

CUT IN
THE
Hand Engravers Association
of GREAT BRITAIN
CLERKENWELL

Colin Mabey

Hand Engraver

Theo Fennell Jewellers Flagship



Interviewed by Katie Baker
in the studio at Theo Fennell
19 November 2012

Date and place of birth:

1949 in Upper Tooting, South West London.

Did you have an early awareness of hand engraving or craft and art generally?

No

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

Colin stayed on at school into the fifth year. He wanted to do something related to art but in those days parents had to pay for college so he looked at apprenticeships. He applied for a hand engraving apprenticeship at a workshop in the Hatton Garden area which appealed because it was artistic and creative.

Where did you learn to hand engrave?

Colin learned to hand engrave on a five year apprenticeship with Guill and Stephenson, a hand engraving company based in Hatton Garden at 14a St Cross Street. At the time when he started there were eight hand engravers and eight machine engravers. The owner was a man called Ernie Stephenson and other senior engravers included Harold Fuller, John Hopkins, Peter Turner and Alan Tetlow. As far as Colin knows these men are all dead now, apart from Alan Tetlow. He thinks Alan would probably be retired now if still living, although he believes he was working five or six years ago at R H Wilkins. Colin stayed there for fourteen year - he was taken on after his apprenticeship. He left in 1978 when he took redundancy and went freelance. The company were moving out of Hatton Garden to Clerkenwell. He had already been doing private work and so he was encouraged to take the opportunity to leave and go freelance.

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

Colin works in gold, silver and all precious metals. 'You end up doing whatever is thrown at you'. He does seal and heraldic work as well as portrait engraving. He did an engraving on a bowl for the Serrano family. In the 2003 America's Cup they sponsored Switzerland - a landlocked country who went on to win the yacht race. Colin engraved the family history onto this large silver cup from the first factory they owned up until winning the America's cup, including portraits of the family members on the cup. It was a six week project. Colin also does seals - mostly coats of arms and crests - which involves working in reverse; and sports trophies such as Six Nations Rugby and the World Cup in 2007. The Six Nations Rugby started back in 1990 but they wanted it to go back to the first ever international which was between England and Scotland in approximately 1880 so Colin has been working on these - a huge project.

He also does silver replica golfing trophies. For a recent job he was approached by a client who had his Great Grandfather's fountain pen - an original Bakelite model with his signature engraved on it. The signature has worn away and Colin has been asked to redo it. Colin also does about 10-15 wedding rings a week for a company called Harriet Kesall based in Hertfordshire. The most difficult projects are titanium wedding rings. The trend for titanium and white gold presents a challenge owing to the difficulty of engraving on such a hard surface.

How do you work? Alone or together with others to produce an end product? What is your working environment? Can you describe your thought processes when working?

Colin works alone in his workshop at the jewelers Theo Fennell. He was working at Hatton Garden in studios there until 1998 when he was invited over by Theo Fennell. He does all their engraving for them and has done work for royalty and many famous names, including the Duchess of York. The workshop is, in Colin's words, *'quite posh for a hand engravers'* with a large bench area. When working he describes himself as having a total concentration that blocks everything out. He has the radio on in the background but other than that no distractions. There is bench space for someone who comes in to do diamond setting once every month or so but other than that he is on his own in the studio.

What motivates you to continue doing what you are doing?

The variety of the work and never knowing what he is going to be doing next. *'Even though I've been in the trade over 40 years I'm still learning'*. For example, the Bakelite pen was a new challenge. Seal engraving in particular is a constant learning process. Recently he engraved a seal with an ermine, an animal which he has never done before. To do animals you need to know all about the muscles. Colin has a collection of heraldic books which he refers to when doing that work. They date back to the 1880s and one is from as early as 1850. He also uses Fairbairn's book as well as a book by an engraver from the 1880s and he has a heraldic dictionary from 1875. Colin found all these old books when he was working as an apprentice in Hatton Garden. There used to be an old book stall on Farringdon Road where he would pick these books up for a shilling. *'I still get a buzz when someone gives me a picture, I prepare a surface and do it.'*

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?

Colin worked on the Rugby World Cup in 2007. He has worked on lots of golfing replica cups and because of this work was recommended to the Rugby board. It was the first time that the cup had ever been engraved live on television.

He travelled to Paris and was given tickets for the game and then given 10 minutes to do what is normally a 20 minute job, waiting until the final whistle was blown before engraving the name of the winners, South Africa. He also did a job for Ketel Vodka at a cocktail bar opening in Hoxton Square, 'Happiness Forgets'. They set him up working there and people would come along and give him things to engrave. Mainly rings and bottle openers. Colin has also done the Ryder Cup, FA Cup and is working on two replica trophies for Lee Trevino from the US Open at 90% of their original size. He has also done work for Rory McIlroy, the US Open, US Senior, Walker Cup, Calcutta Cup and the Cook Trophy.

Hand engraving has also led Colin to have a part in the recent film "W.E.", a film about Wallis Simpson. He played a part as an extra working in the jewellers Cartier in the 1930s. Colin got the role through the Hand Engravers Association. They were looking for a hand engraver for the film so he took his tools along and was selected by the film's director Madonna for the part. This has since led to other work as an extra in films and Colin has now signed up with a casting agency. Has appeared in the film Iron Lady and will be in an ITV drama starring David Tennant next year.

Have you received recognition for your work as a hand engraver?

He has never done competitions and says he has no time as a freelancer.

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

'50/50'. Colin considers his apprenticeship was 'slave labour'. His friends at the time were all going out and earning triple what he was at £12 to £15 a week compared to his £4 a week wage. It took a long while to get the money that the craft deserves.

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

Colin has not trained anyone - there is no time to do it. When at Guill and Stephenson he did help to train the younger apprentices - Duncan Baird-Murray and Jeffrey Kells whom he thinks may have moved to Wales.

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

Colin worked for a time in Hatton Garden sharing a workshop with others. He worked in two workshops during his time there. To get up to his first workshop in Hatton Garden you had to climb these wooden stairs which were all at angles to each other. You could put a penny at one side of the room and it would roll to the other. Clerkenwell was full of Dickensian old workshops. When he was an apprentice part of his job was to go out to other hand engravers on jobs.

The Globe was a pub in Hatton Garden above which there was another hand engravers. The guy who worked there was still working in a very old way with a dark room and a glass bowl filled with green water. A candle was lit behind it so light would spread out. This was the old way of working before electric light so this would have been someone who started out in Victorian times and was continuing using the same methods.

Colin considers Hatton Garden to now be dead as place for the retail jewellery trade. Most of the shops are gone. Most of his clients now are postal or jewellers in the Kensington and Chelsea area. He has no clients from down Hatton Garden anymore and hasn't been down there for two or three years. For him there is no need to go as there. There are tool shops but that can all be done online now.

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

Public awareness is important as well as apprenticeships. You need dedicated people with patience. They need to be artistic and not driven by money and have the dedication to take the work up. Colin believes it takes 15 years to learn hand engraving and to know all aspects of it.

The length of time it takes to train puts off young people. There is little awareness of the skills involved. Even at the jewelers where he works there are tours taking people round and he often gets overlooked. He is worried that if we do not get apprenticeships going again, once people like him are gone, there will be no one to do the work. The art colleges like the Sir John Cass need to promote and teach hand engraving as they used to.

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

The internet is enabling people to promote themselves. Lots of Colin's work comes from the internet and his website. This is especially important working in this area where there are no other hand engravers. That is very different from when he started out working in Hatton Garden. Better photocopying machines are a great help for resizing images. In the past it had to be done by hand. But the tools are the same. Albrecht Durer was using the same tools in the 16th century as Colin uses today.

Views or thoughts on the future of the hand engraving profession and on your particular area of hand engraving:

Alan comments on the great sense of community within the business. This is something which still operates to a large degree on trust and words of promise.

On the negative side he feels that there are many people in the trade with little to say in their work although he acknowledged this may be a very personal view which others may not share. Personally he thinks that jewellery and art should more widely hold some meaning beyond being purely decorative and that a lot of the work does not meet this criterion.

Hand engraving does not sit well within a world that values speed. Unless the Hand Engravers Association succeeds in putting the value and usefulness of hand engraving in the foreground of public awareness the wider interest will dwindle. Teaching that stresses quick results is not conducive to the high-precision skills and years of training required to gain competence in the profession. Alan puts the level of skill needed into perspective by pointing out that engravers produce with tools what most people cannot do with a pencil and paper.

To get young people excited about hand engraving they need to gain a sense of having a 'personal stake' in what they produce. They should be able to expect, and thereby be motivated by, the prospect of gaining personal recognition for their work. Only very rarely does a hand engraver's name gain significant recognition and a personal reputation, as in the case of Ken Hunt or Malcolm Appleby, and this needs to change.

The hand engraving trade could borrow from the example set by the phenomenon of celebrity chefs. By similarly promoting the link between an individual and their work engravers would be motivated to maintain their artistic/artisanal reputation forming a distinctive, creative style and avoiding second-rate efforts.



Gold Cross back
Bamboo Jungle Scene



Gold Cross back
Beehive and Roses



Silver Bottle Sleeve
Pimms



Silver Bottle Sleeve
Jack Daniels Bourbon



Silver Bottle Sleeve
Famous Grouse Whiskey



Silver Bottle Sleeve
Petrus



Silver Pint Mug
Scottish Shooting Lodge



Silver Box



RCA Silver



Engraving style card



