# TIME'S ALTERATION: CALENDAR REFORM IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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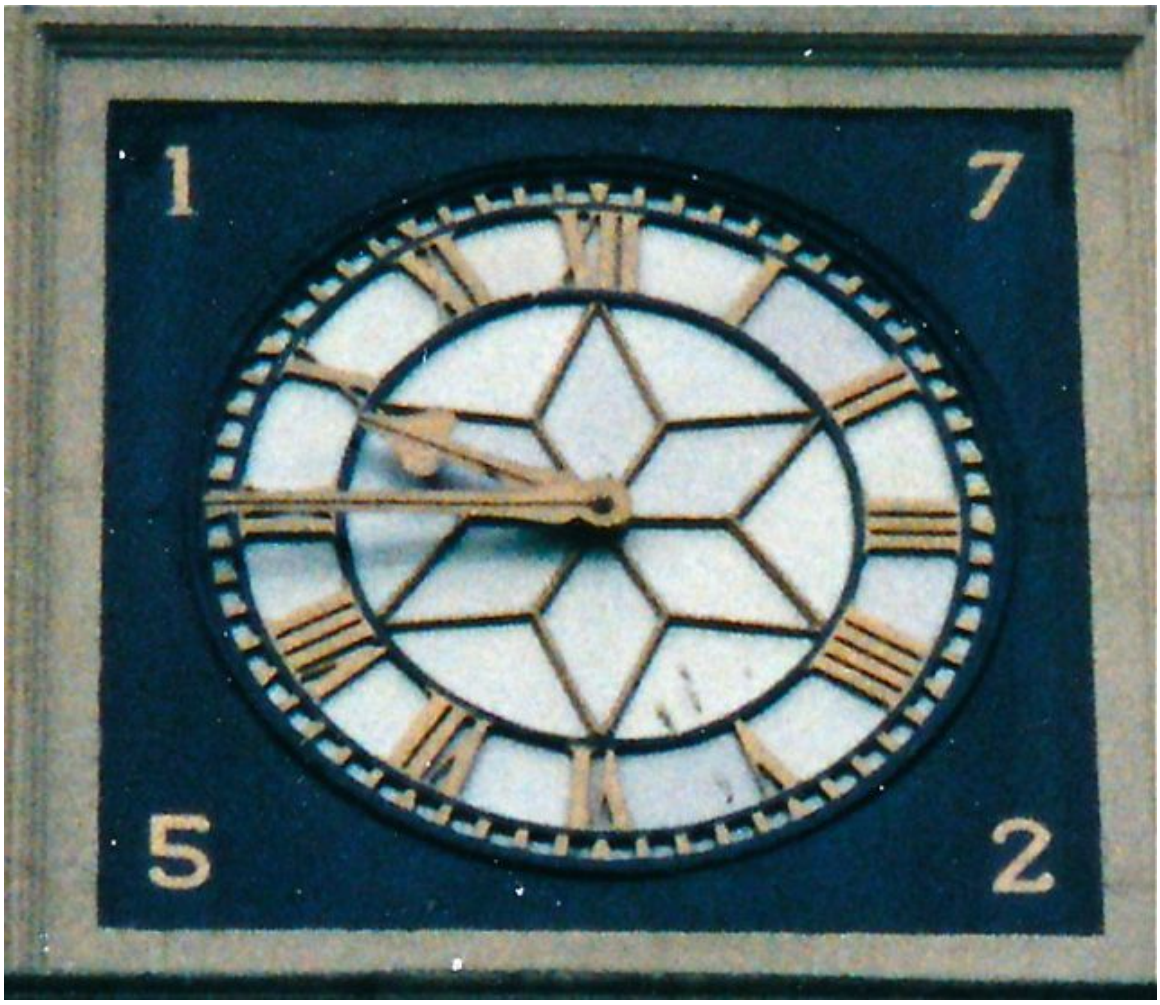

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# Preface

Calendar reform is an unlikely subject to research. It began for me ten years ago, one December night in Keele, with a sudden (and no doubt methodologically unsound) desire to find out what really happened in the famous English calendar riots of 1752. This book is the result of that quest, and it begins and ends with the "Give us our eleven days!" riots, one of the most-cited episodes of eighteenth-century history yet also one of the least understood. To understand it in the end involved an episodic journey through a two-hundred year swathe of English social, cultural, religious, scientific and political history.

The social historian who would encompass the calendar has to become an Orlando, ranging over centuries, homing in on significant episodes, and trespassing on the territory of specialists in neighbouring fields. "If nobody asks me what time is", said Augustine, "I know; but if anybody asks me, I don't know". The calendar was, and is, a complex cultural edifice, universally used but understood differently by all. Astronomers and historians of science see one aspect of the subject, theologians and historians of religion another, folklorists and historians of popular culture a third. A social historian should, in principle, be well-placed to put all this back together, and to view the calendar in the round and in its full historical context. A study of the long history of calendar reform provides a backbone for such a study, as explained (with a synopsis) in chapter two. The periods when calendar reform was considered, debated, and finally implemented — the 1580s, 1690s, and mid-eighteenth century — provide the historical core of the book, but also a platform for a wider view of the changing relationship between early modern society and its calendars. Readers will be able to judge how far I have succeeded in putting the calendar back together in a way that contemporaries would have understood, whilst at the same time answering to present-day historical purposes. Writing this book from a terrace above Morecambe bay, observing the setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, the tides, and the relationship between them, I have begun to question whether the supposedly advanced time awareness of modern urban life really is more sophisticated than that of the world of the almanac, which lacked the crutch of the

omni-present digital clock and had to estimate and infer the passage of time in other ways.

This is a book of several parts, although (I trust) with a coherence of its own. Historians and those interested in the calendar may take it as a whole, but those approaching from different directions will have their own agendas; a few directions may be useful. Readers interested primarily in Hogarth and the calendar riots will find chapters one and eleven of most relevance. Academics who require an overview of the scope and significance of the book before venturing in will find this in chapter two, which is in effect the introduction, although I personally prefer to begin (and end) with a story. Those interested in the calendar per se may wish to go first to chapter three, which explains the workings of the calendar, and why it had become an issue in the first place. Those with a particular interest in the sixteenth or seventeenth-century parts of the book (chapters four to seven) will also find it helpful to begin here. Chapters eight explains the making of the calendar reform of 1752, and chapters nine and ten explain its workings and its impact; as well as exploring a transect of cultural history, these are intended to supply a plain and definitive account of the legislation and its effects, something which (surprisingly) has not been done before. Busy reviewers anxious for sweeping quotations are directed to chapters two and eleven.

Although the 1752 calendar reform itself was British, not just English, the book's theme and sub-title is "calendar reform in early modern England". The traditional excuse, that Scotland and Ireland are so important that they have to be ignored, does have some point here. As will become apparent, the calendar was bound up with religion, custom and the agrarian economy. Scotland had a different church, a different culture and climate, even different quarter days, and to have undertaken the same job north of the border would have postponed this book into the next millenium. A search at national level, in the Scottish Record Office and the National Library of Scotland, although accessible, proved disappointing. Ireland I have scarcely touched; it would make an interesting project for someone.

I began this research with an assumption (which may be dignified in retrospect as an hypothesis) that the persistence of old calendar festivals in England after 1752 might have something to say about the relationship between popular and élite culture (whose study, for left-leaning scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, was a benign substitute for the dreary theology of class struggle). My previous doctoral research into the Lancashire wakes holidays, one of the old festive calendar's most resilient features, provided a useful starting point. It was several years before I had the opportunity to do much more. When this came, in 1991, the question took me further than anticipated, into areas which no casual visitor could hope to master fully, but where someone with a particular knowledge of the calendar could nonetheless have something to contribute. In the perilous but fascinating business of backing into unfamiliar historical territories I have incurred a correspondingly large number of debts to others, which I am now pleased to be able to acknowledge. Scholarship has the reputation of being anti-social. From the point of view of those uninvolved it certainly is, and it is the scholar who in the end pays the price, but true scholarship is indeed a social activity.

Lancaster, old Bartholomew, 1997.