



Rewound

QP recommends a visit to the Clockmakers' Company Museum at Guildhall

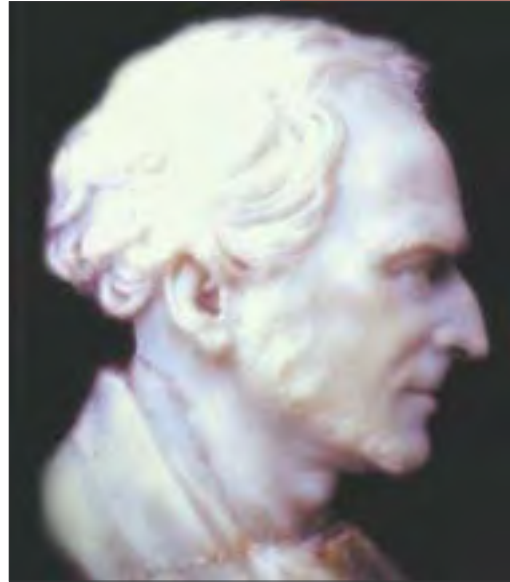
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Did you know that no fewer than 47,000 examples of the smallest screw used by the Waltham watch-manufacturing company of America can be contained in a thimble? Or that a Chinese watchmaker once successfully repaired the broken balance spring of a chronometer by riveting it back together? I certainly did not, and would still be struggling by without such vital knowledge had it not been for the chance discovery of a remarkable museum tucked away among the myriad grand buildings comprising London's Guildhall.

Here, situated in a single rectangular room at the top of a narrow staircase within Guildhall Library, can be found the Museum of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, the oldest collection of its kind anywhere in the world. After walking past a small glazed cabinet containing the prized possessions of the Worshipful Company of Playing Card Makers (everyone needs a guild, you know) and stepping through a seemingly anonymous swing door, the light changes from bright to soft and one experiences a palpable sense of journeying back in time. Displayed before you is the entire history of timekeeping, explained in words and objects ranging from the earliest-surviving record of a mechanical clock in 11th century China to some of the finest bespoke wristwatches of the 21st century.

From the events of the intervening years, visitors learn of a tale of intrigue, invention, ingenuity and, in particular, eccentricity, all of which constitute the history of this extraordinary livery company, granted its charter in 1631 by King Charles I. From the 17th century to the turn of the 20th, its members transformed the City of London into a clock- and watch-making centre that dominated the world. Retrospectively, this seemed inevitable, with men such as Dr Robert Hooke, Thomas Mudge and George Graham introducing horological improvements that proved vital to the progression of timekeeping, and which remain intrinsic to the science today. But the fact that the guild and the collection have survived to this day seems to me almost as remarkable as the achievements of its members.



Benjamin Vulliamy, the initial keeper of the Clockmakers' Company Library and the first man to buy horological pieces for its collection.



(Far left) The museum contains some historical pieces, including this Abraham-Louis Breguet self-winding watch, thought to be the earliest-surviving example.

(Left) A decorated time-piece crafted by the pioneers of jewellery, Peter and Jacob Debaufre.

Acquisitions

By chance, my impromptu visit to the museum on 22nd August coincided with Charter Day, meaning that, as well as the attraction of the exhibits, there was the added bonus of a guided tour by the infectious Sir George White, keeper of the Clockmakers' Company Museum, horological author and former clock dealer. Sir George, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of every strange twist and turn in the bizarre history of the guild, explained that, despite its ancient lineage, the Clockmakers' Company never got around to actually acquiring grand premises of the type still enjoyed by other organisations such as the gold-

smiths and drapers. Instead, they steadily worked their way through the funds until, in the early 1700s, they had emptied the coffers completely. At that point, the friendly landlord of the City's King's Head Tavern kindly offered them a room in which to meet. This arrangement lasted for some years until the company moved to three rooms in the nearby London Tavern, by which time the chronometer maker FJ Barraud had come up with the idea of establishing a clockmakers' library. In a bid to get the library started, he wrote to some of the great English makers – many of whom were enjoying the wealth of their success in large country houses – asking for book donations. The result was a flood of benevolence from retired makers such as Francis Perigal, who simply handed over entire collections of rare and important horological tomes.

For the first few years, the library was looked after by Benjamin Vulliamy – later to become five-times Master of the company, and clockmaker to George IV, William IV and Queen Victoria. He kept the collection on some vacant shelves at his Pall Mall shop, which it would be fair to describe as the Asprey of its day. In 1814, however, Vulliamy attended the auction of the property of the late Alexander Cummings and bought, on the Company's behalf, a silver half-seconds-beating watch, a pair of regulator pallets and the short-duration timekeeper made for Captain John Phipps's polar voyage of 1773.

Firsts achieved by British clock- and watchmakers

1. The balance spring, invented by Dr Robert Hooke of Bishopsgate, London, in 1664
2. Jewelling, first used by Peter and Jacob Debaufre of Soho, London, in 1704
3. The oil sink, introduced by Henry Sully of London in 1715
4. Sweep seconds, introduced by George Graham of Fleet Street, London, during the mid-18th century
5. Keyless winding, first used by Thomas Prest of The Strand, London, in 1820
6. The lever escapement, invented by Thomas Mudge of Fleet Street, London, in 1855
7. The self-winding movement, perfected by John Harwood of London in 1924

This established the idea of adding objects to the library, in response to which further donations began to pour in. At this point, the committee decided to set an aim of "procuring some of the works of the first makers in order to form a series embracing the most distant dates possible." Brimming with enthusiasm for the project, the committee voted in 1817 that £20 be given to Vulliamy to obtain a suitable piece of furniture in which to house the ever-expanding collection. He consequently went out and bought a second-hand mahogany bureau bookcase, which was set up in the King's Head and fitted with elaborate security locks.

By 1819, the company had 110 books, 48 watches or movements, and 12 manuscript drawings, as well as the items bought from the Cummings sale and the ancient livery records (including a remarkable menu for the Clockmakers' Midsummer Quarter Court of July 1692, showing that such luminaries as Joseph Knibb, Thomas Tompion and Henry Jones dined on mutton and cauliflower, beef, goose and other fowl). Things continued apace until the mid-19th century and Vulliamy's death in 1854, when the museum project lost direction. In 1856, the Patents Office asked permission to borrow the library and collection to add to its own, now housed in the Science Museum. The application was rejected by the court, but in 1871 the only surviving

Several retired watchmakers made donations of entire collections of rare and important horological tomes.

member of the Company's library committee, John Grant, suggested that the collection be offered for display in the new Guildhall Library. And so began the association which continues to this day.

On display

The museum first opened to the public in 1873 and the collection continued to expand. Among the many significant exhibits acquired were John Harrison's fifth marine chronometer, purchased in 1891 for £105, and the earliest-surviving self-winding watch made by Abraham-Louis Breguet, believed to have belonged to Czar Nicholas I. In 1894, the collection was first illuminated by electric light, increasing visitor numbers by such an extent that the librarian noted "the edges of the upper cases have become much worn and rubbed... and the wood is beginning to suffer from the boots of the visitors." Had it not been for the move to Guildhall, it seems unlikely that the collection would have survived, let alone expanded so significantly.



In 1988, when Sir George White carried out the first inventory since 1858, the company's chest also turned up, along with some shiny keys of a perfect fit. It was clearly the first time the box had been opened for more than 150 years, because it contained items said to be missing in the previous inventory.

However, it did fade into obscurity somewhat during the war years, and, immediately after 1945, Vulliamy's £20 bookcase was seconded by a clerk for use in another part of the building. It appears that he eventually took it home with him, because it turned up in a West Country auction a few years ago, where it was bought by an eagle-eyed dealer who spotted a label in one of the drawers that proved to be a bookplate of the Clockmakers' Company. He contacted Sir George White, who matched the bookcase up with the description in the company's records. Thanks to a consideration of several thousand pounds, it has now been returned to its true home and forms an important exhibit in the museum, housing some of the first pieces bought in Vulliamy's day.

But there is more to this remarkable museum than just history – its very existence is helping to ensure a future for the clock- and watchmakers of today by promoting interest in modern horology. The first display cabinet that visitors

Ten significant items from the collection

1. John Harrison's H5 marine timekeeper, with original drawings and notes
2. Sir Edmund Hillary's Smith's wristwatch, worn during the ascent of Everest in 1953
5. The earliest-known self-winding Breguet watch
4. John Harrison's personal long-case regulator
5. A gold, pair-cased watch by Thomas Mudge
6. A pocket watch containing Thomas Earnshaw's spring-detente escapement used by Captain George Vancouver during the circumnavigation of the North American island named after him
7. An original example of the Act of Parliament offering the Longitude Prize of £20,000
8. The earliest-surviving Tompion watch movement
9. A decimal watch of 1862 by Statter of Liverpool, in which the hands move anti-clockwise dividing the day into 10 hours, each hour with 100 minutes, each minute with 100 seconds
10. A George Daniels patent Co-Axial Escapement fitted to a Patek Philippe wristwatch movement

encounter is sponsored by the celebrated English watchmaker George Daniels, and contains examples of his own work as well as those of young contemporary makers, admirably demonstrating that the craft is thriving. It is a plan that clearly works, as, while I was there, a visitor expressed an interest in commissioning a wristwatch from Roger W Smith, a prodigy of Daniels who now produces fine, hand-made pieces himself, in limited editions.

The phrase "London's best kept secret" may be severely overused, but in the case of this museum I think it may well be justified. ○

Further information: The Collection and Library of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers of London can be found at the Guildhall Library, Aldermanbury, London EC2. It is open to the public Monday to Friday from 9.30 am to 4.30 pm, but is closed one morning per week for rewinding. Admission is free. www.clockmakers.org