

Restoration

The story of Rupert T Gould – the flawed genius who rediscovered the Harrison sea clocks

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Time Restored By Jonathan Betts

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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.



Between 1920 and February 1st 1933, Rupert Gould restored the four Harrison timekeepers in his own home for no pay. He filled 18 notebooks with meticulous notes and diagrams, devising the 'H1, H2...' nomenclature himself.



(Left) Gould spent seven of his twelve years of attic seclusion restoring H3 - appropriate given that it took Harrison the longest to build of all his clocks. Here, Gould poses with H3, holding the balance from H2. (Right) Though he had cleaned it before the others (removing some two ounces of dirt and verdigris), Gould left the restoration of H1 till last, as it had suffered the most from its century and a half of neglect at the Observatory. Replacing all its missing parts required Gould's prior experience with the other three timekeepers. (© National Maritime Museum, London. Lent by MOD Art Collection)

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.

After Astronomer Royal Nevil Maskelyne took possession of the Harrison Timekeepers, the large clocks found their way into unsatisfactory storage and neglect at Greenwich. H4 ('The Watch') and Larcum Kendall's replica, K1 were properly cared for and the latter saw service on voyages of exploration with Captain James Cook. It was in 1920, while researching material for his definitive work, *The Marine Chronometer - Its history and development* (Potter, 1923 and subsequent reprints) that Gould determined to seek out the Harrison timekeepers and restore them. Many aspects of the way the work was done, described in detail here, are quite appalling by today's standards. Gould's main aim was to understand the four timekeepers and to get them working - a process that took him 12 years. He often broke parts through simple clumsiness, replacing them using different materials, and even cut a hole in a front plate to make the movement easier to adjust. But, as Betts points out, without Gould's efforts these important national treasures could have ended up in a skip.

Betts tells his tale very well. In addition to being a 'good read', *Time Restored* is a work of considerable scholarship; there are over 400 footnotes and six appendices including a bibliography, reading list, and glossary. Most usefully (and unusually for 'popular' books these days) there is a comprehensive index - solving that annoying problem when, having read the book, you want to check a fact but can't find it. Packed with information for the serious student of horology, there is also much in this book for the general reader, especially those interested in social history. ◦