

**CUT IN**  
THE  
*Hand Engravers Association*  
of GREAT BRITAIN  
**CLERKENWELL**

**Charles Scarr**

**Hand Engraver**



Interviewed by Katie Baker  
in Charles' workshop at Craft Central, Clerkenwell  
26 November 2012

**Date and place of birth:**

March 1943 in Olney, Buckinghamshire.

**Did you have any early awareness of hand engraving or craft and art generally in your family or among contacts?**

No.

**What led you to take up hand engraving? Did someone in particular inspire you to become a hand engraver?**

Charles was gifted at drawing and quite artistic. He needed a job and saw one advertised for an apprentice.

**Where did you learn to hand engrave?**

Grinhams on Milk Street in the City of London from around 1959. There were five apprentices and three seniors as well as a machine engraving section with four or five people. Mr Murrell ran the place. On the first day there you were shown the graver and what it looked like sharpened. You were given a stone and told to keep sharpening it until you could do it correctly. Then you were given a sheet of brass with something drawn on it and told to cut that. You had to find the correct tool for it. *'They can't push your hand for you'*. You had to keep resharpening the graver yourself. You did this for weeks and you would be slipping and sliding everywhere. You'd just keep practicing and practicing until it was like a pencil in your hand and you could do anything you wanted with it. It would be a few months before they gave you a job to do and first you were given very basic jobs. The more you improved the better the jobs you were given to do. The pay was £1.50 a week initially and gradually crept up. It was £10.00 by the time Eric left.

Mr Murrell was fifty five or so when Eric joined the company and was approaching retirement. The other two men were in their late sixties or early seventies. Charles and the others came out of their apprenticeship at the same time. Seniors were all on the verge of retirement as were the office staff. The owner was in his eighties and only came in once a month. He was a retired hand engraver himself. He always looked elegant and it had been a successful firm for many years. The staff had got old though and it came to a natural end. Grinhams engraved things like cutlery, silver salvers, tableware, coats of arms, initials, gold and silver pieces. The Lonsdale Belt used to come over for engraving too and that was done by the seniors. Ernest Wright was one of the men there. He left to go to Canada, doing a job over there. He came back to the firm then left to go to another country, then back again to the firm. The company would always take him back again. After the apprenticeship ended Charles found a position in Clerkenwell Close doing gold block engraving at a company called H M Avisons.

They engraved brass blocks for hardcover books in the publishing trade. It was very difficult work which involved working in relief, taking all the background away and leaving the image or text in reverse. A sheet of gold would be placed between the leather of the book and the engraved block. The block was then heated and pressed into the spine of the leather covered book leaving the imprint of the gold letters. His first job there was a coat of arms; a one and an eighth inch high crest with seahorses either side of the central shield, ribbon and a motto at the bottom. He had to get used to cutting in relief and back to front. It was a nightmare job that took days. There was an old chap there, about seventy six, who could hardly see and had big magnifying glasses. He did all the arms work and they wanted someone who could take over from him. They let him know that this man would have done it much quicker. But in fact Charles mastered it quite quickly. The machinist would take a lot of the metal away, leaving the letters in rough. Later they started photographing designs and putting them straight on the metal which made things easier. Charles stayed at the firm until 1975. He had started doing the sort of work he does now (clocks and watches) so it was a natural step to become self-employed. The company were not too happy but really they had no reason for this as they had not been the ones to train him.

**How would you describe your hand engraving? What kind of work do you undertake and what materials do you work with?**

Charles became interested in clock restoration through an uncle who was an antique dealer. He would bring him items that needed engraving. Other people began asking him as well and he started looking for parts to adapt. He got so busy that had to stop doing his day job.

He does a lot of work restoring bracket clocks - the engraved back plate often become distressed and worn or have had holes drilled into it. Anything that needs engraving he does. People pay to have the clocks restored to their original condition. He learned from books how the style changed, the types of engraving, lettering, etc so he could adapt new parts to fit in. He also works with watches - many started off with a gold or silver champléve dial, which was often replaced by a white enamel dial as that was the fashion at one time. Many were also scrapped and the gold and silver parts taken out, as they fetched a higher price for scrap than the watch did. There are lots of watch movements out there left and Charles makes new dials for them. Charles works mostly with brass, gold and silver on the dials.

**How do you work- alone or together with others to produce an end result?**

Charles works on his own in his studio, but with other clockmakers around, so he will do the metal work but not the cases.

**What motivates you to continue doing what you are doing?**

Charles enjoys his work and finds it a pleasure to do. To him it is more like a hobby. He is due to retire soon and wishes he could continue but has decided he would like to spend more time with his wife. He will still do a couple of days a week picking jobs that appeal to him and working from a studio at home.

**Can you tell me about any particularly memorable projects that you have worked on and if there was anyone with whom you worked on these?**

He was approached by the famous watchmaker George Daniels in about 1997 to do engraving exclusively for him. Daniels is famous for having invented a particular type of escapement - a device which regulates timekeeping. Daniels took on an apprentice named Roger Smith who wanted to be trained by him and is now an excellent watchmaker in his own right. Charles is still engraving Roger Smith's watches. He has been asked to do some special commissions for him, including one for a man named Derek Pratt, an Englishman who lives in Switzerland. Derek wanted to make a reproduction of John Harrison's H4 or as he called it "another one" rather than a replica. H4, one of the most famous clocks ever built, was the fourth of Harrison's attempts at a marine chronometer and is now to be found at The Royal Observatory in Greenwich. Derek was given permission by the people at Greenwich to make another one for which Charles made the movements.

Charles also undertook a project at Hampton Court Palace to replace the sundials in the privy garden. The originals, made by Thomas Tompion, were eroding and their surfaces becoming rubbed, so Charles was asked to create two replicas. Initially they were reluctant to let Charles have them in his studio but they eventually relented due to the impossibility of being able to do the job without them at close quarters for comparison. The originals have now been taken into the museum at the Palace. So far only one of the sundials has been engraved. The end result is an exact replica, down to every detail, including the material, so it is signed underneath by Charles to ensure it cannot be mistaken for the original sometime in the future. Charles enjoys this type of work, doing one off projects.

**Have you received recognition for your work as a hand engraver? If so how and where?**

He was commended by the Goldsmith's Craft and Design Awards in 2012.

**Looking back over your career would you join the profession again?**

Charles has enjoyed it but maybe he would do something else if he had the time again.

**How have you passed on your knowledge and skills to others and to whom?**

As a self employed hand engraver Charles has never had the time to train an apprentice. He did teach for a time at West Dean College. One or two days a year he would teach a masterclass to students there on a clock restoration course. The students were all interested but it was only a small part of their course. It needs longer than a day to learn how to do it and it just gave them an insight into hand engraving. You really need to spend time doing it and to do it every day. Charles is sorry he didn't take an apprentice on but believes it is better to do an apprenticeship at a bigger company. It is financially difficult to have an apprentice when you are self-employed.

**Have you had any links with Clerkenwell and Hatton Garden now or in the past?**

Charles has always worked in Clerkenwell.

**Do you have any views or thoughts on the future for the profession of hand engraving- for instance on training; public awareness; and your particular area of hand engraving?**

Finding people who want to train is difficult as no one wants to spend so long training any more. There is not really anyone to pass it on to – it is something you have to really want to do. It is a dying trade as there are other processes that do it now, like laser engraving. Machine engraving does most of the work now, especially large batches of things. But there is a different look to things that are handmade, a pleasing aesthetic. It is not precisely symmetrical for example. The sundials at Hampton Court could have been made with a laser program but they would not have the same aesthetics.

**What do you think are the most significant developments over the 20th century in technology and techniques?**

Computers have taken the skill out of a lot of things - even in areas like engineering. Computers can be programmed to do so much now.

## Examples of Work



*Watch by George Daniels, with engraving by Charles Scarr*



*Close up of engraved face by Charles Scarr*