

# Horologist of London

## Antique clocks make him tick

by DOT FRANKLIN

If the Horologist of London had existed during medieval days, it would have displayed a guild sign. Gerald Grunsell, owner of the Main Street clock shop, said he apprenticed with the finest English clockmaker of his time, and has the qualifications necessary to be a guild member.

Surrounded by hundreds of intricate tools, Mr. Grunsell, who opened his shop in 1978, said clocks in his collection "have marked the hours of the American Revolution, the Civil War and two World Wars." He claims to have the largest selection of antique longcase clocks in Connecticut. "All," he said, "have been restored to a condition becoming their age."

Mr. Grunsell, a London transplant now living in Ridgefield, had a classical clockmaking education. Born in central London, he attended a school located in the official home of the archbishop of Canterbury. (Charlie Chaplin was a student there, too.) In these elegant surroundings, Mr. Grunsell discovered he had "an aptitude for astronomy, math, the sciences, woodworking and art. When I graduated at 17 and wanted to go into business, it pointed me toward watchmaking."

Being European, he said, that meant apprenticing to a firm and taking tests. It also meant working for a pound a week (about \$5) from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and until 1 p.m. on Saturdays.

"I managed," he said smiling, "to squeeze in dancing and became

the amateur ballroom dancing champion of London in 1960."

In addition, Mr. Grunsell attended school three nights a week.

### Journeyman

Over the next few years, he became a journeyman earning \$30 a week. "That meant," he said, "you work for various companies, and take your tools with you."

At 21, he passed the necessary tests and was elected to the prestigious British Horological Institute and awarded a fellowship. The institute, formed in 1830, was so powerful in its heyday, Mr. Grunsell said, "that if you made a clock and weren't a member of the guild, they could seize the work and fine you." Clockmakers and watchmakers, he explained, were the scientists of their day. "They worked with Newton, Hook and Boyle."

If Mr. Grunsell had practiced his craft in those days, he would have had a patron. "Only the very wealthy could afford portable clocks for the house," he said.

But Mr. Grunsell was living in the '60s, and he had three livelihood choices. "I could join a manufacturing firm, design for the jewelry trade, or become an antiques dealer." He chose the latter and has been in the antiques business 23 years with previous shops in the English countryside, London and New York City.

"The city was so noisy and dangerous, I started looking around," he said, "and ended up in Ridgefield. It's a pleasure to be here where people are so responsible. And you have every-

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**HOROLOGIST** — Gerald Grunsell opened his shop on Main Street some years ago. It proved to be the advance guard for Main Street's change to an antiques center.

# Clocks

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thing — ballet, a symphony orchestra, theater — and you're close to the city."

## Following good stuff

Mr. Grunsell said he came to the States because "in the '70s I realized all the good stuff was coming from America. Wealthy Americans traveling to Europe in the 1930s through 1970s brought back home with them all the European masterpieces. But the Europeans weren't traveling to America. So I came to America and brought the clocks back to their countries of origin. Dutch clocks would go to Holland, French to France, England was the staging point."

Before leaving England, Mr. Grunsell acquired an apprentice. "This young man," he said, "had planned on being a veterinarian. When he changed his mind and decided on clockmaking, his father, a judge, asked me if he'd be able to make a good living. Mr. Grunsell said he told him, 'If you're a garbage collector, and you're the very best at what you do, you'll do just fine.'"

The young man eventually headed the clock department at London's Christie's. Today he owns two shops in London. "I supply him with clocks," Mr. Grunsell said, "and he supplies me."

The world is becoming so small,

Mr. Grunsell said with a sigh, "I can fax him a picture on Monday which he'll receive in three minutes, and on Tuesday the transaction is complete."

## Like so many pencils

Walking into Mr. Grunsell's shop, one finds clocks lined against the wall, "like so many pencils," he said. So Mr. Grunsell suggests that people take his clocks home and see them in their settings. Antique clocks double in price every 50 years, he explained. "If the clock was in George Washington's bedroom, it's going to cost a lot more."

The store's main attraction is a 1765 clock once presented to a Chinese potentate. The engraved and silvered dial shows a painted scene in a theater where the audience is watching a Punch and Judy show. The 11-bell musical movement plays eight tunes and sells for \$32,000.

"Actually," Mr. Grunsell said, "the simplest things take the most skill. I've had people ask me to make a choice for them. I say if the man who made the clock didn't do the job right, it will offend you. Your own good taste will tell you which one is for you."

Mr. Grunsell said with pride that he stands behind each of his clocks.

"You buy me, you don't buy the clock."