

Matthew Hart
Apprentice seal and surface engraver
RH Wilkins/Rebus Signet Rings



Matt using a flat engraving tool to seal engrave a monogram on a silver signet, copying a customer's artwork

Matthew Hart is an apprentice seal and surface engraver under Master engraver Emmet Smith, Director of RH Wilkins/Rebus Signet Rings. Here he talks about what it takes to become a hand engraver and the training and support he's received during his five-year apprenticeship.

Matt comes from four generations of jewellers; his dad, brother and uncle all currently work in Greville Street in Hatton Garden as mounters and setters. So when Matt started thinking about his career at sixth form college he was keen to enter the trade. At school he really enjoyed art, and in particular drawing, so hand engraving seemed like a natural fit. "I wanted to do something a bit more artistic," Matt explains. "I found engraving really interesting – I loved all the different techniques and how old the trade is. So when my uncle heard that Emmet [Smith, Director of RH Wilkins] was looking for an apprentice, he encouraged me to apply."

Matt started at RH Wilkins/Rebus in 2014. He recalls his first day at work: "They had me drawing lots of ovals. I couldn't understand the point of it at first, but I quickly came to understand that the basic shapes of script lettering are made up of

ovals and what engravers call 'the line of beauty'. I practiced those shapes over and over!"

Next, Matt was taught how to 'set up' and hold a square graver, the basic tool that all hand engravers use. "We make all our own tools," Matt says. "Every engraver's tool is made to fit their own cutting style. It's completely custom made. This will change over time as you progress and start to cut slightly differently."

A year into his apprenticeship, and after much practicing on copper, Matt was allowed to start working on customers' orders. "Initially it was very simple stuff – and always under a lot of supervision," Matt explains. All the early drawing practice really started to pay off. "At that time I was best at script lettering, so I might be engraving a couple of script capitals on a simple silver disc."



Surface engraving of 'Praying Hands' by Albrecht Dürer on a silver signet ring

Alongside his time in the workshop, Matt benefitted from training days run by the Goldsmiths' Company. Each year, this focused on a different area of the jewellery trade, enabling apprentices to gain a fully rounded appreciation of the industry. "We got to experience different aspects of the trade, and were able to have a go at different skill sets with a tutor showing us how to make something," says Matt.

As Matt gained confidence, he found he needed to check his work less and less with other members of the team. He also took on an increasing number of customers' orders – although he would still practice on pieces of copper to refine his technique.



Completed seal engraved signet ring covered in soot ready to take the wax impression

Then in 2016, Matt was awarded a three-year grant by the Sir John Cass's Foundation to help him complete his apprenticeship. It was around this time that he started to train as a seal engraver. RH Wilkin's sister company, Rebus Signet Rings, has experienced a huge surge in orders in recent years thanks to the revival of the signet ring. "When James [Handyside, RH Wilkin's former apprentice and specialist seal engraver] left, Emmet didn't have enough people to keep up with the demand for seals and signet rings, so they decided to train me up," Matt says.

Seal engraving requires a very specific set of skills and tools, as Matt explains: “With seal engraving, the way you cut and the way you present the finished product is completely different to surface engraving. The finished piece is actually the wax impression the seal creates, not the ring itself. So you’re working in reverse, and that takes a lot longer. We use half round and flat gravers, which are capable of going deeper without making the cut too wide. Plus you have to keep checking your work as you go along. We push the seal into plasticine so we can check what’s happening, and then towards the end we check the seal with wax because that makes a much crisper image.”

During his apprenticeship, Matt has also been encouraged to take part in prestigious industry competitions run by the Goldsmiths’ Craft & Design Council. “It puts you out of your comfort zone as you have to make something really impressive for the judges,” he says. “Emmet really encourages us to take part as it’s good for the company and for the apprentices – especially if we win!” And win he did! Matt walked away with Gold *and* the Theo Fennell Award in the Goldsmiths’ Craft & Design Awards for his gorgeously intricate gold seal engraving (pictured below).

A ceremony at Goldsmiths’ Hall this coming December will officially mark the end of Matt’s apprenticeship, when he will be made a Freeman of the City of London. He is then guaranteed a job at RH Wilkins – which is not something most of today’s graduates can enjoy. “I will stay on as a full-time seal and surface engraver, depending on the role Emmet has in mind for me,” Matt confirms.

All in all, Matt believes his years as an apprentice at RH Wilkins have been invaluable. “Hand engraving is such a hard skill to learn, it takes a lot of time. Unless you’ve got the right people teaching you, it’s almost impossible. The best engravers are taught by a Master. I think it’s the best way to get into the trade and get your foot in the door.”



Matt’s award-winning seal engraving for the Goldsmiths’ Craft & Design Awards