



# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CLOCK HOUSE



In 1805 **Samuel Wyatt** (Engineer to Ramsgate Harbour) was directed to produce a plan for a watchhouse, with clock tower above, to be placed in such a position as to command a view over the harbour. **M.G. Louch**, Wyatt's deputy, prepared drawings for the proposed building.

Four years later in 1809, **John Rennie** (the new Harbour Engineer) advised that the original design of the building should be modified by raising the ends to form store rooms, and by 1810 work on the **Clock House** was in hand. The upper floors were added, but with no alteration to the floor level of the central upper chamber. Consequently we find two steps leading down into what is now the *John Rennie Room* and two more leading up to the room beyond.

In 1815 **Nathaniel Gott**, Rennie's resident engineer, reported that he thought it desirable to have a place to deposit pitch, tar, resin etc; inflammable substances in frequent use in a harbour. To house the material cellars or 'undercrofts' were added, vaulted over with solid stone arches, and running the entire width of the building. His description of the Clock House at this time shows that the building was already partly occupied:

"In the centre on the ground floor is a general office, the right wing being hired by the Trinity [i.e. Trinity House], the left wing is a carpenters shop. In the centre, above the office was a fire-proof depository for plans and paper and the mechanism for driving the pier clock, which was housed in a small turret above. This clock had a strong bell which strikes the hours. The upper floor of the right wing is attached to the Trinity storeroom, whilst that to the left wing is the store keeper's department and model room"

In 1815, the Astronomer-Royal John Pond, Professor S. Vince and the Admiralty, together with Captain Kater FRS and others connected with naval and mercantile marine affairs proposed the establishment of an observatory and the laying of a **Solar Transit Line** to facilitate correction of ships' chronometers and to aid nautical science generally. The Trustees agreed to this and a solar transit line and clockroom were established beneath the central tower.

By 28th July, 1817, the Clock House was considered complete. But it was a further two years before the solar observatory was in operation. The meridian line, laid by **Lieut Matthew Curling Friend**, R.N., was shown to **Sir William Curtis**, Chairman of the Harbour Trustees on May 8th 1819. Thereafter an order was placed for an Astronomical Clock of the kind already in use at Greenwich.

There are no records showing exactly how the sun's transit of the meridian line was observed. Some sort of shadow-throwing device of sufficient precision for accurate clock-setting would have been used. A suggested method is described in the *John Rennie Room* – formerly the Solar Observatory – where the Ramsgate Meridian may be seen cutting diagonally across the Floor.

On the authority of the solar transit line the Harbour Master at Ramsgate, Lieut John Woolward, began logging entries in his journal according to **Ramsgate Mean Time** on Monday 18th November, 1822. It was not for a further 26 years, on 1st November 1848, that **Greenwich Mean Time (GMT)** was kept at Ramsgate for the convenience of shipping.

In 1860 two coffee/reading rooms for the use of local fisherman were constructed against the seaward side of the Clock House. Built of timber and corrugated iron, and supported on a level with the upper floor by iron stanchions, these additions were removed in 1936.

Included among the building's numerous occupants over the years have been the Royal Navy, Trinity House and the General Steam Navigation Company whose pleasure steamers used to run between Ramsgate and London and who were already in part occupation in 1881. More recent occupants have included a sailing school and the R.N.L.I. The Clock House became home to Ramsgate Maritime Museum in 1984.

