



Est 1858

South London Branch British Horological Institute

Newsletter No. 569 AUGUST 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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**2026
NEWSLETTER**

www.slbbhi.co.uk

The hours of folly are measured by the clock; but of wisdom, no clock can measure. William Blake

NEXT MEETING

6th August

Garry Williams MIET. BHI Chairman.

Donna Millichamp.

Membership and short course administrator.

Doors open 7:30pm Starting 8pm.

The South London Branch of the British Horological Institute is one of the largest and most well attended branches within the UK. Our origins go back to the 1970s and our first chairman was the late Peter Elliott a very good friend of our current vice president Ron Rose. between them they organised events at Upton Hall such as making a skeleton clock in three days.

Continued



MAKING A CLOCK IN 3 DAYS TEAM

We cannot ignore the current changes which are happening within the British Horological institute, the oldest institute in the world, set up in 1858 primarily to serve the professional horological community, training clock and watchmakers alike. Memberships are declining and many branches are reporting fewer active members. Communication is primarily now via e-mail, so having a newsletter like our own, with website is exceptional. We have found that using Royal Mail doubles our expenditure on stamps et cetera. With artificial intelligence (AI) now helping us with newsletter reports, what of the future I hear you ask. Gary Williams the BHI chairman has been endeavouring to guide the BHI through these and other big changes that are engulfing the institute at present. Are changes necessary? Have we not faced these problems with the upkeep of Upton Hall in the past and do we need to sell? Does the Museum of Time Keeping have any contract with the administration of the BHI? Do we continue to trailblaze the distance learning course?

All these questions and more Gary Williams and Donna Millichamp, who is the membership and short course administrator, hope to answer for us. Perhaps we do dwell too much in the past and should think what is the way forward for the institute.

It is very rare branches get a visit from the chairman and a head office administrator so I would like to thank Gary and Donna for taking the time to come and see us. I hope you will find the time as well to come and meet with them and greet them to the South London Branch.

Duncan Greig

LAST MEETING

Justin Koullapis FBHI

“Self-Perpetuating. the Legacy of John Harwood “.

Introduction and framing

Justin was welcomed to BHI SL and told a richly researched, technically detailed and warmly human story of John Harwood FBHI, and his development of the first practical self-winding wristwatch. To Harwood it was not a simple invention of convenience; his deeper objective was to transform the watch from a fragile, exposed mechanism into a hermetically sealed, reliable instrument—one protected from dust, grime and moisture. The lecture combined biography, design and patent, engineering explanation, commercial context and family anecdotes to show how technical genius, manufacturing realities and marketing choices together determined the fate of Harwood’s invention.

Who was John Harwood and what problem did he try to solve?

John Harwood (b. 1893) trained as a watchmaker in Bolton, served in the First World War,

and later settled on the Isle of Man. At his bench he cleaned, burnished and adjusted watches; in this he observed how these delicate movements were exposed to contaminants the moment they left the watchmaker's care. Harwood's aim—quoted in articles and in the *Horological Journal*—was to create a watch that could be sealed against ingress by eliminating protruding parts like the crown and stem. It was not primarily to save owners the chore of winding, but to allow the watch to be sealed from external elements and therefore to be more durable and reliable.

Technical concept and distinctive design choices.

Harwood's solution combined several notable mechanical choices:

- Bumper-style rotor: Instead of the full central rotor that later became commonplace, Harwood used an oscillating segment (a "bumper") that straddled the movement on two pivots. This reduced lateral load on a single bearing and addressed a common failure mode in early automatics where a long cantilevered arm stressed the pivot.
- No external crown: To avoid a stem passing through the case wall, Harwood designed a bezel-based setting mechanism. Rotating the bezel engaged internal gearing to move the hands, and a small dial aperture displayed a coloured indicator (commonly red) to show neutral vs setting state.
- Friction clutch and buffers: The winding train included a friction clutch allowing slip when the mainspring reached tension; buffers and small springs absorbed impacts from rotor motion. These elements were intended to protect the movement and reduce wear.
- Precision finishing: Harwood produced a complete prototype and detailed drawings, and he personally finished many of the first watches—filing tiny clearances by hand to ensure reliable operation.

Prototyping and Swiss collaboration

Recognising that large-scale watch production required Swiss expertise, Harwood took his prototype and patents to manufacturers in Switzerland in the early 1920s. He worked with Fortis and intermediaries (e.g. Ernst and Anton Schild) and met technicians such as Peter Abey, who later praised Harwood's

complete prototype as “perfect in conception and execution.” However, the Swiss industry of that era was still evolving techniques for mass producing novel, small, high-precision parts. Specialised assembly methods and automated processes we now take for granted were lacking; as a consequence, many components had to be hand-finished.

Practical improvisation

Justin highlighted Harwood’s innovation in the early years - the factory could not supply spring steel wire of the correct gauge for tiny coiled buffer springs, so Harwood procured a spool of polishing wire (used for jewel polishing assemblies) and repurposed it to form the needed springs. This story illustrated both Harwood’s resourcefulness and the fragile supply chains for unusual parts in the 1920s

Market launch, licensing and product variety

Harwood filed patents in the UK, Switzerland, France, Germany and the US in the early 1920s – a sign of the early global ambitions. The first model was presented at Basel in 1926, and distribution began by 1928 through licensed partners. There were numerous case and dial variations, licenses produced in Spain and the United States, and active advertising campaigns. Contemporary trade publications and letters from watchmakers indicate the watches were sold in quantity—records are unclear but estimates in the tens of thousands—and were appreciated by owners where properly serviced.

Why the company failed

Although Harwood’s watches reached a market and received technical respect, the company posted significant losses (a reported loss in 1931) and was wound up by 1932. Justin argued the cause was not simply the Great Depression but a combination of structural factors:

- Manufacturing complexity and cost, bespoke parts, hand finishing and the need for careful assembly raised production costs and hampered margins.
- Distribution and business arrangements: Licensing, finance and

possibly exploitative or unsatisfactory business partnerships left Harwood's company vulnerable.

- Incomplete sealing and technical compromises: Some Harwood models lacked effective caseback gaskets and were not fully waterproof, undermining the very protective advantage Harwood sought to sell.
- Poor marketing messaging: Advertising emphasised "no winding" convenience - portraying the watch mainly as a simple labour-saving curiosity. For a relatively expensive item, this pitch underplayed the more persuasive selling point: improved protection and longer service intervals.
- Trade incentives and service economics: Local watchmakers earned ongoing income from frequent servicing; a better-sealed watch needing less frequent attention reduced service revenue and could be unattractive to repairers. Some watchmakers also found certain adjustments complex for the low pay of small routine jobs, so they were less willing to service intricate new mechanisms.

Advertising and brand positioning: Harwood vs rivals

Justin contrasted Harwood's trade-press, wordy ads with the bold, lifestyle and demonstration-driven marketing of competitors such as Rolex, where later 1930s marketing concentrated on waterproofing, public record attempts and adventurous imagery: sports sponsorships, publicity around endurance feats and direct demonstrations of ruggedness to create strong brand value. Rolex's messaging linked product performance to aspiration, prestige and assuredness; Harwood's, technical comments about "no winding" did not create the same emotional pull. Even if Harwood had aimed for hermetic sealing, he may have lacked the capital to perfect and demonstrate consistent waterproof performance—a handicap given market expectations.

Recognition and legacy

Harwood was eventually awarded the British Horological Institute Gold Medal in 1957—an important award and one of only 12 such medals ever issued—recognising his technical contribution. The BHI and trade publications continued to publish instructions

on Harwood watch servicing for decades, signalling the watch's survival and practical presence in the trade. After the company folded Harwood returned to the bench and lived modestly, with his son continuing in the trade. Justin made contact with the family during lockdown after he was asked for input on a run of horology themed, Isle of Man commemorative stamps. As a result of this contact, the family have kindly loaned Harwood's Gold Medal and portrait to the Museum of Timekeeping, preserving his place in horological history.

Technical demonstrations and artifacts from the talk

The lecture included recorded close-ups and hands-on demonstrations of the bezel-set mechanism, the little flag indicator and the rotor/buffer assembly. These illustrated clearly how rotating the bezel engages the castle wheel and rack to set the hands, how the indicator toggles colour between neutral and setting, and how the bumper rotor's double-pivot mitigated bearing stress. The video fragments showed the friction clutch in action and the buffer compression—mechanical minutiae that emphasised Harwood's precision engineering.

Concluding reflection for club members

Justin highlighted both the pleasures of mechanical detail and the human story of a diligent maker. Harwood's bumper rotor, bezel setting and sealing ambition are tangible contributions to the wristwatch's evolution from an exposed, delicate object to a rugged everyday instrument. Whether or not his company ultimately succeeded, the expectations he helped establish—automatic winding, reduced ingress and greater reliability—are central to modern horology. His life also reminds us that technical pioneers do not always reap the rewards they deserve; many innovations arrive because multiple people and firms refine, commercialise and market them, but the originators still deserve our admiration. The lecture highlights John Harwood's rightful place in that lineage and gave club members both a mechanical appreciation and a cautionary business story to reflect on.

John Summers.

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions seem to have dried up with around 10% outstanding. 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 most items being sold.