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Ruth Belville: The Greenwich Time Lady

David Rooney

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In a world that witnessed the emergence of automatic timeballs, telegraph time signals, the speaking clock, and the BBC's "six pips," one family provided the hours and minutes to paying customers across London for more than 100 years using a pocketwatch named "Arnold." It was with Ruth Belville—the last of the timesellers, who retired in her 80s in 1939—that this remarkable episode in the history of timekeeping and London life was brought to a close. Seeking to show that the Belvilles operated a service that was to many customers better than the official electric time signals from Greenwich, this chronicle turns the story of the Greenwich Time Service on its head, revealing for the first time the strengths of Ruth Belville and her family. In this fascinating true account, commercial propaganda, dirty tricks, and failing technologies come together in a story of the Greenwich Time Lady and her surefire will to succeed in Edwardian London.

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