

Dudley Sauvarin Withers

Engraver, jeweller, teacher of engraving and jewellery shop owner

Sauvarin Withers Engraving and Jewellery

Interviewed by Chris Rowley

Interview took place in January 2013

Early life and learning

Now 60 years old. No family connection with engraving – just he was not good at academic work at school but had a great art teacher who encouraged him and suggested he contacted the London art schools. He was impressed by the Cass course on design and silversmithing; did a Foundation Year (1968/9) and, greatly enjoying it, went on to do what was in effect a degree 1969/70 – 1973. He graduated in 1974 with a diploma in Engraving.

His engraving teachers were mainly Fred Fryer and Bill Turner. At this time the engraving classes were very popular, with lots of people studying. Wayne Parrott was studying a year or so ahead at the same time.

Dudley has always particularly admired Stan Reece's work. He was also teaching at the Cass at the same time Dudley attended. Dudley has several of Stan's prints at home – both heraldic, pictorial and botanical subjects. He also has a vague memory that in the 1970s Stan did at least one set of stamps for a Commonwealth country. Occasionally he gave Stan a lift home from college when he lived in Croydon.

Dudley's main memory of Bill Turner – apart from his lovely engraving – was visiting his workshop in Holborn to get some advice. *"The workshop was very dark; the only window looked out at a brick wall and – as a young man – I was surprised he could do such wonderful work in such an uninspiring place."*

I can't remember much about Fred Fryer apart from the fact he was an excellent engraver and a good teacher. He was tall and balding and I guess was approaching retirement age. I seem to remember that he did some work for the Royal Mint. I would guess he was about sixty-five plus years old when I was a student at the Cass in the early 1970s; so probably born around 1910.

But, because I was doing general silversmithing – not just engraving – we did have teachers in other disciplines. I did chasing, which I loved, taught by Bert Brooker. Bert Kitchen was outstanding on the drawing side. (He did beautiful book illustrations and also contributed to Private Eye). Reg Hill, Albert Lucas and Roger Zucca were also good.

Two other silversmiths who I got to know as students and who also did a bit of engraving were Joan Andrew and Barbara Masters. But neither would have claimed to be established engravers. (They are both dead now.)

On an ordinary week at the Cass, I reckon that I did 2½ days engraving with Fred Fryer, one day chasing with Bert Brooker (there is some of his work in the Goldsmiths' Company's book 'Treasures of the Twentieth Century' – page 37); and one day enamelling – with George Lloyd. I also took an evening class in general jewellery.

When I was at the Cass – it was probably my second year – there was a request for a student to do a farewell gift for someone who had a Canterbury background. So I volunteered and did a piece which had chased figures from the Canterbury Tales in the foreground and an engraved background. (See images at the end of this interview.)

Career

In my last year at the Cass, I went to work part-time at Betser's. They were very big in engraving things for the West End jewellers. I was there two or three days but it was not ideal. Nobody spoke to me – unless it was to tell you everything you'd learnt was wrong!

So I left and went to John Pinches who were medallists. It wasn't really engraving. You were given a drawing and the right sized piece of clay and you had to carve it out perfectly. After I left the Cass, I did six months paid work there but it wasn't what I wanted.

By chance at a wedding, I met Reg Hill – who had taught me design. He mentioned an elderly silversmith who worked in Westerham – very near where my parents and I were living. His name was Francis Cooper. He had followed his father John Paul Cooper, who was a famous silversmith with the arts and crafts movement. Anyway, I went to see him and he said that although he couldn't give me any paid work, I could use his studio. (You can see his work in the 'Treasures of the 20th Century' page 27.) So there I was at 22 or 23, starting my own business. I build it up visiting galleries and shops who were prepared to sell my jewellery. The most fun one was probably when I started to sell at the Covent Garden market. I was next to the goldsmith Vera Honeker who you [Chris Rowley] knew well. She'd been at the Cass.

In 1977 – when I was about twenty four – I was in Blundell's buying some silver, I met Syd Wickham who had been one the people who taught me at the Cass. He said that the Cass were looking for someone new to teach engraving on a part-time basis so why didn't I apply. I went along to see the Principal and I got talked into and started doing the Friday evening courses. Stan Reece and Wayne Parrott, were the two main weekday teachers. Then someone left and I was doing three lessons a day once a week. And I taught there for around twenty years until 1997.

In the meantime, I was building up my own business. If you had asked me – and I'd probably say the same today – I'd say that I was and am an engraver. But as you and I have gone through all the drawings and photographs of forty years of work, there are not that many pieces that I have done that are straight engraving. There are carved pieces, chased pieces, pierced pieces, some enamelled pieces (although any enamelled work was mainly done by George Lloyd who lived in Croydon. Sadly he died probably 15 years ago). So looking at all that work, an outsider would call me a jeweller.

After Francis Cooper had died, his widow had said that I could go on using his workshop in Westerham. But – again it was chance – a small workshop became available in the village where I lived – Limpsfield. So I took that – and then eventually, some years later, a shop opposite which I have had as my base for thirty years now.

I have some photos of a flute that I engraved for James Galway in 1997 – an unusual project. I'm very keen on classical music and I wrote to him out of the blue – not asking for any project – just to meet him. He invited me to meet him and then said could I repair a jump ring for the pendant he always wore at concerts. But it had to be done in time for the concert the next night. When I delivered it, he took me out to dinner and I asked if I could engrave something for him. He said to give him some drawings and then he sent me a flute. Eventually he said to engrave everything – anything I wanted all over it. So I did. You've got a few photos of it.

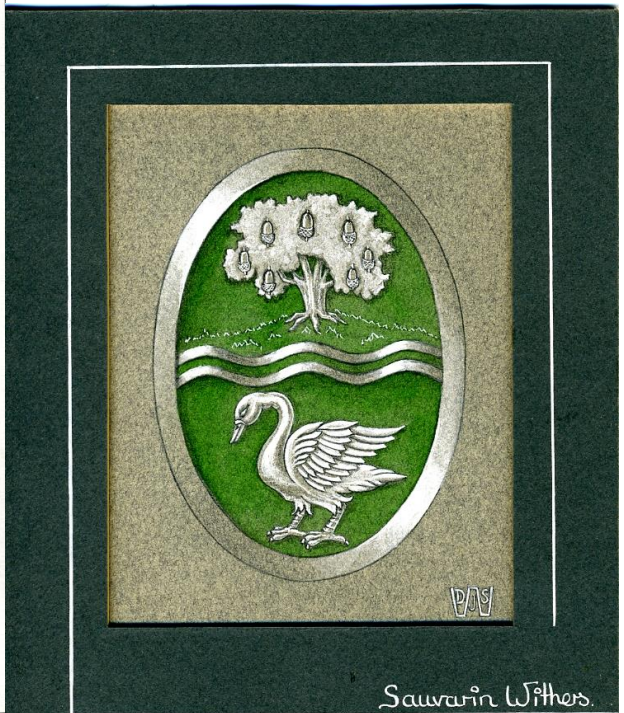
Currently, Dudley continues to run his long established and well-respected shop in the High Street at Limpsfield, selling jewellery and to a lesser extent small antiques, but designing a wide variety of work and accepting commissions. The work includes a limited amount of engraving – although he has to spend a good proportion of his time running the business as well as designing and making.

A quiet, thoughtful and respected member of the engraving and jewellery world, who suggests that the best way to describe his work is to look at his reproductions/ photos/ drawings.

Archive material and photographs









26/7/99

Dear Mr Lewis - Jones

Further to your enquiry I now enclose a sketch of for a brooch with four roses as discussed. The brooch could be made in silver + the four roses in gold ^{for contrast} if you wish. I estimate the cost for making the brooch in silver + gold as £265.00.

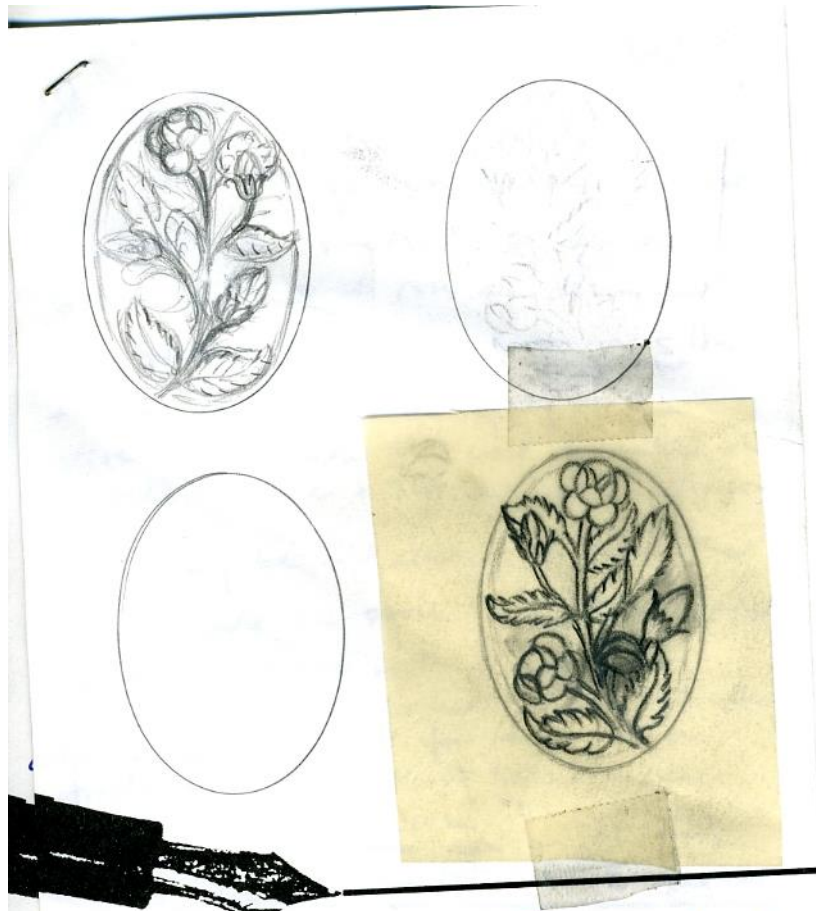
You may be interested to know that I also have in stock a Victorian label + tassel in silver with applied gold decoration on the tassel which coincidentally is decorated with four roses + three daisies. The cost of label + tassel being £300.00.

As I will be on holiday between 29th July - 5th Aug. inc I will reserve the label for you until perhaps

Stephane Phillips Agencies
 Manufacturers Agent
 you may be able to see it possibly Sat 7th Aug
 however I look forward to hearing from you
 in due course

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 01225-704053 CAR PHONE: 0860 320796

Letter to Mr Lewis Jones regarding a four-rose design for a brooch

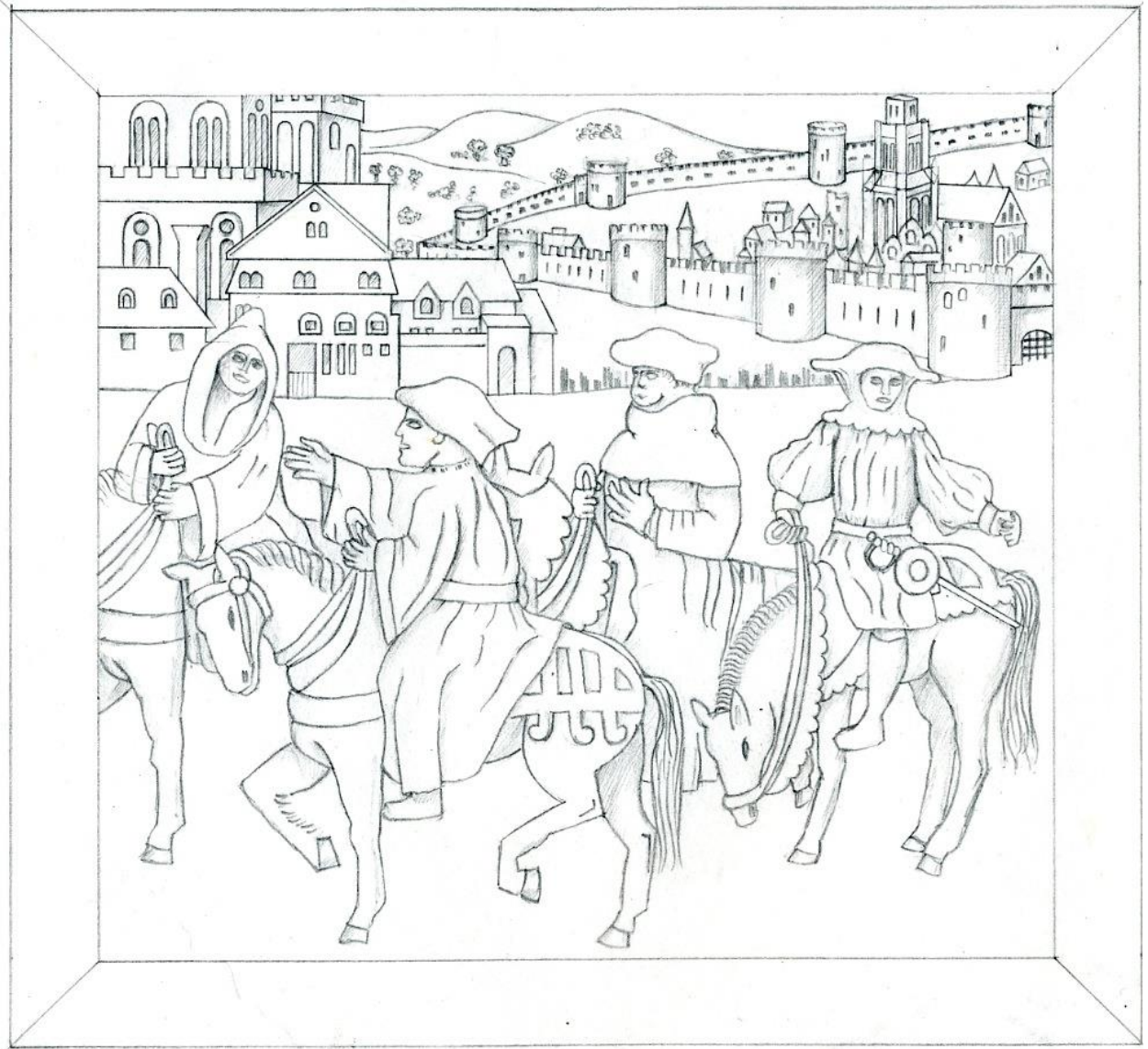


Stephane Phillips Agencies

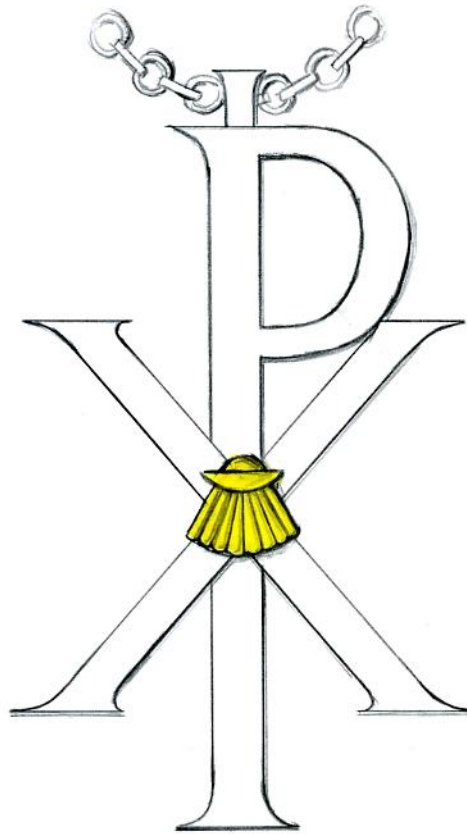
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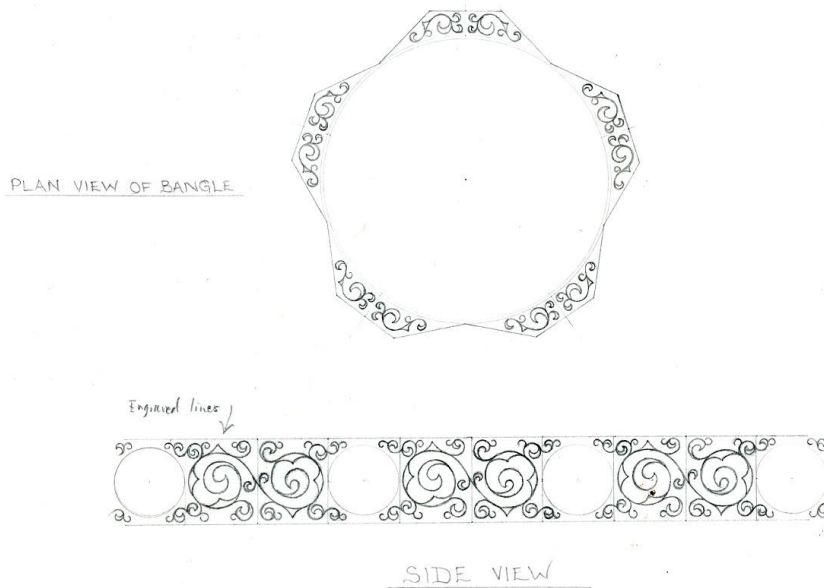
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Designs for a four-rose design on a brooch



Drawing for 'Canterbury Tales' – chased figures in the foreground, with engraving in the background





Taken from *'The Magician in Gold and Silver'* by Jane Johnston

Article featured in the Caterham Times, 1979 (when Withers was 27)

Worked in studio in garden of his parents' house. Tucked into a quiet, leafy little backwater in the garden, it must be marvellous for concentration. ...There isn't a great deal of room to move, with the piano against one wall and tools and books around the room.

Most of Dudley's work is jewellery, though he hesitates to call himself strictly a silversmith, which he says is really an umbrella term for several different skills. He is a chaser and engraver – two methods of ornamenting metals, and he works in both silver and gold. *"I didn't want to go just into engraving. That would mean lettering endless names on cups and trays and so on. I wanted to be my own master and design as well as make pieces."*

"Once a piece has been commissioned, I never repeat the design so it will be the only one of its kind."

"I do some small bits of fashion jewellery like rings, but I prefer the traditional styles."

When making a commission *"The first step was to go up to the West End to buy the gold and the stone. Hatton Garden may be the Mecca, but the West End is the Elite."*

In his photographic scrapbook, he has pictures of a silver flute owned by celebrity flautist, James Galway. *"I was given the opportunity to meet him and he was very interested in my work. So he decided to commission me to do some work for him."* In fact Dudley spent 80 hours engraving the flute for Galway, who wrote in thanks saying, *"I have rarely seen such a beautiful piece of workmanship."*

Meanwhile, the man with the Midas touch is going along very nicely.

He wears a watchmakers glass and engraves in 3 hour bursts so his eyes don't go out of focus with the hard concentration.