

people

A DAY IN THE  
LIFE OF...

GERALD GRUNSELL

A Dickensian time traveler  
in 21st-century New England

BY JAMES LOMUSCIO  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOBBI LANE

A gentle chime greets visitors entering the Horologist of London on Ridgefield's Main Street. The chime does not emanate from the dozens of centuries-old case clocks lining the walls. Rather it's an electronic sound activated by a wire under the welcome mat. The clocks, with storied faces of silver and brass, tick mechanically along. Their real chimes will be heard soon enough—precisely on schedule, at noon. Tall, intriguing, and, indeed, timeless, these 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century clocks stand guard for the man who toils away under the light in the back room.



**TICKTOCK**

*Gerald Grunsell, who moved to Ridgefield 27 years ago, is a tinkerer whose passion for the time-honored art of clockmaking was flamed as a boy in London.*





**“SEE THAT ENGRAVED PLATE? IF THE ENGRAVER GOT HALFWAY AND THEN SLIPPED, THAT WOULD BE THE END OF IT. HE'D HAVE TO START ALL OVER AGAIN.”**

“It takes practice, practice, practice,” says Grunsell. He points to a 1700s Dutch grandfather clock: “See that engraved plate? If the engraver got halfway around and then slipped, that would be the end of it. He’d have to start all over again.” Grunsell’s meticulous methods seem to net the divine. When a customer first brought Grunsell a 1610 British grandfather clock, for example, its face was brass, the original silvering having eroded. Grunsell restored the original face by employing the same silvering method—rubbing silver nitrate onto the brass—used centuries ago. Its face now boasts a rich silver, with contrasting recessed black Roman numerals made of wax, which Grunsell painstakingly set in place.

Grunsell employs two veteran clockmakers: Brookfield resident Jay Doyle, who specializes in antique American clocks, and Kent resident Richard Sobeck. On this particular day Sobeck was off to return a reworked 150-

year-old French clock to a customer in Weston. Doyle, more than 30 years in the profession, says he began hanging around the shop for collegiality in the 1970s, and Grunsell immediately assumed the role of mentor. “I asked, ‘Why are you showing me all of your trade secrets?’” recalls Doyle. “And he said, ‘Because someday you’ll help me.’”

At the stroke of noon, an eruption of gongs, chimes, and bells bursts the solitude of the shop. “I don’t even hear them,” Grunsell says when asked. The conductor of this powerful yet mellifluous symphony labors away at his workbench, trying to make sense of an improper repair to an 1800s British mantel clock. Until four o’clock, Grunsell works away to the sounds of endless ticktocks, plucking pin vises, miniature tweezers, and broaches from his surgical-type tool set. Unless, of course, the electronic chime kicked off by an entering customer breaks his reverie. *RM*

There, on a workbench awash with light from a gooseneck lamp, sits Gerald Grunsell. He begins work at 7:30 in the morning, and by 10 a.m. he's lost in time, immersed in the intricacies of the exploded inner workings of an 18th-century London-made grandfather clock. Wearing a striped apron over a white-collared blue shirt and a tie, Grunsell appears as proper and prim as his British roots would suggest. The only exception is his gray-brown hair, tousled in front from Grunsell continually moving his magnifying goggles up to his crown and down onto his nose. Right now, his goggles are down. There's something awry with the escapement, the small brass hook that catches each

**“BY 10 A.M. GRUNSELL IS LOST IN TIME, IMMERSSED IN THE EXPLODED INNER WORKINGS OF AN 18TH-CENTURY GRANDFATHER CLOCK.”**

tooth of a rotating gear. Yes, he determines, the escapement needs an adjustment, and all of the gears will have to be cleaned, reset, and tested. “I only stop for tea,” quips Grunsell, with a cup at the ready. “Lunch doesn't exist because I'm not prepared to go out or to make it.”

Such are the small sacrifices for Grunsell, a tinkerer whose passion for the time-honored art of clockmaking was flamed years ago. As a boy he witnessed the Blitz in London, and after the war he apprenticed with the city's master clockmakers. Grunsell eventually earned the title of Fellow in the British Horological Institute. Clockmaking became his life, interrupted only by a year's tour in 1957 with the Royal Air Force repairing reconnaissance cameras. In the early 1970s he immigrated to the United States and worked as a clockmaker in New York City before moving to Ridgefield 27 years ago with his wife Ellen. It was then that he set up shop at the site of a former liquor store.

A highlight of his career, he explains, was tuning a collection of ornate pocket watches owned by Egypt's King Faruk. Today, customers from around the world send Grunsell clocks to repair, fine-tune, or appraise. Quite often, they're merely looking for the Grunsell seal of approval.