

## Henry Sully – move to the Netherlands – ca 1705-07

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*Author's Note: The information below was used in part as background material for the writing of the third chapter of my monograph on Henry Sully, dealing with his time in the Netherlands. However there are no doubt some pieces of information below that did not make it to the final chapter, so this text is provided here on my Sully Pages on Timetales.ca, for future reference.*

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I've embarked some months ago on an ambitious project to document Henry Sully's life in more detail than has ever been done before<sup>1</sup>. From his origins in backwater Somerset, through his apprenticeship with Charles Gretton in London, then travels, life experiences, horological discoveries and ups and downs on the Continent (Netherlands for at least 4 years, then Germany, Vienna, and finally Paris where he lived the last 12 years of his life).

One mystery I am trying to make sense of is why would Sully leave London in the first place. After having slogged through a long apprenticeship with Gretton, spent a couple of years as a journeyman with him, made a bit of a reputation for his skills, then having been freed he possibly opened up shop for a couple of years, and took on an apprentice of his own. There is at least one watch I've seen in the literature signed Sully in London, so he produced some timepieces of his own for a short period. Sully then leaves London and moves to The Hague and then Leiden in the Netherlands, where he seemed to mainly repair watches, and fathered 4 children in quick succession. Eventually he started to write, then made contacts with rich influential patrons who encouraged and financially supported him, especially after his move to Paris, and the more famous episodes of his life start there.

I started a discussion on this subject in the NAWCC forums, and excerpt the salient points of the ensuing exchange of ideas below, for future reference.

<https://mb.nawcc.org/threads/horologist-leaving-london-for-the-continent-around-1705-why.172343/>

I'm thinking of a few possibilities to explain the move from London to the Netherlands:

1. He had met with Wren and Newton around 1703, as he was completing his apprenticeship, indicating to them his desire to make a "marine clock". Perhaps he was advised by one or both to go to the Netherlands and "follow in the footsteps of Huygens, try to learn from people who had known him and helped him build his own early attempts at a marine clock". He was probably also curious to find out how continental horological practices differed from those in England.

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<sup>1</sup> This ambitious project reached a conclusion in 2023, consisting of a prologue and 9 chapters, chronicling Henry Sully's life and work from his origins in Somerset County, to his death in Paris.

2. Perhaps London was not an easy place to establish yourself as a young watchmaker, especially at that time when there were so many illustrious and well-established makers who dominated the market (Tompion, Gretton, Quare, etc. etc.). London was also a busier and no doubt dirtier place, and possibly Sully felt that the Netherlands would be a better place to raise a young family. There may have been other financial reasons that made it tough to start a business in London at the time. Having come all the way to London from Somerset, Sully undoubtedly was unwilling to go back to his home county and start a business there. His ambitions and desire to make a mark for himself were too strong.

3. A recent historian suggested that perhaps Sully had left London for the Netherlands, to escape from personal debts. I'm not sure how much debt he could have gotten into in a couple of years after his apprenticeship, but I suppose it's a possibility.

I'm leaning toward possibility number 2, based on my limited knowledge of the state of watch-clockmaking business dynamics in London at that time (around 1705-1710).

We may never know what really motivated Sully in this momentous decision in his life, but it's fun to try to think of possibilities.

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There was no religious reason for his move. Sully was protestant, he was baptized in the Anglican church of St. Mary's in Stogumber, Somerset. His three children born in Leiden Netherlands were baptized at the Pieterskerk protestant church. All that to say that there is no evidence of him being affiliated with the Quakers, nor that there was any religious reason for his leaving London to settle in the Netherlands. He converted to catholicism just before he died, so he could be buried in the catholic Church in Paris where he had installed his famous meridian/gnomon (Saint Sulpice).

Some writers over the years and centuries have claimed that Sully came from Huguenot parents but I found no evidence of this in the genealogical and historical record. I have seen presence of Sully's in England going back centuries before his birth, and some of his ancestors in Somerset predate the migration of Huguenots following the revocation of the edict of Nantes (1685). Likewise, there are also Sully's going back many centuries in France. They may well in fact be completely different families. That claim of huguenot ancestry is an example of the kind of "fact" that gets replicated time and again about a certain person, without clear grounding in historical evidence. I'm trying to be mindful of this as I continue researching and writing my monograph on Sully.

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Rich from NAWCC offered these useful thoughts, which supports possibility 2 above:

*I think that Huygen's successful design for the balance spring began a huge steady increase in demand for watches. Those that were engaged in watchmaking in that last quarter of the 17th century and had the credentials and reputation (e.g. Fromanteel's, Tompion and others) made a lot of money. Within a short period of time, certainly by 1710 (in my view) the standard balance spring, verge, and fusee technology was widespread. We see many examples of what we think of today as "English" characteristics being made from Augsburg to Holland in big numbers, and Holland was in the forefront of technology across many disciplines. I think there was an oversupply. Imports were a big issue -- the word "London" on watches meant "Quality" so attracted a lot of makers and a lot of fakes. The guild is busy trying to benefit its members*

*(that's why guilds existed) and keep competition out, and deny foreign patent/invention claims. I note also that reputable watchmakers in London were ordering finished and unfinished movements from Lancashire at this time (and no-doubt buying up deceased and bankrupt maker's parts). They were businessmen foremost and needed to squeeze every pence they could. Times were hard. Many went bankrupt during the first quarter of the 18th century. So, maybe Sully like those who immigrated to America also at this time, went with the idea of making money. They just could not make a lot of money in London anymore unless they had capital and connections. How many makers had the power to circumvent the spirit of the apprentice & journeymen rules and produce thousands of London watches? As we know, Tompion and a few others could. Just saying that we think about this time with romance and use words like "the golden age". I think for most watchmakers, it was subsistence living but at least a living. Very few died wealthy.*

Nick from Nawcc also offered these thoughts:

*A former Master of the CC, sadly no longer with us, always said that one of the things that held up development of clocks (and watches) in the UK was a lack of customers. Other countries in Europe had more princes, more nobles, and as a result more competition among them to have the best and the latest. It may well be that was still the draw to leave London as late as 1705.*

Robert's response to these two contributions:

Very good points you raised Rich. Yes, I suppose we think of the great names of the "Golden Age" and it's easy to forget the many many other makers who struggled to make ends meet, not to mention all the workers making the individual parts going into the watch movements, or the frame makers supplying movements to the big names, many of those lower on the manufacturing pyramid no doubt had an even harder go of it, the women making those tiny fusee chains, the women guiding the parts and ruining their health, etc. etc. And I suppose that being a recognized maker by the CC did not necessarily guarantee success. As you point out Rich, "capital and connections" were necessary ingredients to establishing oneself for future success. So it seems that the second possible reason I raised in my original post (possibly in combination with some of the other ones) resonates with some of you, and offers possible reasons for Sully to seek "greener pastures", where being a trained English watchmaker would lend him increased status on the Continent, England being the recognized world leader in quality of watchmaking at the time. Sully was probably not the first or last English horologist to leave the UK for similar reasons. Some makers seem to have made a decent go of it in the provinces, not getting rich but living a comfortable life raising their families, being an upstanding member of their communities (some work I did on Colchester makers revealed that perspective to me in a clear way). But competition must have been very fierce around London, between the big players, and all the upcoming "wannabees".

Yes Nick that is a good point too. Lots of royalty and levels of aristocracy on the Continent needing to be supplied with quality timepieces of all kinds. Although I suppose it must be remembered that England was exporting a lot of timepieces at the time, since their higher quality watches were sought after in the circles of discriminating customers on the Continent and beyond.

When Sully met Julien LeRoy around 1715, LeRoy recalls (writing in 1737):

*A common friend, Mr. Blakey of London, skillful spring-maker, whom [Sully] had asked to introduce him to a known horloger, brought him to me, Rue des Petits Augustins. Since our first conversation we argued about the merits of English and French watches, but I felt I defended the weaker side: Parisian watches, especially the repeating ones, lagged behind those of London because they were only half as expensive, which prevented most if not all horlogers to produce works as finished and perfect in all regards, as they were capable of.*

Through his writings and his leading up a couple of watchmaking schools/factories around Paris, a few years later, which involved him bringing over 60 or so English workers and their families, Sully greatly assisted the knowledge transfer between English-trained horologists and the French workers being trained and hired in the factories, which eventually helped France to raise its capabilities of producing fine watches, and compete better with England in years to come. LeRoy became one of the leaders in the French watchmaking resurgence, as we well know.

I'm sure that Sully could not predict any of this when he decided to move from London to the Netherlands 10 years before he met LeRoy in Paris, but he seems to have been an opportunity-seeker his whole life, and life seems to offer opportunities to well prepared and driven individuals like he was.

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Allan on Nawcc also quoted Chamberlain's text on Sully, to explain his move from London.

Robert's response:

Thanks for chiming into this thread, and for taking the time to type an excerpt from Chamberlain's 3 page summary of Sully's life, which was for me the impetus to try to flesh out his life more fully, as there was only so much that the Major could fit into that summary, based on documents available to him at the time.

I purposely left Sully's name out of the subject line because I wanted the focus to remain on the decision to leave London for the Continent, as a freshly trained young English horologist just after the turn of the century. There is obviously a lot more to say about Sully's life (my monograph is probably up to around 20-30 pages now, and I've yet to cover many of the well-known episodes around his last twelve years, spent mostly around Paris, so will have lots to write about that in due time). And yes there is some tragedy in how the course of his life ended, but there are many more dimensions to that than what has typically been portrayed in the few accounts of his life that have come down to us so far.

The leaving-London decision was one that I was particularly interested in (and hoped to be the focus of this thread), because it essentially set a trajectory for the rest of Sully's life, much different than if he had decided to set himself up as one of the several London watch-clockmakers, or go back to Somerset and ply his trade there. Obviously, his open-mindedness and wanderlust set him on a different path, and there was no looking back.

I have not read much about Tompion's life story, or that he had spent, as you suggest, "a large part of his life in Europe". I had however come across the fact that at one time he had a passport to travel to the Netherlands, so had made a note of that.

I suppose many English-speaking horological historians have painted a picture of London as a sort of "Mecca" for watch and clockmakers in that "golden age", because of the quality of the timepieces produced there, and their reputation of excellence around the world at the time. It was certainly an attractor to a lot of foreign horologists, and not only Huguenot refugees. But as Allan points out, for some English horologists (Sully being only one of probably many), continental Europe certainly had its attraction as well, so it wasn't just a one-way street. And as Nick pointed out, the continent (and beyond) represented a very large market of affluent horological enthusiasts and customers.

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Dan from Nawcc quoted a recent article which had some misleading facts about Sully.

Robert's response:

Interesting article you provided a link to. The statement about Sully is obviously simplified and in part incorrect and misleading, which is one reason I've decided to write his story once and for all, getting as close to the original historical sources as I can, and dispell once and for all the various myths and un-truths surrounding his life.

The famous English clockmaker and horologist Henry Sully (1680-1728) was imported to be clockmaker to the Duke of Orléans. But all of Sully's efforts, even his importation of sixty skilled English craftsmen, could not overbalance the retarding forces in French society, and his workshops at Versailles and St. Germain were soon abandoned. Sully was not "imported to be clockmaker to the Duke of Orléans", rather he spent many years living and working in the Netherlands, Germany and Austria (Vienna) before relocating to Paris and only after some time getting recognized because of presentations he made to the Science Academy, and influential patrons opening doors on his behalf. Indeed, he was eventually approached by Scottish financier John Law, who had ingratiated himself to the Duke of Orléans (the regent at the time to the future Louis XV), and given free rein to apply some of his financial theories to the poor condition of the French economy that followed the death of Louis XIV (who had shall we say, a bit of an extravagant approach to life as a monarch). One of Law's ideas was to bring over English tradesmen and setup factories in France based on superior English knowledge in areas like steel-making, fabric making, and yes, watch and clockmaking. Following Sully's successes with the Academy, Sully entrusted him with setting up a watch/clock factory (and school) in Versailles, and this is where he went back to England and enticed 60 or so trained horological workers to come to France with their families, get housed and treated well, and work at the factory that Henry managed. That whole story is rather complex and will be one of the next sections in my ever-growing monograph, but indeed the factory only lasted a couple of years, and another one that Sully created suffered the same fate. England then devoted considerable money to repatriate those workers and their families.

So that is an example of horological workers being imported into a European country (France in this case). But coming back to Sully, there is no evidence whatsoever that his decision to leave London for the Netherlands as a young man had anything to do with something like that.

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Someone else on Nawcc suggested that Sully may have went to the Netherlands to follow his wife or wife-to-be. Some else asked where Sully lived in London before he left.

Robert's response.

Here are the facts for Sully at this conjecture in his life, as I've been able to establish to date:

1694 – Oct 23 – Begins his apprenticeship with Charles Gretton on Fleet Street London

1702? – Completes his apprenticeship with Gretton (and hired as journeyman with him?)

1703 – Meets Wren, Newton and others and discusses plans for marine timekeeper

1705 – Becomes freeman of the Clockmaker's Company

1705 – Apr 2 – Takes in Samuel James as apprentice

1707 – Aug 20 – Christening in the Hague of Anna Sully, daughter of Henry Sully and Anna Horton

1708-1710 – Christening of three other children in Leiden, of Henry and Anna

In the two year period between Apr 1705 and Aug 1707, Sully evidently married Anna (or Anne) Horton, whom I presume was an English girl, abandoned his apprentice and practice in London, and fathered a child who was christened in The Hague.

I suppose it's possible that Anna Horton may in fact have been living in the Netherlands (there were no doubt several English families living there for various reasons), and may have met Sully while visiting family members in London (or while Sully had been traveling alone in the Netherlands for some reason, away from shop and apprentice), then enticed Sully to move to the Netherlands and marry her there.

Or they may have met in London, married, and then decided to move to the Netherlands. In this scenario, Sully would have been the primary driver for the move, and it comes back to my original question. Why?

I have not found a marriage record for Henry and Anna, either in London or in the Netherlands, using online search tools at my disposal.

I should point out that Anna Horton sadly died sometime after giving birth to their fourth child, which means that young Henry found himself a widower with four very young children, trying to make a living as best he could, until he met and married a Parisian woman six years later, in 1716.

This family dimension or dynamic in Sully's life has never been mentioned by anyone who's written about him over the centuries, and is something I will try to weave into my monograph about his life, as I feel it explains some of his later decisions in life (to provide for several children). I feel that family is an important dimension in anyone's life, although I understand that many horological enthusiasts prefer to focus their attention primarily on the maker's credentials, professional contacts, horological inventions and timepieces.

I should point out another fact I've determined. At the christening for Sully's 3rd and 4th children, in Leiden, one of the witnesses is identified as "Jean Horton" (male, since the other witnesses are women). So that suggests a father or brother of wife Anna also residing in Leiden at the time, which provides some argument in favour of Sully having moved to the Netherlands to live with his wife (to-be?), whose family probably already was living there.

Another family-related fact while we're on the subject: a reference to a 1729 legal document I found, to settle the estate of Henry, lists 5 surviving children. Three of the ones born in the Netherlands, and two additional ones, no doubt born out of his second marriage, with Parisian Angélique Potel. The indication is that poor young Jean, Henry's second son, did not survive. Childhood deaths, of course, were not uncommon in those times, but still this is a tragedy that would mark any man. As would have been the loss of his first wife, sometime after the birth of their fourth child.

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In researching and writing this monograph on Sully, I am purposely questioning and sometimes challenging some of the things that have been written (and often repeated) about him over the decades. There are many such inconsistencies and inaccuracies in what several people have written about him over the years, and hopefully I can help dispel or correct some of them. Though getting at the basic facts is not always easy, dealing with a horologist who died almost 300 years ago.

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The online record for the baptism of Henry's first child, born in the Hague, has a most interesting witness identified: Nicholas Massy. From the draft of my monograph:

Nicholas Massy (III) is another interesting figure to be associated with Sully at that time, in The Hague. He was the son of Nicholas (II), a French Huguenot refugee in London who had run a watchmaking business on Cranbourn Street until his death in 1698. Nicholas (III) settled in The Hague in 1700. Possibly, he might have known young Sully while he was apprenticed with Gretton, and encouraged him to join him in the Netherlands sometime after 1705. They must have been quite close, for Massy to agree to be a witness at the christening of Sully's first child. Nicholas Massy went on to win the second prize in 1720 by the Académie des Sciences de Paris, on the subject of marine navigation. The first prize was won by Jean-Pierre Crouzaz, a professor of philosophy and mathematics at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. Some research has suggested that Massy may have been a practicing clockmaker in Lausanne at that time. In 'The Marine Chronometer', Gould scribbled a note in the margin about Massy's writing on the subject, saying that "I have a copy, but have never had time to read it through. It appears to be devastatingly dull and I can read most things about bygone technology." Gould goes on to suggest that Massy's prize "may have served to re-awaken Sully's interest in the subject, for in 1721 he began the construction of a marine timekeeper upon a new principle".

As indicated in the excerpt above, I could see a possibility that Sully may have been drawn to relocate to the Hague on the invitation or advice of his fellow London horologist Massy.

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Sully's move to the Netherlands was a definitive step in his life, whatever the reasons for it were (and this thread has offered more than enough possibilities). His life would not have been the same had he decided to remain in London and run a watchmaking shop which would have been the more sensible thing to do. But Henry Sully was not that type of man, and horological history would not have evolved quite the same way had he taken that path, as his contributions (small or large depending on one's perspective) would likely not have been as noteworthy.

At least, through this thread (and later, through the monograph I am working on) horological enthusiasts will be aware of some personal aspects of Henry's life that I discovered (and John confirmed), that he was married twice, had six children. I feel that many of the future decisions and endeavours in his life have to be understood with the perspective of his need to provide for the family members who depended on him.