

Henry Sully's Life Story - Chapter 7 Back in London

By Robert St-Louis, Ottawa, Canada, December 2022 – All rights reserved

SULLY BACK IN LONDON (1721) - Draft

This is the seventh chapter in the story of Henry Sully¹: following the failure of the two horological factories that Sully led in Versailles, and later, Saint Germain en Laye, he found himself compelled to repatriate along with the English workers to London. After some time spent there trying to make financial arrangements for himself and the workers, he started working again on his marine clock designs and tried to find supporters and funding. Since this did not materialize, in part due to the economic issues in England (South Sea Bubble) he decided to return to France and rejoin with his family. He settled again in Versailles where for some time he was obliged to try to make a living repairing watches, as he had done many years before, in the Netherlands.

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, we learned about the failure of the two horological factories led by Henry Sully in Versailles and Saint Germain en Laye, in the wake of the collapse of John Law's economic policies in France. The story of the return of Sully and other English workers to England is told compellingly in J.R. Harris's book², as indicated in the previous chapter. Harris consulted several archives, both in France and in England, to pull together the story he tells about Sully's role in originally getting English workers to agree to go work in Versailles, but later in repatriating those workers to England. Many of those source records are State Papers contained in the Public Records Office archives in Kew, London.

Reluctant return to London

1720 was a difficult financial year for both France and Great Britain. In France, the bubble that burst was in large part due to the measures that John Law had tried to implement to help the country get out from its financial challenges after Louis XIV's death. Law benefitted from the trust and respect of the Regent, which allowed him to roll out concepts like a Central Bank (Banque Générale) issuing paper money (a first in France, and something that would not be tried again for 80 years!).

Law also created a Mississippi Company extended from Louisiana to Canadian colonies, trading in beaver skins and precious metals. Investors were able to buy shares in the company, lured by gold and silver. The shares rose dramatically, but came crashing down around 1720 (the

¹ Henry Sully (1679 – 1728) was born in Somerset England, trained as a watch-clockmaker in London, and spent most of his adult life on the Continent (the last 12 years in and around Paris), where he wrote several influential books and memoirs on horology (in French), and directed two short-lived watchmaking factories. He worked diligently for over 20 years to produce a working marine clock to measure longitude, which alluded him to the end.

² J.R. Harris, *Industrial Espionage and Technology Transfer: Britain and France in the eighteenth century*, Routledge, London, 1998.

Mississippi Bubble), resulting in inflation in France over 20 percent. Law was forced to flee the country. All this resulted in the closure of Law's manufactures, and for the English workers to have to find ways to go home, with some help from the British government.

In England, 1720 was difficult because of the "South Sea Bubble", which similar to Law's debacle in France, had ruined many investors and substantially diminished the national economy. The South Sea Company, a public and private partnership, had been founded by Parliament in 1711 and given monopoly in 1713 on trading overseas, which included profitable trading of slaves from Africa destined to the Portuguese and Spanish empires. The Company offered stocks to investors, with an attractive return of 6 percent. This quickly became unsustainable due to the end of the War of Succession in Spain in 1713 (Treaty of Utrecht), which resulted in lower amounts of trade, especially the importation of slaves.

To help renew confidence in the Company, King George took over its governorship in 1718, which further inflated the stock value. In an ill-fated and desperate move, Parliament allowed the Company to take over the national debt in 1720, which resulted in a rampant increase of stock value, without any meaningful fundamentals. In September 1720, the bubble burst and stocks lost 80 percent of their values, ruining countless large and small investors. A House of Commons investigation revealed bribery and corruption on a large scale, resulting in a financial and parliamentary scandal.

In spite of this disastrous economic context, the British government allocated £3,000 to repatriate and cover costs of the horological workers in France, out of concern that poverty and possibly imprisonment (for unpaid debts they had left behind when they had gone to France) awaited many of the returning workers and their families. Sully spoke about this period, following the repatriation: "*having been a great sufferer in the ill turn the affairs of France have taken this last year 1720, and nearly ruined as many thousands have been; I began to think of quitting a country so unhappily governed*".³ Sully would soon come to realize that similar financial problems would befall the country he was returning to.

Harris goes on to say that Sully claimed that he and his brother Richard had made sure that "*there remains now not the shadow of any one of the manufacturys established by English hands in France*".

In a letter of 20 October 1720 from a diplomat (Sutton⁴) to the Secretary of State (Craggs⁵) one reads: "*Information about the said Manufactories and the means to Destroy them, which he is very capable of, being a very ingenious Man, and well enough qualified for Business besides that of his Profession (watchmaker) but he is not without a good deal of Presumption of his own Ability*".⁶

³ Harris, op. cit. p. 16

⁴ Sir Robert Sutton (1662–1723) an English diplomat and politician in the House of Commons from 1710 to 1720

⁵ James Craggs, (1657-1721), English politician implicated in the South Sea Bubble.

⁶ Harris, op. cit. p. 18



Figure 1 - James Craggs Senior, Secretary of State

Just what the role of Sully and his brother Richard was in “dismantling the factories” is not clear. Richard Sully seems to have played a role in factories other than the horological ones, but it was probably Henry who saw to the factory in Saint Germain en Laye, and probably with the help of Reith, to the factory at Versailles. This would have entailed selling off wherever possible equipment, tools and supplies that had been acquired by the French government to build the factories in the first place. Perhaps these were sold at auction, or to the original suppliers, for a fraction of their value. Workers may have also been hired to dismantle workbenches and other construction, to revert the workshops to the empty spaces where they had originally been set up (for example, in the abandoned Hotels in Versailles described in the previous chapter). Also, furniture and other contents of the living quarters of the English workers would have been sold off.

The intent of the British government, based on the expression used “dismantling the factories”, seems to have been to make sure that English workers would not have a place to continue working, should they decide to stay in France. And possibly also, to make sure that no facilities would be left in functional state that could be taken over by the French for their advantage. In any case, dismantling the working areas would have represented additional work for Sully, Reith, Blakey, and other leading men in Law’s factories, who were already busy just securing the arrangements to physically repatriate the English workers and their families across the Channel.

Sully and Reith, as ex-directors of the now defunct horological manufactures, felt they deserved preferential treatment in the distribution of the £3,000 allocated by the British government, for having made all arrangements to bring home the English workmen and families. Because of this, there was much discussion and disagreement about how the money was distributed back in England, with the workers especially unhappy with their paltry allowance, claiming that Sully and Reith were keeping the lion share for themselves. Harris writes, based on his research: “*Sully claimed to be disappointed as he himself had only had 350 guineas, one-third of what he hoped for. In other words, he had expected to receive well over one-third of the whole sum the Government had earmarked for the repatriates!*” Although that may not dispel the impression that Sully (as well as Reith and Blakey) was looking out for his own interests first and foremost in advocating the allocation of the government funds, the presence of his needy family in France provides a rationale for his selfish approach.

In particular due to his research of records in various archives, of depositions from, and arguments between, Sully and various watchmakers upon their return from France, Harris developed a rather harsh opinion of Sully, which may in fact be well deserved in this troubling period of his life. Harris described him thus: “*He was specious, adept at self-promotion, willing to turn his coat rapidly, and noticeably lacking in loyalty or gratitude for past favours.*”⁷

However, one must consider that after creating and temporarily leading two horological manufactures, which had provided a good livelihood to scores of workers and their families, and had given him great status, and an affluent, comfortable life for him and his family, Sully was compelled to retreat to England with little money to show for all his hard work. He had to leave his family behind in France⁸, while he tried to receive some compensation from the British government and try to plan his next move. The lack of income caused Sully to ponder on his next venture, and he found the time to devote efforts to his interrupted marine clock project.

In researching the archives, Harris read through depositions of Sully and others, trying to explain their role in the French manufactures, and more importantly, seeking to obtain as much financial compensation as they could from the British government. In these depositions, referring to Law, Sully said that “*Law’s honours and dignities increased upon him, perhaps faster than he expected, his attention to his Manufacturys grew much slackened*”. Indeed, Law had moved on to bigger initiatives (including the Mississippi Company which ultimately was to bring about his undoing). Because of this Sully indicated working more with Law’s brother William, and describes him as “*a man of mean genius, and with whom the being a Scotsman or a Jacobite, or both, were the best titles to favour*”.

Harris goes on to write, from his readings of the depositions, that Sully mentioned his being replaced as Director of the Versailles manufacture “*as if it were a conspiracy to sack the best managers of the English works*”, and that it had “*led to trouble, particularly for the workers*”.

⁷ Due to the pandemic and inability to travel, this author was not able to consult these state records himself (trying to obtain more information relevant to Sully’s own side of the story), that Harris used and quoted to weave his retelling of the events.

⁸ Harris wrote that he received from the English government “a further £40 for his family in France”

Ultimately the government funds of £3000 were distributed among the returning English workers, and many claimed that some (including Sully) unfairly got the lion's share. In the end, no one was happy about the turn of events, they all had a sour taste in their mouths about the whole affair in France, and everyone (from ex-directors to common workers) had to try to re-establish themselves into a livelihood for themselves and their families.

Harris writes⁹ that the “*adventurousness of British workers*” is remarkable, and was advantageous to those like Sully who enticed them to France. In some cases, personal debt and difficult masters may have encouraged them to leave as much as promises by the enticers of “*high pay, pensions, and other amenities*”. But, Harris concludes, “*for men to travel great distances, to settle in another country with a different language and, for most, a different religion, with a very different diet and countless other strangenesses of custom affecting daily life, and then to bring over, in many cases, wives and children to join them, required a readiness to face change which is quite remarkable*”.

Julien Le Roy picks up the story¹⁰, no doubt told to him by Sully himself:

Upon his arrival in London, Mr. Sully received a part of the sum he had been promised for his return. It also provided for all the benefits that his reputation deserved: it was then that he started to work on his escapement [for his marine clock]; he found in it such wonderful properties that he demonstrated it in front of Mylord Parker, then Chancellor of Great Britain, and in front of Mylord Islay; he also demonstrated it in front of many interested and wise men, and of the clockmaker to the King. It was at that time that he wrote to me and proposed a horology problem related to the demonstrations and experiments that he had just done; he speaks about it on page 264 of the book already cited.¹¹

Sully himself, writing in 1726¹², recalls the story of his activities in London upon his return from France:

In the year 1721, in London, I found myself with the leisure to execute everything I had been mulling over previously; I started with the escapement. A diamond watch that Sir Newton had shown me in 1704¹³, and of which I will speak later, gave me the first idea: as early as 1712, I had imagined the necessary changes to be made, without having completed their execution. I built a watch with this escapement, and showed its construction to Lord Parker, at the time Chancellor of Great Britain, and Lord Islay, and demonstrated its workings in the Academic assembly of Mrs. Watts and Worster, and many other knowledgeable and interested people of London, and among other able craftsmen [artistes], to Mr. Vick¹⁴, watchmaker to the King.

⁹ Harris, op. cit. p.547

¹⁰ *Règle* (1737), p.399

¹¹ Sully, *Description d'une horloge d'une nouvelle invention pour la juste mesure du temps sur mer*, Paris, 1726.

¹² Sully (1726) op.cit. p. 264

¹³ This watch had an escapement made by Pierre DeBauffre (master in Paris 1675, member of Clockmakers Company in London 1689-1722)

¹⁴ Richard Vick (?-1750), keeper of clocks in the King's palace (Loomes, *Watchmakers and Clockmakers of the World*, London, 2006).

I also showed my “pendule à levier” [lever clock], and I announced its properties to all my friends, but showing its construction to only one London clockmaker, who was Mr. Reith¹⁵. I then wrote about it to Mr. Le Roy, watchmaker of Paris, whose ability is now deservedly well known by the public.



Figure 2 - Thomas Parker - Chancellor of Great Britain

Back to France and family

Harris writes¹⁶ that “Once Sully and Blakey had got all they could from the British government they may have been very conscious that they had previously experienced a period of great prosperity in France, and believed that their skills would still be at a premium there.” Indeed, two expatriates like Sully and Blakey, who had spent many years earning a reputation and making a living on the Continent, may not have had an easy time trying to integrate back into the very competitive horological marketplace in London. Harris suggests that “they probably lived in considerable discomfort under the anger and accusations of those whose expenses they were supposed to have defrayed, and whose debts they were supposed to have discharged, but whose cases they had treated with much less care than their own”.

¹⁵ No doubt, the same James Reith who had worked with him, and replaced him as Director, in Versailles.

¹⁶ Harris, op.cit, pp. 26,33

Changes in the political landscape and players did not favour Sully, as Harris writes “*the death of Craggs¹⁷, a secretary of state who had been well disposed to Sully and his associates, and the succession of the less sympathetic Carteret, also seems to have discouraged them*”. Harris goes on to say that “*the new legislation [being] very circumscribed in its application, anyone wishing to travel to Europe in time of peace, who could present himself as pretending to gentility, or to merchant or professional status, or appear credible as a traveller in search of culture, the picturesque or a gentler climate, was going to find little to prevent him*”. Thereby, Sully (the “chief enticer” as Harris called him) found little to prevent him going back to France, when doors of opportunity were found closed for him in England.

In this chapter and the previous one, writings by Harris and Julien Le Roy have been juxtaposed on similar topics about these three years of Sully’s life (1718-1721). It is interesting to note what Harris says about Le Roy, whose writings about Sully in *Règle artificielle du temps* (1737) were obviously a source of information for him, in addition to his research in French and English public archives: “*his friend the great Le Roy took a perhaps partial and indulgent view of him at his passing, suggesting that he was perhaps as much a martyr to his craft as others might be to their religious faiths*”.

There were certainly many sides to Henry Sully, which is not easy for a historian to fully comprehend with limited information sources at hand. As was indicated earlier, Harris seems to develop a rather negative opinion on Sully (specious, turn-coat, lacking in loyalty or gratitude), which does not agree with contemporary opinions about him. In her book, Bertucci (2017) is much more sympathetic toward Sully and his achievements, notably in the leadership role in the *Société des Arts*, as told in the previous chapter.

LeRoy himself continues Sully’s story from his own firsthand memory¹⁸:

These early beginnings [in London] did not last long, the Secretary of State died, his replacement [Carteret] was not very favourable to [Sully], he didn’t receive the entire sum promised to him. The Lord Chancellor, to partly compensate him, gave him a sum of 70 guineas which, together with what he had already been given, totaled around 350, but this sum was at most a third of what he had expected, and insufficient to cover the expenses he had incurred in the hope of getting more money; therefore, finding himself not further ahead, his inclination to return to France brought him back to Paris, where he established himself at Versailles.

There he started working with his hands repairing and servicing watches; I remember that he distributed printed tickets to the Camp officers of Porchefontaine¹⁹ to get their business. (His situation was so different from the one he had found himself only a few years before!) Since he was very able with his hands, and his setbacks had made him very laborious, he re-established

¹⁷ Craggs, James I (1657-1721), who was involved in the South Sea Bubble, died only a month after the death of his son, which greatly disturbed him. It is rumoured that Craggs Senior may have died of opium overdose.

¹⁸ Règle (1737), pp. 400-401

¹⁹ Porchefontaine was once an old feudal seigniory, farm and wooded area adjacent to Versailles, where one assumes was situated a military camp or barracks in Sully’s time.

his business pretty quickly; clients from the Court came to him in droves: amateurs of the art and others, all came to discuss with him and get him to repair their watches.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the establishment by Law and Sully of a horological factory at Versailles in 1718 was facilitated by the fact that at that time, the palace itself was still largely mothballed since the death of Louis XIV (1714) and the subsequent decision of the Regent to relocate the seat of Court to Paris and Vincennes. But coinciding with Sully's return from England, and no doubt influencing his decision to re-establish himself and his family in Versailles, was the decision of the new King, Louis XV, to re-establish Court in his great-grandfather's palace. Indeed, in late afternoon of 15 June 1722, twelve-year-old Louis XV returned to the place of his birth.²⁰ His first step was to pray in the Royal Chapel, and then he walked with great enthusiasm, in spite of the hot day, throughout the magnificent gardens.



Figure 3 – Young Louis XV (1716-24) – Metropolitan Museum

²⁰ Retold vividly in: <https://www.chateauversailles.fr/decouvrir/histoire/grandes-dates/retour-cour-versailles>

The King was back, and in his wake would follow all the usual aristocrats and men of power and influence who needed to stay close to the Ruler of the French Empire. No doubt, hotels and other prestigious houses that had remained empty for several years (some of which having been used to house the short-lived horological factory as we have seen) were cleaned up, redecorated, and the town and residents of Versailles thrived again, providing necessary services and products to all its royal and affluent residents.

By astutely choosing Versailles as his new residence and place of work, Sully thus was able to make a decent living for himself and his sizable family, in a similar way to what he had done when he had first arrived in the Netherlands fifteen years before: repairing watches and clocks, entertaining customers and visitors with horological stories and anecdotes, or educating them on the proper care of their timepieces (as he had done already in his writings). At this later point in his life, Sully was also well served by his reputation as a famous horologist, having: given well-received presentations at Court and at the Académie Royale des Sciences de Paris; often been mentioned in the *Mercure de France*; and published influential books. His name was well known by many aristocrats and people of wealth, who no doubt came to him “in droves” as Le Roy wrote, to service their prized timepieces.

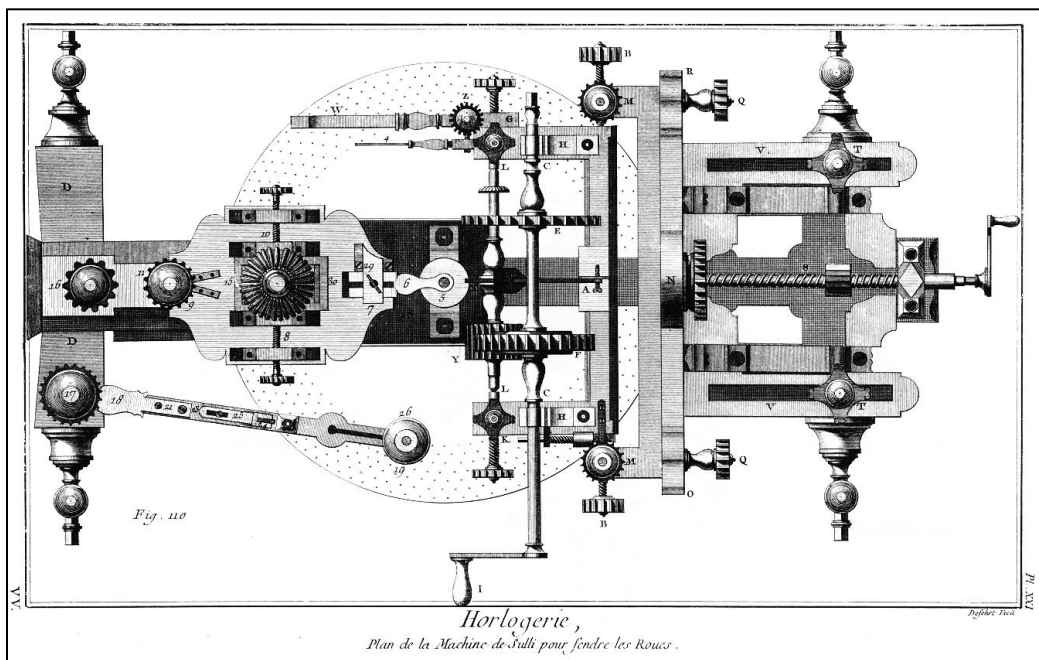


Figure 4 - Sully's machine for cutting gear teeth

On the subject of repairing watches, which is something Henry Sully did predominantly during some periods of his life (either because he was transitioning from one career path to another, from one country to another, or just as an honourable way to feed himself and his family) it is useful to remember what was said about this aspect of the horological profession, by no other than the great French horologist Pierre Gaudron (1695-1745), watchmaker to the Duke of Orleans. In Antoine Thiout's impressive "*Traité de l'horlogerie*", published in Paris in 1741, one reads a lengthy and detailed article by Gaudron, providing meticulous insights and advice on how a watchmaker who needs to service or repair a watch should examine the movement.

In this article, Gaudron writes that “*we have an obvious need for good watch repairmen, without whom the best timepieces would be spoiled*”. He goes on to say that “*many watchmakers regard watch service and repair [racommodage] as being the least esteemed discipline of the profession, but they are wrong*”. In fact, “*the skilled watch repairman is the most distinguished*”, since more experience, knowledge, and abilities are required to troubleshoot a watch that is fully assembled and not working properly. Certainly, Henry Sully possessed all the knowledge and skills needed to effectively repair any timepiece, which is why he never had problems earning a living within this trade.

In the next chapter, we will discuss the following period of Sully’s life, where in the relative comfort of his horological repair practice in Versailles, he picked up tools and drawings again, and with the help of some special workers assisting him in this complex task, built upon the work he had started twenty years before, and had recently taken up again while in London: to design and construct a novel and functional clock allowing the determination of longitude at sea.

This initiative not only would address a dire maritime traffic need for seagoing nations like France and England, but held the promise of great fame, and considerable monetary rewards, to whoever would first come up with a viable solution. Sully was to ultimately come up short, as we shall see, but he gave it a valiant try. As his friend Julien Le Roy wrote²¹: “*to have courageously attempted an undertaking even more praiseworthy, in that its success would prevent thousands of men from perishing in the sea.*”

²¹ Règle (1737) p.409