Until the publication of Dava Sobel’s phenomenal bestseller *Longitude*, in 1995, the name and achievements of John Harrison were known only to a small band of horological devotees. *Longitude* struck a chord though, and was followed by two films for television and later a stage play. In the major film made by Charles Sturridge for Granada in 1999, Michael Gambon produced a remarkable performance as John Harrison, but his story was also interwoven with that of Jeremy Irons’ character, Lt Commander RT Gould – a complex figure credited with the rediscovery and restoration of Harrison’s sea clocks.

The story of polymath and horologist Rupert Thomas Gould (1890–1948) has now been retold in a painstakingly researched and beautifully written biography by Jonathan Betts, Curator of the Harrison timekeepers at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich. *Time Restored* is subtitled *The Harrison timekeepers and RT Gould, the man who knew (almost) everything*, and there is a lot of meat, even in the title. At one level, ‘Time Restored’ refers simply to Gould’s work on the timekeepers, but the book also presents a great deal of social history and we are given a (not always edifying) picture of upper middle-class, late Victorian, Edwardian, and mid 20th century life. The subtitle refers to Gould’s performances on the classic BBC radio programmes: *Children’s Hour* and *Brains Trust*. He also published on a variety of abstruse subjects such as typewriters, scientific mysteries and even the Loch Ness Monster!

The dilettante

Time Restored must have been a very difficult book to put together, as the process lasted over 20 years. One of this book’s greatest strengths is also perhaps its greatest weakness though. Betts had access to an enormous amount of documentary material provided by Gould’s two children, he also spent several hours recording interviews with them. And although details of the rather ‘Oxford Union’ way Gould and his friends amused themselves certainly provide an interesting record of a time and a class, I sometimes felt I was being told more than I wanted to know. Gould was a gifted dilettante with a vast range of interests. He had a very complicated life, including marital problems, strange sexual behaviour, and a number of completely incapacitating mental breakdowns.
After a brilliant start at the Royal Naval College, Gould had a short period in the Navy on the eve of the First World War when, as a navigation officer, he became interested in marine chronometers. He had a mental breakdown as war broke out and was subsequently found a desk job where he became an expert on charts of Polar Regions. The scandalous nature of the separation from his wife in 1927, reported by the Daily Mail in lurid detail, rendered him 'unemployable' in any official capacity and for the remainder of his life he lived first with his own mother and later with his mistress and her mother, earning odd sums here and there from writing and broadcasting, in order to supplement his Navy pension. Betts portrays him with an unblinking but not unsympathetic eye.

**Labour of love**

To bring the general reader 'up to speed', an early chapter outlines the story of the longitude problem and John Harrison. As Laycock has pointed out in The Lost Science of John 'Longitude' Harrison (Brant Wright, 1976), John Harrison established many of the principles of experimental science. He would make a massive mechanism, analyse its imperfections, and successively incorporate devices to ameliorate them. By the time he reached his third sea clock, this approach was spiralling out of control. In an amazing 'paradigm shift', to adopt today's jargon, he abandoned H3 after 18 years of work and produced the (ultimately) prize-winning H4 by rapidly perfecting the design of the contemporary watch.

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