his Servants Absence; which being brought, he would take the Cup out of his Froes Hands, and fill it with Wine; then drinking to one of his Friends on the other side of the table, he would fill the Cup, and put it into the Froes Hands again, and directing her Face to the Person he drank to, the Froe would move of her own accord, cross the Table to the party drank to...This Figure have I often seen, and been at the Table when the Experiment was put in practice.⁹

Through Hartlib, it seems Paston met another talented London clockmaker Davis Mell (1604–1662) who was also a musician, but who had taken up professional clockmaking in quieter times during the Commonwealth. Paston bought one of Mell's clocks in 1655 – several years before the clock in the picture was created.¹⁰ Mell specialised in musical clocks and it is probable the clock Paston bought was of this type. It may be the timepiece described as 'A Chime Clock' in the second surviving inventory (pre-dating 1673), titled 'Curiosities in Lady Paston's Closet at Oxnead...' which appears to have been given the enormous valuation of 180 pistols (roughly £150). A fine chiming lantern clock by Mell, now in the Harris collection at Belmont (Fig.10) is perhaps similar, or might even be this very clock.¹¹

As with the Blois enamel watch, it is likely, being so valuable, this fine clock by Mell was sold soon afterwards as no clock approaching that value appears on any subsequent Paston household inventory.

The clock depicted in the painting however, was very different. Such early pendulum clocks were almost always fitted in wooden cases – a new departure for clockmakers whose products had invariably been decoratively metal-cased before. The best of this new type of horological furniture had a



Fig. 10. Chiming clock by Davis Mell in Harris collection at Belmont, c. 1655.

minute hand as well as an hour hand to indicate the time more precisely, and the wall-mounted versions were rather more substantial than the clock shown in *The Paston Treasure*. The usual early pendulum wall clock was reminiscent of the upper part of a longcase clock (which evolved from these early wall clocks by having a trunk added below). The clock shown in *The Paston Treasure* was however of a rarer type. Less substantial in the construction, without striking work and consequently slightly less expensive to produce, such a clock nevertheless had a very stylish appearance and contained the essential element of interest – the pendulum control. Indeed, the clock depicted in *The Paston Treasure* may very well have been bought from Ahasuerus Fromanteel himself.

9. William Leybourn and Richard Sault, *Pleasure with Profit: Consisting of Recreations of Diverse Kinds* (London: Baldwin & Dunton, 1694), Chapter 11, 19, No. 5 and Chapter 13, 27 (no.xvi).

10. Hartlib papers, Ephemerides 1655, Part 4, 13 August-31 December, see <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/hartlib/29/5/56B>.

11. Lantern clock by Davis Mell at Belmont, Harris (Belmont) Charity, Inv. No: FAV.BT.H107).

Examples known

This form of wall clock in a 'diamond shaped' case with a small and relatively simple movement, survives in a number of examples today, some with rear winding evidently intended for use on a gallery such as in a hall of a house or on the gallery of a chapel. At least nineteen examples are now known, including an anonymous example also in the Belmont collection¹² and some by celebrated London makers, including the remains of one by Fromanteel. Although simpler than the more typical hour-striking wall clock of the period, an early pendulum clock of this kind still very much represented the 'high tech' of the day and for viewers of the Paston Treasure who knew, this was an impressive piece of technology quietly positioned in the background of the scene.

The clock in the painting displays several features typical of early English pendulum clocks, including a case in fashionable ebony, a narrow silvered-brass chapter ring on the dial and an engraved gilt-brass dial plate. It is almost certainly the clock described as 'One Clock Picktor' found in The Best Closett in the New Buildings at Oxnead, amongst many other good things, in the 1683 inventory, and the 'One clock in a black frame' in The Dying Room in 1703. The single blued-steel hour hand (with its long tail as in the enamel watch), as shown in the painting, may seem anomalous on a clock principally of interest for its accuracy, and this requires comment.

Long term stability: the real value in a pendulum clock

It's important to emphasise why the accuracy of the new pendulum clocks was so highly prized, at least in the domestic market, as this point does not seem to have been sufficiently made in the literature concerning the introduction of the pendulum clock. It was not because the owners wanted to determine time correctly to within seconds, or even to within a minute – such things were not of principal

interest to most private owners. What was much more valuable was the fact that such clocks had *great long term stability*, that is to say the owner didn't need to keep putting them right every day (something which was not as straightforward as it seems today).

In his London advertisement (see note 7), Ahasuerus Fromanteel emphasised that these new clocks can now be made 'to go for a week, a month, or even a year, and keep time as well' [as one which is set every day]. The relevance of this remark may seem puzzling to some, as long duration clocks had been made for some decades before this time,¹³ but such clocks, which still had the old balance wheel control, were regarded as a *tour de force* of design, rather than precision timekeepers. The inevitably poor timekeeping, and the need to reset regularly if time of day was to be indicated correctly, was not regarded as an issue with such a clock.

On the other hand, Fromanteel's meaning in his advert is quite clear: the new clocks did not *need* setting every day, and here was a real advance – a modern convenience. That such a clock should have a single hour hand makes sense in that context – where errors after a week, or even a month's running would begin to show without a pendulum as a controller.

Exhibition clock

The clock of this type chosen for the exhibition (Fig. 11), which also has a single hour hand, dates from c. 1670 and is by Henry Jones (1633–1695) of London. Apprenticed in 1654 to Benjamin Hill but turned over to Edward East (1602–1696), Jones was in the top rank of London makers from this 'Horological Golden Age', and this clock is another example of the type by one of the most highly respected of makers.¹⁴ The clock, which was originally designed to wind from the rear and which has been converted to front wind, is kindly loaned to the exhibition by the Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums, Glasgow.

12. Inv. No: FAV.BT.H209.

13. For example, the three-month going astronomical clock made c. 1630 by Johannes Sayller of Ulm, now preserved in the Landesmuseum in Württemberg in Germany.

14. Andrew James, 'Henry Jones of London, his birth, marriage and family', *Antiquarian Horology*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (March 2018), 108–111; and C. Stuart Kelley, 'Henry Jones, Clockmaker', *Antiquarian Horology*, (4 parts) Vol. 27, No. 2 (2002) et seq. (2003–2005).



Fig. 11. The clock by Henry Jones, London, c. 1670, in the exhibition.

Further coverage of this interesting and rare form of ‘diamond cased’ clock can be found in a number of articles written in recent years, and the form, once thought to be ‘one off’ in occurrence and even a later ‘made up’ design, is now recognised as of real interest and rarity.¹⁵

The symbolism of timekeepers

The appearance of any timekeeping device in a still life painting is invariably recognised by art scholars as potentially representing the concept of Vanitas – the allegory which points to the vanity of riches and luxury in life, and a stern reminder of the brevity of our existence

15. L. C. Rettig, ‘Clocks from the Burrell Collection’, *Clocks magazine*, December 1982, 21–23; P. G. Dawson, C. B. Drover & D. W. Parkes, *Early English Clocks* (1982), ACC Edition, 2003, pp. 528–530; T. Spittler, ‘Diamonds aren’t forever’, *Clocks magazine*, May 1996, 21; *The Passage of Time*, Exhibition Catalogue, AHS, 1999, p. 22; H. M. Vehmeyer, *Clocks, their origin and development, 1320–1880*, Snoek, 2004, pp. 570–571; Bill Linnard, ‘Diamonds are Forever?’, *Horological Journal*, May 2005, 175–177; Bill Linnard, ‘More Diamond Dials’, *Horological Journal*, April 2006, 149–150; Bill Linnard, ‘Diamonds Galore!’, *Horological Journal*, April 2007, 136–138; Bill Linnard, ‘Three of Diamonds’, *Horological Journal*, October 2008, 438–440; Dreweatts auction catalogue, 11 March 2014, Lot 144; and Dreweatts auction catalogue, 15 September 2015, Lot 201.

– a *memento mori*. It would have been second nature to the still life artist working for the Pastons and there is no doubt that, among several other messages sounding from this painting, the moral of the Vanitas was intended, loud and clear. Luxury is exemplified in almost every quarter, including, of course, the Blois enamel watch. In sounding a *memento mori*, a timekeeping device is traditionally depicted with the time on the dial shown at just before twelve (midnight) – ‘the end is nigh’. The dial of the Blois watch indicates 8 o’clock and its message is evidently simply that of riches – wealth and an appreciation of fine art. This contrasts with the wall clock, the hand of which does indeed point to just before twelve. Whilst being in stylish ebony, the black impression of the clock case, as well as its coincidental similarity to some contemporary church clock dials and to funerary hatchments (being of a diamond shape), all add to the sober message it intends; there is no doubt the clock has a salutary role in addition to its technological significance. Alongside is the guttering candle, and the hour glass with much of its sand now run into the lower vessel – there is no escaping the allegory there. However, the representation of timekeepers in paintings can, in other contexts, have another meaning, especially when present in portraiture.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century watches and clocks were invariably expensive and certainly an indicator of wealth and

prosperity when depicted alongside the sitter, and the association with a clock of more complicated design implied an educated, learned owner.¹⁶ However, of greater significance, and widely understood at the time, was the association of clocks and watches with the qualities of temperance and order. Although by modern standards clocks were poor timekeepers, they were generally understood to be regular and controlled in their behaviour, and countless sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portraits used such an instrument alongside the sitter to suggest they possessed these qualities. Thus, with three timekeeping devices shown in *The Paston Treasure*, there may well have been an intention to convey these subliminal messages too.

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Figs 1,2,5,6,7 & 9: Norfolk Museums Service

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Fig. 8: Charles Frodsham & Co. Ltd, and Stokes Photo Ltd

Fig. 10: Harris (Belmont) Charity

Fig. 11: CSG CIC Glasgow Museums & Libraries Collections

16. A. Chapuis, *De Horologiis in Arte* (Lausanne: Scriptor, 1954).