



BAIRD-MURRAY

Former Chair of the Hand Engravers Association

An appreciation on his retirement

Alan Craxford, November 2020.

I got to know Duncan through working together on the Executive Committee of the Hand Engravers Association. I was the first Chair and Duncan followed me. Now the Association is well past its 10th birthday it has become an established organisation which enables a wide range of things (pre pandemic) to happen. Especially in increasing interest in our skill.

However, in discussing his life and contribution as a hand engraver, a number of interesting coincidences came out. For instance, Duncan was a pre-apprentice student at, what was then, the Sir John Cass School of Art the year after I left as a part time student. One of the tutors who taught us both was Stan Reece who of course taught so many people our Art.



Duncan chairing the "Training the Trainers" event at Birmingham, 2015

Duncan is best known for being *the man* at Guill & Stephenson which he ran successfully for 30 years. There are many ways to be a hand engraver. It's often not about being highly original and innovatory but always doing a good job, on time for a fair price. If one looks at our language its fascinating how the term engraving crops up to indicate permanence. "Engraved on my heart" is typical example. Because the one thing people know about engraving is that metal is removed. Once this has been done it is very difficult to erase so it's always there. This is what makes it meaningful to the customer and adds to the value in all senses of the word to the ring, the trophy, the cutlery, the retirement gift. It's a pity it was not practice to record photographically at least some of the work produced. I suppose we so easily forget how difficult it used to be to get a photograph taken let alone when the object the work was on was not yours to photograph. Nowadays it is all so easy we barely think about it.

Anyone who adds to that sense of meaning does humanity a service, however modest, and provides a bit more of the glue that holds society together. Anyone who can hold to that simple principle successfully for over 30 years, when retirement beckons, deserves acknowledgment. Duncan epitomised how (seemingly) straightforward, traditional engraving can transform ordinary objects to treasured heirlooms.

My purpose of writing this piece, I hope will give a sense of how things were for a not untypical engraving business. The original company was set up in 1946, incorporated in 1959 and Duncan took over in 1984. At that point the team included Geoffrey Kells and Angela Heard. John Bailey and Jim Hay joined in the eighties and it is a testament to Duncan that they stayed with the firm until 2018. Jim specialised in pantograph and computer engraving.



Jim Hay, engraver at Guill and Stephenson until 2019

One of things I remember of visits to Guill & Stephenson in what was then the Craft Central building in St Johns Square, was the general sense of impending chaos. It seemed to work because everyone either didn't move from their bench, or remembered where they last put something. Makers, it seems to me, function within the two opposites of Order and Chaos, it all depends on the people concerned and what works for them. The main point here is what comes out in the end, as long as that's good, how it does so is not really our affair. I do have a sneaking little suspicion that Duncan was secretly rather proud of the artistic chaos that was where he and his team spent so much of their working lives.

When Duncan moved the business to the sparkingly modern Goldsmiths' Centre, he initially shared a beautiful large studio / workshop space with Sam James Ltd (who have now taken over Guill & Stephenson). As it happened, I was organising a photo shoot to gather images for the Association. Duncan, as it happened, wasn't there so he may not know this story. Everybody had their workspace and Duncan's was at the far end of the room. So briefly what I saw was a workspace he must have had for most of his working life. If you're an engraver you need several things from your workstation; solidity; adjustability; something not too precious; toughness and works well for you. I was quietly knocked out by what I saw - the opposite of hi-tech. What I saw was a set of London telephone directories. I thought I was the only other person in the workshop who remembered what a phone directory was! There in a pile you can easily add or subtract to create the height you need, they are heavy so don't move. They were easily available and replaced. On top Duncan had placed a couple of sandbags - for finer control - so there it was: a highly individual workstation that had clearly served him well all his working life.



Workstation with adjustable height and real solidity!

Congratulations and thank you to Duncan, for being such a valuable asset to the trade of engraving for over thirty years. We wish you well in your retirement.



Duncan in conversation with the Dean of Westminster in the Parlour of the Lord Mayor of Westminster.



The paperweight Duncan engraved for the Hand Engravers Association's collection. On permanent display at The Clockmakers' Museum.



"Just for fun" a copperplate engraving by Duncan of his two cats



A lunch in celebration of the sponsorship of Sarah Hobbs. Who is apprenticed with her father David Bedford.