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South London Branch British Horological Institute

Newsletter No. 567 MAY 2026

Branch No 25. Founded 1978

Meetings are held on the 1st Thursday of each month

At The White Hart Barn (Godstone Village Hall)

Godstone Surrey RH9 8DT at 7.30 p.m. for 8 p.m.

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Wanted

**2026
NEWSLETTER**

www.slbhi.co.uk

"Time is too slow for those who wait, too swift for those who fear, too long for those who grieve, too short for those who rejoice, but for those who love, time is eternity." ~ Henry Van Dyke

NEXT MEETING West Dean Students.

Annual Presentations from students.

4th June 2026

The South London Branch is delighted to
welcome back Malcolm Archer

Tutor from West Dean.

He will give us a short introduction on how he
has been coping with teaching horology to the
students over the last year and then
individually introduce student presentations.

Doors open 7:30pm Starting 8pm.

LAST MONTH'S MEETING

American and English Clockmaking/Repairing – reinterpreting the National Clock and Watch Museum, Columbia

Rory McEvoy FBHI, Curator Emeritus RGO

For our May lecture we welcomed our former BHI SL Chairman Rory McEvoy, who was visiting the UK with a delegation of NAWCC members. His lecture outlined the work he has done as Executive Director of the National Watch and Clock Museum, as well as their Horology School. The lecture offered an engaging account of a major transformation at the Museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania—one that celebrates turret (or “tower” to use the American term!) and street clocks while revitalising community engagement, education, and conservation practice. Rory shared technical insight, project-management lessons and human stories, moving from the gallery’s problematic initial state, through the complex restoration and installation of a 20-foot street clock, and to the growth of a hands-on training programme at the Museum’s Horology School.

Why the project mattered

Assessing the Museum on taking up his position in the USA, Rory found the entrance gallery tired, unsafe, and poorly interpreted. A superb collection of turret and tower clock movements were poorly presented and failed to offer visitor engagement: mismatched barriers and stanchions, fraying cables, debris, dirt and even bird droppings on some objects. These conditions created preservation risks and made the gallery feel indifferent. Restoring this entrance space was therefore urgent—both to protect the collection and to present a compelling visitor introduction to the museum’s horological holdings.

A neglected street clock becomes the centrepiece

Central to the project was a 20-foot street clock which had lain in storage. Acquired from Tampa, Florida via the NAWCC street clock chapter, the clock—an unusual Ansonia presented both rarity and logistical challenge. Historically designed so that the driving movement sat indoors and the motion works ran beneath the pavement to the exterior dial, this arrangement was designed to minimize condensation and corrosion in humid climates, a significant consideration for Pennsylvania summers. The clock had been buried under junk and required thorough restoration, making it both a conservation priority and a dramatic focal point for the redesigned gallery.

Design choices, partnerships, and interpretation

Rory set about reviewing the Museum layout to display exhibits to best effect. He described how a casual conversation with a cleaner, Eileen, led to the idea of reconfiguring a doorway to provide better viewing into the conservation studio and to place the street clock as the gallery's focal point. The decision to proceed helped overcome earlier disagreements and revived a stalled project. Rory emphasised the value of partnerships: Museum Display Services, a high-quality local case maker whose workshop was conveniently nearby, provided excellent support for display fabrication. A collector's donation of an important early E. Howard tower clock added interpretive weight and helped shape the gallery narrative.

Technical delights and horological highlights

Rory delighted the audience with detailed accounts of the mechanical and historical gems on display. He discussed a 30-hour tower clock by Schwalbach with exquisite cast-iron framing, inventive mechanisms by Aaron Dodd Crane (including the walking escapement and torsion-pendulum

experiments), a Stevens tower clock with a deadbeat escapement, and an E. Howard tower clock fitted with a gravity escapement. Of particular interest was the walking escapement system: a wire interacts with a pinned barrel/mainspring to provide single impulses while a step-advance mechanism moves the hands, an ingenious system illustrating the innovation of American inventors and historic turret-clock engineering. Dodd Crane didn't limit his skills to clocks – for time poor 19th century parents, he even designed a clockwork, self rocking baby crib!

Conservation, engineering, and installation challenges

The street clock installation was a case study in adaptive engineering. Because the clock's height matched the gallery ceiling height, the team debated cutting the into ceiling or floor; they chose to let visitors see the clock in full, so they cut into the concrete floor to create a deep pit for the foundation. Excavation revealed unexpected archaeological material—the building proved to be on the site of an old foundry, with slag and waste from earlier industrial activity just below surface level —this required geotechnical assessment and deeper (and deeper!) shoring than originally planned. Structural engineers confirmed the need for a more robust foundation, and rising cement prices added budgetary pressure. The team ultimately poured a heavily reinforced concrete base with rebar and a designed trough to allow the motion works to pass beneath the gallery floor.

Moving and orienting the clock during restoration required custom solutions: modified engine mounts, a rolling gantry, and a rotisserie-like rig to turn the heavy cast-iron structure for cleaning, painting, and gilding. Skilled volunteers and two experienced riggers made the final lift appear deceptively straightforward. The clock began running immediately after installation but required a heavy 200-lb weight to drive the motion works; plans are in place to refine the gearing and reduce the required weight to around 120 lb to improve efficiency and lessen wear.

Community, volunteers, and fundraising

A consistent theme in Rory's talk was the vital role of volunteers and the revived sense of community ownership. Museum staff and volunteers—named contributors included Alex (communications), Sonny (maintenance), and the financial controller—took part in clearing debris, preparing the site, and participating in finishing work such as gilding and painting. Local donors and collectors contributed clocks and cash donations; one donor's gift of an early E. Howard clock notably enhanced the gallery's interpretive value. The project's success exemplified how modest individual contributions and hands-on volunteer effort can combine to deliver a major institutional outcome.

Environmental controls as enablers

Rory highlighted the importance of environmental control systems for conservation. He led fundraising and procurement efforts for an updated ventilation solution. In tendering the work, contractors were invited to walk the site; the winning contractor included an extra unit dedicated to the gallery's back room and conservation studio. This dedicated air-conditioning reduced humidity risks and provided the stable environment necessary to protect exposed ironwork and to allow conservation work to proceed safely.

Revitalising education: the Horology School

Parallel to the gallery work, Rory described significant investment in the Museum's Horology School. He acknowledged the success of the BHI SL workshop and importance of such facilities for training and development. After pandemic-era closures and loss of equipment, the Museum prioritised revitalising hands-on learning. One donor provided \$120,000 to partition and refurbish a former loading-dock area, enabling a machine shop, wood shop, and forge area. The Museum also invested in a professional watchmaking studio, importing German watch benches, cleaning machines, timing instruments, and camera-equipped student pods, aimed at delivering industry-level instruction.

The School is already running multiple workshops (introductory wristwatch servicing, basic clock repair, and more), developed with support from industry veterans, including an alumnus who has delivered Rolex training worldwide. Rory emphasised that clock-repair instruction is scarce in the U.S., and the museum's program fills an important regional gap, offering structured pathways from beginner workshops to advanced horological training.

Interpretation and visitor experience

The new gallery uses strong graphic storytelling (period prints, wall graphics), transparent sightlines into a conservation studio, and carefully curated displays that highlight rare makers like Ansonia and E. Howard. The entrance moment, now housing the 20-foot street clock within a soft gothic arch, against a period backdrop photo of a street scene showing a similar street clock, creates an immediate, memorable impression that draws visitors into the museum, inviting both novices and specialists to engage with the mechanics and social history of public timekeeping.

Lessons learned and next steps

Rory shared practical lessons: the importance of clear communication with contractors, the value of delegating restoration tasks to specialist volunteer chapters (the tower and street clock chapter managed mechanical restoration while museum staff handled building works), and the need for patient, persistent fundraising. Operational next steps include finalising interpretive panels, and continuing to expand the Horology School's curriculum and outreach.

Conclusion: craft, conservation, and community

Rory framed the project as much about people as about iron and gears. Restoring the street clock and the gallery reconnected volunteers, donors, students, and staff to craft skills and scientific curiosity. The combined outcomes, a restored public-facing exhibit and a revived training program, offer a sustainable model of conservation and public engagement feeding education and skill transmission.

Rory closed by inviting BHI SL BRANCH members to make contact if visiting the USA, and welcomed to us the official gallery opening which is scheduled for 25th July.

John Summers



WANTED DEAD or COMPLETELY DISMEMBERED

If you have any broken cylinder platforms or parts could I please have them for an evening class project. Any parts like hairsprings, cylinder escape wheels, balances or complete platforms, damaged or not. They can be given to me at a meeting or evening class or by arrangement. Regretfully, I would like to have them as a freebie but for okay platforms I will consider checking my pockets!

**Thankyou Ron Rose 07980 175181 or
ronalderose@btinternet.com**

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions for 2026 are coming in steadily with more than 85% already paid. If you received a renewal form with this newsletter please complete and return to me with payment.

I have posted membership cards to those who have paid.

If you received a renewal notice but have paid please contact me and I will adjust my records.

PLEASE NOTE I have not sent news letters to those whose payments I have not recieved

FREE ADVERTISING FOR BRANCH MEMBERS

If you wish to place an advert in our newsletter , contact Bill :-
01543 506195 or electricwilliam@gmail.com

If you are wondering about this service, it is usually very successful with both items advertised last month sold !

www.slbbhi.co.uk