

AHS London Lecture Thursday 12 March 2020

David Thompson

The Art and Mystery of Watchmaking.

A detailed account of the making of a watch, c.1650

There is no doubt that from its beginnings in the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth I, skills in watchmaking developed rapidly. By the time of the introduction of the spiral balance spring to watches in 1675, the London makers, including those with immigrant connections to both France and Flanders, had become perhaps the most accomplished in the art compared with their counterparts across the English Channel. Questions have been raised over the years as to how the process of making a watch was actually carried out in these early years. Many of the processes which were achieved without the use of sophisticated machinery have remained somewhat uncharted. The formation of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers in London in 1631, which in essence was largely achieved by a group of those engaged in watchmaking rather than those making larger horological items, was described at the time as being established for those engaged in the 'Art and mystery' of the trade.

Recently a revealing document has come to light amongst the papers of John Evelyn, which is held to have been written by the ingenious mathematician and clergyman William Oughtred (1574–1660), who is also credited with the invention of the slide-rule in 1622. It is titled *Summe Directions Towards the making of a small watche of brasse*. Rebecca Pohancenik spent many laborious hours deciphering what has to be described as a challenging manuscript to reveal the secrets held within explaining how a watch movement was actually made in London in about 1650. Whether or not Oughtred was actually skilled in the art of watchmaking, or simply recording



the expertise of others, remains as a subject for discussion. Nevertheless the manuscript describes in detail the necessary processes involved.

The talk will take a journey through the document detailing how each part of the watch was made, with illustrations of contemporary watches and their components to show the sort of results which were achieved by these ingenious men.

David Thompson is well known to members of the society as its former chairman. He is also the retired Curator of Horology at the British Museum, a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and a Fellow of the British Horological Institute. He has published three books on the collections of the British Museum and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and published numerous articles in Antiquarian Horology over many years. His specialist area is that of watches made before the introduction of the balance spring to watches in 1675.

TICKETS

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