



# Rebus: Lifetimes in a seal

by Gordon Hamme

Gordon Hamme visited the workshops of Rebus, a division of R.H. Wilkins in Hatton Garden to speak to Emmet Smith. The company has an illustrious history of fine craftsmanship, winning 17 prestigious awards dating back to 1969 in hand engraving, seal engraving and jewellery design at the annual Goldsmiths' Craft & Design Awards at both junior and senior levels. As a result they have undertaken many prestigious commissions for royal families, governments and iconic sporting organisations including the Ryder Cup, the FA Cup, Davies and America's Cup. We spoke about craftsmanship, seal engraving and the company's strong relationship with the College of Arms to produce these 'enigmatic representations.'

Emmet Smith is the young managing director of Rebus, which specialises in heraldic seal engraving. Emmet is a highly specialised and gifted engraver who is fascinated by the art and history of seal engraving. He excelled in art at school later gaining a place at the London Guildhall University engraving department whilst undertaking his five year apprenticeship through the Goldsmiths' Company indentured to R.H. Wilkins, qualifying as a Freeman of the Goldsmiths' Company in 1992.

Emmet explained, 'Seal engraving is a separate skill, carving in reverse with the ability to think in 3D on a minute scale. The craftsman has to be able to write backwards in 3D with the work being perfect under a 4 times magnifying glass. It takes a great

deal of ingenuity where we often have to make our own engraving tools for an individual job.' Emmet's customers are often art historians, genealogists, connoisseurs and collectors who are fascinated by seals not only for their aesthetic appeal but also for the great amount of information they contain. 'It is our link to an ancient past and a symbol of pride in a continuing family heritage.' Seal engraving, otherwise known as 'Intaglio' is an ancient craft executed by tools that have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. The Rebus team have a sound understanding of heraldic law, coats of arms, crests and clan badges. They work closely with the College of Arms in London to verify and craft these miniature works of art.

## The Rebus service

To achieve the highest quality of engraving Rebus only use die-struck rings. The rings are formed firstly from specially prepared milled gold, silver or platinum, which gives the metal a higher density than cast rings. The process of die-striking the ring blanks from the sheet metal further compacts the metal allowing the engraver to achieve the sharpest most detailed results. Rebus has created unique packaging for their bespoke service. Each handcrafted ring is packaged with two sticks of sealing wax and the impression the engraving makes displayed together in a distinctive black and gold presentation case. Every ring is individually hallmarked by the London Assay office as an assurance of quality.

Top right: The wax seal truly shows the engravers skill

## The London College of Arms

We visited the College of Arms in Queen Victoria Street close to St.Paul's Cathedral in London. Speaking to the Windsor Herald of Arms, Mr.W.G. Hunt he explained the fundamentals of who can apply for the granting of arms. 'From the London College of Arms it is anyone with letters after their name who are English or Welsh and anyone who can establish a direct male line of descent from an ancestor whose arms are registered at the College is automatically entitled to those arms.' He explained that other territories have their own heraldic authorities. Companies can also apply for their own arms having to be established more than ten years, of sound financial standing and be a leading or respected body in its field.

We asked if coats of arms belong to surnames Mr.Hunt explained, 'No. There is no such thing as a 'coat of arms for a surname'. Many people of the same surname will often be entitled to completely different coats of arms, and many of that surname will be entitled to no coat of arms. Coats of arms belong to individuals. For any person to have a right to a coat of arms they must either have had it granted to them or be descended in the legitimate male line from a person to whom arms were granted or confirmed in the past.'

Arms have been granted as early as 1307 by the Kings of Arms, the three senior Officers of Arms, who act in this manner on behalf of the Crown.

In the early mediaeval period the proclamation and organisation of tournaments was the chief function of heralds. They marshalled and introduced the contestants and kept a tally of the score. From this derive both their modern roles of organising ceremonial and of being expert in armoury. The knights taking part in tournaments were recognised by the arms they bore on their shields and the crests they wore on their helmets. Heralds soon acquired an expert knowledge of these and became responsible for recording arms, and then later for controlling their use.

Rebus can be contacted at 0207 405 5188 or [info@rebusignetrings.co.uk](mailto:info@rebusignetrings.co.uk) . You can also visit their sister company RH Wilkins, [www.rhwilkins.co.uk](http://www.rhwilkins.co.uk).



One of Rebus' miniature works of art



The seal, wax impression and wax sticks in the supplied presentation case



Working on a seal, cutting directly into the gold blank