

Sundial creator sheds light on serious clock watching at Mount Stromlo

By IAN WARDEN

Doctor Margaret Folkard, one of Australia and the world's very few gnomonists, ("Gnomonists are the people who play seriously with sundials" she explains) was in Canberra yesterday to give a talk about her 5000-year-old craft and to visit, at Mount Stromlo, one of her own famous gnomonic creations.

The sundial at Mount Stromlo, conceived by Dr Folkard and her fellow gnomonist Dr John Ward (they are from Adelaide) is what she and Ward call, inventing a name for what is in part their own invention, a Sundial of Human Involvement.

In simple terms (Folkard and Ward are serious physicists and the maths and science of serious sundials are a little daunting for those of us without scientific training) what this means is that the Mount Stromlo sundial is a horizontal sundial that does not have any hour lines marked on it. Instead, it has a series of fixed hour points located around the circumference of an ellipse and a vertical rod (or in this case a person) whose position can be adjusted throughout the year to cast a shadow that passes through a point on the circumference of the ellipse.

"Imagine I'm a broomstick" Dr Folkard invited yesterday (and indeed she is tall and slim) as she provid-



Gnomonist Dr Margaret Folkard stands and casts a shadow on her Sundial of Human Involvement at Mount Stromlo. The sundial and her shadow say the time is about 10am.

Picture:GARY SCHAFER

ed the human involvement that this rare kind of sundial needs and as, at 10am by the wristwatch she cast a shadow indicating something between about 9.56am and 10.04am. The thinner, the more broomstick-like the human involved in a Sundial of Human Involvement, the more precise the time told.

Dr Folkard and Dr Ward have created some of the most revered of Australian sundials. The armillary sphere sundial in the herb garden at

the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney is one of theirs and so is the big, chunky (but scientifically precise) Sundial of Human Involvement at Mount Annan Botanic Garden (near Sydney) made from striking columns of basalt rock.

"This [her gnomonic partnership with Dr Ward] all started with us making an unusual present for friends who had everything" the energetic Dr Folkard explained yesterday, pacing among her

sundial's boulders.

"But then [in 1984] when John was given a Churchill Fellowship [to study gnomonics in Europe and the USA] through the prestige of that we got to see all sorts of sundials seldom seen by the public and got into all the Queen's private gardens where most of the sundials weren't very wonderful but where the gardens were always splendid."

Dr Folkard loves the art and science and history of

sundials and feels a part of the great gnomonic tradition in which she is now using computers to design sundials, "finding new ways of doing ancient things".

The Sumerians used sundials 5000 years ago and the Greeks and then the Romans used them extensively.

A Roman poet, Titus Mac-cius Plautus, (250 to 185BC) wrote a contemporary-sounding poem in which he cursed them in much the same way that a stressed, late-20th cen-

tury citizen curses the way his or her life is ruled by clocks.

The Roman Emperor Augustus had a sundial covering a floor area of 180m by 110m and a 30m tall stone obelisk from Egypt as the gnomon (the object that casts the shadow).

"No-one needs a sundial" Dr Folkard conceded yesterday, but went on to say they are "just one of the many lovely things to have".

It distresses Dr Folkard that the sundial at the new

Parliament House is, though in a public space, almost se-creted away where few people can find and enjoy it.

And then, this mesomorphic journalist's shadow indicating a time somewhere between 10.05am and 10.16am, it was time for Dr Folkard to go.

She said, as she left, that "Time is so arbitrary.

"I love playing with time but I can't understand all the fuss about the millennium."