Master of time

Sylvia Vetta meets a master craftsman who had a hand in making a Jubilee gift fit for the Queen

■ Right, a 17th-century bracket clock made by Charles Gretton. Below the Queen's Jubilee timepiece

At the time of the millennium the British Horological Institute resolved to build two special timepieces — one to be presented to the Queen in her jubilee year and the other for the institute's own collection. An elite team of 15 clockmakers was assembled to build them.

The workmanship and materials are of the highest traditional quality and includes solar power elements, which are definitely very 21st century.

One of the team was an Oxfordshire clock restorer, Jeremy Barrow, proprietor of the Oxford Clock Company.

I went to see him to discover a little about the history of clock-making in this country and to discover why early pieces still hold such a strong appeal.

Jeremy has been interested in things mechanical since he was a child. He was experimenting with electricity at the tender age of five — and had his first brush with the dangers of motoring, while finding out how his grandfather's car worked, at the age of six.

As a young man that curiosity particularly centred on Rolls Royce cars and clocks and watches. The combination is interesting because, at one time, clocks were valued more highly than Rolls Royce cars are today.

Trade delegations visiting foreign parts — particularly China — would take a fine quality timepiece as a gift to make a powerful impression.

"A James Cox automaton made especially for the China trade fetched almost £400,000 at auction in September," Jeremy explained.

But he hasn't always been a professional clock restorer.

"For many years, I jetted around the world selling sophisticated textile machinery to more than 50 countries. I became fed up seeing the inside of Heathrow and wanted a different way of life," he said.

"I spent two years training at West Dean College, which included time working at the British Museum, where there is a collection of more than 7,000 clocks.

"After qualifying, I set up my business here and mostly restore clocks made between 1650 and 1900 using original tools and materials."

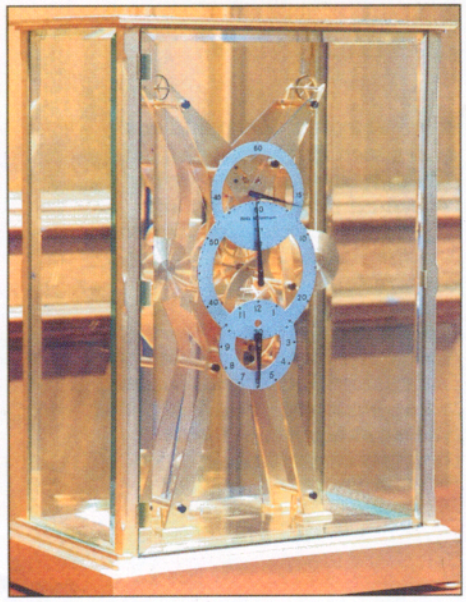
Early clocks were completely hand made. Most early clocks were made by blacksmiths.

"Each wheel with teeth took a lot of skill to make, and could so easily be ruined by a slight or sudden slip," Jeremy said.

He showed me some early clockmaker's tools including a Swiss wheel-cutting engine, which he still uses.

"It was invented to speed up the process because, once set up, each tooth would be exactly the same distance apart and of identical shape."

I realised that I was looking at tools whose significance was much greater than their creators would have realised at the time. The only difference between these machines and the great machine tools of the industrial revolution is one of scale.

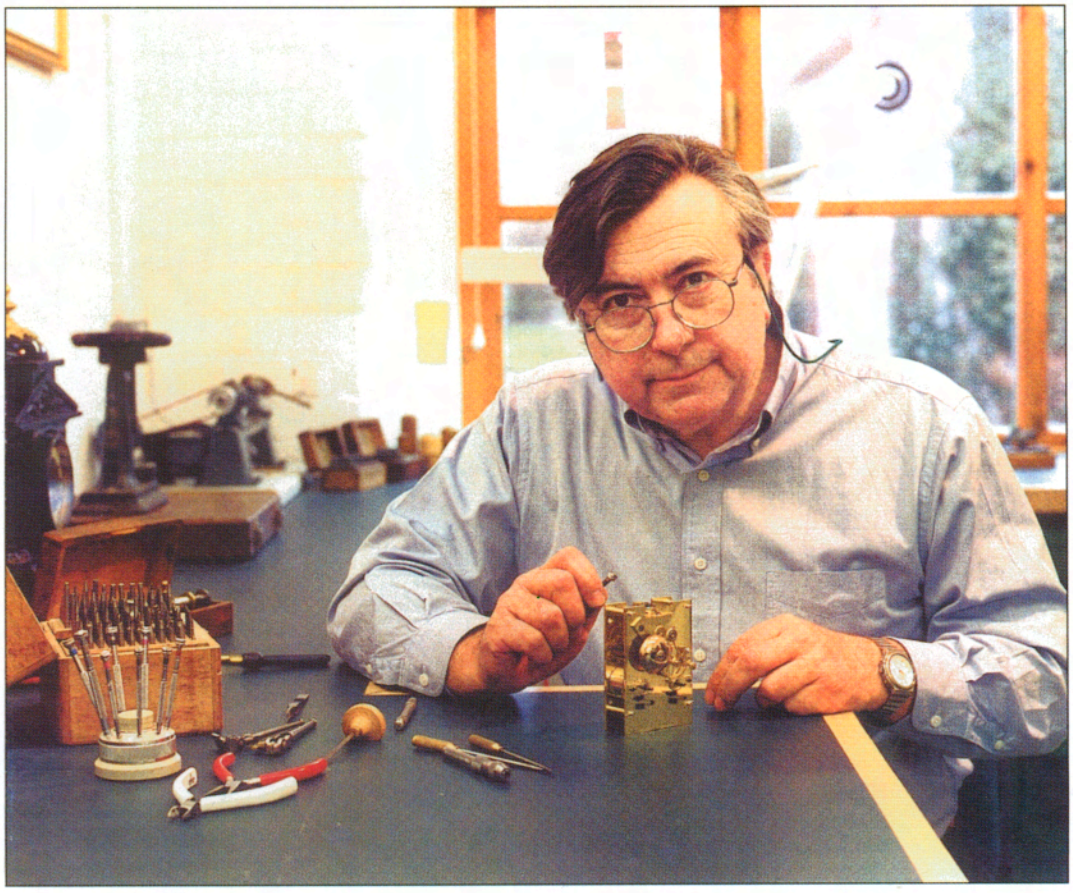


The earliest working clock in the world is in Salisbury Cathedral and was made in 1382. It is hard to imagine the impact which the arrival of the first clock must have had on the medieval world. Before the first clock began ticking away, man's sense of time was based solely on the passage of the sun and the change in the seasons.

"The Salisbury clock worked with a balance wheel and weights and so didn't keep accurate time," Jeremy revealed. "The invention of the pendulum in 1658 transformed clock-making and accurate time-keeping."

In the 17th century, specialists began to emerge. One famous Oxfordshire maker was George Harris, of Fritwell.

He made Hook and Spike clocks which were the forerunner of the Longcase. Jeremy has worked on a 17th century bracket clock by Joseph Knibb, who started out in Oxford's Holywell Street before moving to London and establishing a reputation as one of the talented clockmakers of his time.



■ Above, Jeremy Barrow, proprietor of the Oxford Clock Company. Below, the clock made for the Queen in her Jubilee year — Jeremy was one of 15 clockmakers who worked on the beautiful timepiece

■ The restored 1735 laquered Longcase

Jeremy showed me a beautiful early lacquered Longcase of 1735. Someone, back in the 1960s, had stripped off the lacquer to reveal the wood.

"I decided to do a little detective work. I sent a tiny chip of the original finish to a laboratory to be analysed. It confirmed the date of the case and the colour of the lacquer as Prussian blue.

"While I restore the mechanisms myself, I use a good furniture restorer like my neighbour, James Chatfield, to restore cases." It cost Jeremy a lot to restore the chinoiserie lacquer but he is now the proud owner of an historic piece.

■ The backplate of Jeremy's 17th-century Knibb bracket clock

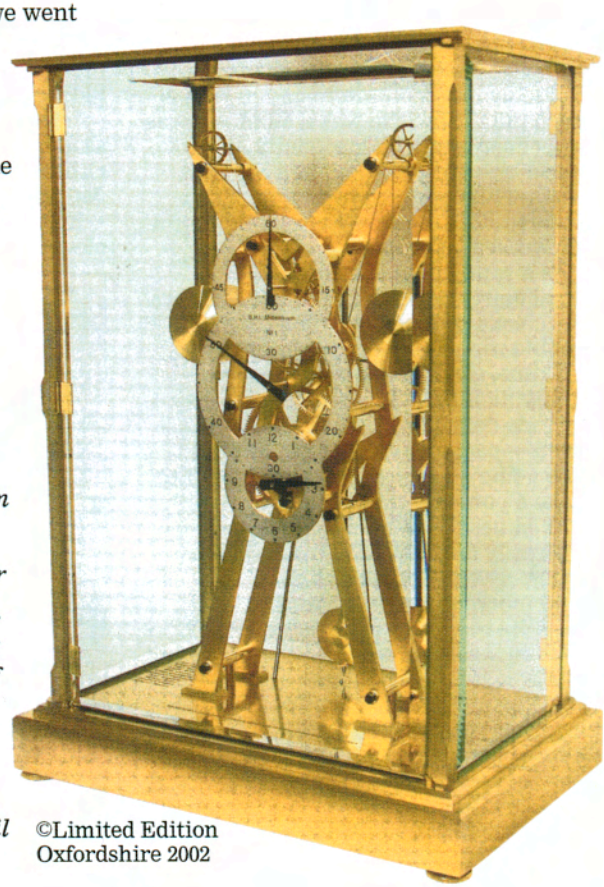
He sees himself and his clients as custodians of beautiful pieces of craftsmanship.

"This country was the cradle of modern engineering, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution," he said.

"This isn't surprising really because, after the Hugenots fled persecution in France and came to England, we went on to be the world leader in clock-making. From this emerged the engineering skills that were to make us prosper in the 19th century."

Jeremy is involved in work he loves. He would be even more delighted if an appreciation of the great achievements of British clockmakers and engineers could inspire a new generation.

■ *If you would like to find out more about this wonderful heritage, there are many great collections to visit, including Greenwich, The British Museum and the V&A and The Wallace Collection.*
Nearer to us, Waddesdon Manor has a fine collection of French clocks. The Beeson Collection of Oxfordshire clocks was donated to the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, but is not currently on display. Jeremy Barrow can be contacted at the Oxford Clock Company, PO Box 182, Oxford OX1 4FL. Telephone 01865 205321 or e-mail jbarrow@globalnet.co.uk



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