

AHS London Lecture Thursday 14 July 2022

Seth Kennedy, Engine-Turning and the English Pocket Watch-Case Industry, 1800–Present

Watch-case making was split into separate tasks performed by individual specialist workers, much in the same way as watch movements were made. However, it is usually only the 'case maker' who brought the piece to completion who might be identifiable through the Assay Office hallmarks. Using a rose engine to apply geometric engraved decoration to metal watch cases has a history dating back approximately 250 years. Also, makers of gold or silver watch dials often decorated their work with engine turned patterns. Yet the engine turners who performed this work are seemingly as anonymous as the pendant and bow makers, or the joint finishers or the polishers.

There are sources concerning ornamental turning techniques and knowledge of the machinery itself thanks to remaining examples, but very little research appears to have been published regarding the people who used them. With a primary focus on nineteenth-century London, this talk will investigate who some of these engine turners were, what their lives might have been like and how this part of the trade was organised. Where did they live and work, where did the skills originate and how were they were passed on? Where did the machines they were using come from? It's a story that includes successes and failures, family succession, charitable works, thieving apprentices and murder.

Other trades also made use of engine turning throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and so, after the decline

of English watchmaking, these will be followed to determine what, if anything, of professional engine turning today can be linked to the earlier generations.



Abraham Decombe was born in Geneva c. 1801 but by his early twenties was living and working as an engine turner in Clerkenwell. This is the house in Camden Town he had retired to by 1851. His younger brother Henry also came to England, initially to London, but then settled in Liverpool. He married there in 1837 and continued working as a watch-case engine turner.

Seth Kennedy is a professional antiquarian horologist based in London who specialises in the restoration and repair of antique pocket watches. He is also a pocket watch case maker. He received a scholarship from the Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust in 2018 which provided him the opportunity to study engine turning under the tutelage of skilled practitioners.

Attending London Lectures

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