

SOME FACTS CONCERNING THE LIFE, TRIALS, AND MISFORTUNES OF HENRY SULLY,  
THE WATCHMAKER. (From the *Mechanic*.)

Source: Silversmith's Trade Journal, May 5, 1876.

*Transcribed and commented by Robert St-Louis, April 2024. Some footnotes are added by the editor for additional insight, comments, and clarifications.*

Editor's note:

This is a fairly good summary biographical text on Henry Sully, in large part gathered and reworded from the chapter<sup>1</sup> that his friend Julien Le Roy devoted to Sully's life story in the 1737 edition of *Règle artificielle du temps*.<sup>2</sup> The small chapter that Major Paul Chamberlain devoted to Sully in his book "It's About Time"<sup>3</sup> no doubt borrows from this summary text, as well as possibly a few other sources (including Le Roy's text obviously).

As the author of this 1876 text indicates, information on Sully's life was not readily available at that time, at least not in English. However, considerable information could be found in French sources (books, articles in newspaper archives, etc.), but those would have been most difficult to research at that time, for someone writing this in America or the U.K. With the increased presence of contemporary information in digitized form on the internet, namely the Gallica website of the French National Library, such facts have become more available to a diligent historical researcher. But the fact remains that many aspects of Sully's life and motivations will always remain incomplete or unknown.

Footnotes in the text are provided by the editor to correct or augment particular statements put forward as "facts" by the author of this article (the "Mechanic"). For a more fulsome description of the subject of Henry Sully's life, work and times, the reader is greatly encouraged to read the editor's considerable writings contained on his website: [www.timetales.ca/sully-main.html](http://www.timetales.ca/sully-main.html)

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The materials at command from which to form the biography of Henry Sully are very few and scarce, inasmuch as there is no notice of him in any of the leading English cyclopaedias, which is somewhat surprising, considering that he was a prominent member of the horological profession in most of the Continental cities.

Beyond a tract written by a lover of his genius<sup>4</sup> the only means at hand we gather from two distinguished and diligent workers of the horological art, who obtained what little is known of him from occasional remarks in the writings of foreign artists<sup>5</sup>.

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1 Pages 381-413.

2 The editor has transcribed and translated this chapter, which is on the website [timetales.ca](http://timetales.ca)

3 1941 Richard R. Smith Co. Inc., reprinted in 1964 by the Holland Press, London, Pages 319-323.

4 Unsure who this "lover" may be, but Sully has had his fans over the decades and centuries, including yours truly.

5 Indeed, such French writings (of the eighteenth century) are the best source of any substance of Sully's life and work.

Henry Sully was an Englishman, born in 1680<sup>6</sup>, and apprenticed at an early age to a celebrated watchmaker of London, named Gretton, under whom he made great progress, he being most assiduous in his attempts to improve timekeepers, which soon gained for him some reputation notice of among those connected with the supporters of his employer<sup>7</sup>; and, on completing his apprenticeship, he immediately set to work to construct a watch<sup>8</sup> which might be the means of discovering the longitude at sea. Having, in the year 1703, shown his plans to Sir Isaac Newton, and, receiving great encouragement from him, so increased his desire to attain his object by means of a timekeeper that he laboured incessantly to produce such to perfection but his object requiring much time - which was money - was ill-suited to the condition of a needy watchmaker for such he was and before he could complete his instrument circumstances compelled him to leave his country.<sup>9</sup> He went to Holland in 1708, where he remained until 1715<sup>10</sup>, from whence, after having become acquainted with the French and Dutch languages, he went to Vienna, where he acquired German.

His genius and conversation obtained for him there the notice of Prince Eugene. The Duke d'Aremberg and Count de Bonneval induced him to accompany them to the army on the Rhine. There he had the charge of the watches, and several German noblemen became his patrons and friends; on peace being restored Sully returned to Paris with the Duke d'Aremberg, who gave him apartments in the Hotel d'Ausbac, with a pension of 600 livres. Soon after his arrival in Paris he was introduced to Julien Le Roy, who writes of him "In our first conversation we disputed the merits of French and English watches, but I was on the weaker side, our watches at that time being inferior to those of London." Shortly afterwards, when the Duke d'Aremberg went to reside at the Cloitre de St. Germain l'Auxerrois, Sully followed him, and there married.

Though a foreigner, Sully applied for the post of " Maitre Horloger," but the Parisian watchmakers, alarmed at his reputation and supporters, united in opposing him in his desire to obtain such an appointment<sup>11</sup>. His friends, however, obtained for him a donation from the Regent of 1500 livres, which Law, of Lauriston, the noted Scotch speculator, was charged to remit to him under the authority of the Court of Versailles. Law, who was a clever man, went to see him, and, having discovered Sully's talents, considered him to be a person highly qualified, and the best adapted person to be engaged in establishing a manufactory for clocks and watches, with a view to the benefit of France. He soon afterwards communicated this design to Sully, who, at his request, went twice to London to engage workmen for the purpose and, having engaged sixty, they with their families were located at Versailles<sup>12</sup>. The manufactory thus formed existed about two years, and Sully was the director. But expenses resulted, the workmen had to be paid, expensive tools were supplied by Sully in order to produce work of a required standard. But as Law was thoroughly ignorant of the practical part of the business he could not understand why so small a profit resulted, and, therefore, began to murmur. Nevertheless, these two years formed the most prosperous period of Sully's life. Handsome apartments, steward, servants, workmen to carry out his ideas, with ample funds, of which he had the management,

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6 Actually, he was baptised in Stogumber Somerset on 12 February 1679.

7 This seems like fanciful conjecture, an expansion of what Le Roy wrote in Règle (1737) p. 382.

8 Le Roy writes that Sully had built several "machines", not specifying whether they were watches or clocks.

9 Actually, little is known about the actual motivations of Sully to leave London and settle in The Hague. This author has written much about this in his Sully biography on timetales.ca

10 See timetales.ca for actual dates. Sully was living in The Hague by August 1707. He relocated to Leiden in 1708, then Frankfurt-on-Main in 1711, and Vienna in 1714. He moved to Paris in late 1715.

11 This episode followed his project of a "new watch" with Le Roy, and presentation of such to the *Académie royale des sciences*, in June 1716. All this is described in more proper detail and context, as is the case for most of the "facts" in this article, in this editor's voluminous Sully biographical monograph on timetales.ca

12 A document listing the names of some of the horological workers, obtained from English archives at Kew London, was prepared by this editor and resides on timetales.ca

everything for a time equalled his wishes; but this enviable state was of short duration. The expenses of the manufactory were necessarily great and Law, suspecting Sully of extravagance, displaced him<sup>13</sup>.

Spirit-broken at this reverse, Sully returned to Paris, took furnished apartments, fell dangerously ill, and sorrow retarded his recovery.<sup>14</sup> But Law relented and changed his conduct towards Sully, through which, fortunately, a nobleman became acquainted with him, felt much for the disagreeable situation in which Sully was placed, and sent him, as a present, some shares in the public funds value 12,000 livres which enabled him to feel again in easy circumstances, and at once turned his attention to the means of bringing horology to perfection. For this purpose he proposed, under the protection of the Duke de Noailles, to establish a manufactory at St. Germain. In this he was so well assisted by the duke as to be enabled to take a commodious house, and procure a number of workmen from Paris, London, and Amsterdam, who were employed solely under his direction. All his energy was exerted in exciting his men to surpass those of Versailles ; thus for some time the two manufactories were endeavouring to emulate each other. But the times changed. Law was obliged to leave France<sup>15</sup> in consequence of the scarcity of money the manufactories suffered much, especially that of Sully. His small capital soon became exhausted by paying clever workmen to produce difficult pieces of work, for which, when completed, there were no purchasers, and consequently the scheme was abandoned.

The English Government at length became aware of the injury likely to befall this country<sup>16</sup> from the loss of clever artisans, and granted 3000l. to the workmen employed in the French manufactories, to enable them to return and again settle in London. This grant, together with the liberal offers of several noblemen, induced Sully to return to his native country with his workmen. After continued struggles he found himself again dependent upon his personal labour, which was insufficient to maintain himself. A leaning to the scenes of his former happiness determined him to return to Versailles, which enabled him to stem the tide of human requirements<sup>17</sup>, and by degrees his position improved, and being clever, his affairs assumed a favourable aspect.

Having procured a few skilful workmen he again indulged in his favourite pursuit, and produced a chronometer, the escapement of which was his own invention. For some time it went well, and its exhibition produced orders from several ambassadors who wished to present them to their various sovereigns. These orders, with others, were too much for our poor countryman's finances he was, therefore, obliged to request those who desired them to advance cash when giving the order<sup>18</sup>. But when they were completed he found that they were not quite to his mind. His various attempts to correct the faults occupied much time his subscribers became tired of waiting, and demanded their money back. During his attempts to improve those timekeepers his debts became excessive, and to add to his misfortunes his most valuable tools were sold with other property during his absence, to pay arrears of wages due to his workmen<sup>19</sup>; he was thus reduced to poverty. He again returned to Paris, and

13 It should be noted that Sully was likely not ideally positioned to assume the creation and management of such a large undertaking, which was a most novel initiative at that time. Nothing in his working past suggested he possessed the skills for such a task, though he evidently made a valiant attempt at making it work, complex as it was.

14 This article, as most past writing on the subject of Sully, does not even suggest the family dimension that Sully's setbacks impacted, i.e. the fact that he supported several children born in the Netherlands by his first wife, and two by his second wife.

15 As a result of failures of some of his economic initiatives under the auspices of the Regent of France, most notably the collapse of the "Mississippi Bubble" – see [timetales.ca](http://timetales.ca) for much more detail on this part of his story.

16 The author of this article is undoubtedly English.

17 A vague allusion to the fact that Sully had a sizable family to feed and support.

18 This practice was not unheard of and Breguet used it successfully in the production of his "*montres de souscription*", when he returned to France after exile in Switzerland during the "years of terror".

19 This is conjecture, Le Roy says that some of his tools were sold to appease his "creditors". And this occurred during his stay in Bordeaux, while he was doing some tests at sea of his marine timekeepers.

grief once more brought on a long illness, and during his convalescence he joined the Society of Arts, which formerly met at the Louvre. The last time he attended that society he read a translation of a letter he had received from the celebrated Gregory, on the utility of mathematics Towards the end of the same week, having heard of an individual who had something new in horology to show to the society, he took the address incorrectly, and in the search overheated himself, and died four days after of inflammation of the chest in October, 1728.

He was buried with funeral honours opposite the door of the sanctuary of St. Sulpice. His last days<sup>20</sup> were employed in endeavouring to make chronometers useful to navigation, generously sacrificing his own interests in an attempt which, if successful, he felt sure would benefit mankind and be the means of preserving innumerable lives.

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20 Actually, his quest to make a successful marine timekeeper took over 20 years of his life, mostly part-time but occasionally full-time, at least until 1726. His last days, if they are to mean the last few months of his life, were more taken with writing, and devising a meridian line and gnomon for the Church of St. Sulpice, which explains why he was buried there.