

## A TRIBUTE TO THE LIFE OF PETER SHORER

22.11.1923 – 3.6.2010

**Peter Shorer F.I.I.C. acclaimed archaeologist and conservator at the British Museum for over 40 years became a leading retailer of a specialist range of historic artefacts and stunning gold, silver and precious stone-set jewellery which have the uniqueness of being exact reproductions of the original exquisite pieces. Peter, with his unprecedented experience of many years working with antiquities at the British Museum and countless other museums throughout the world, was one of the select few antiquarians allowed to handle and take moulds from these rare and priceless artefacts. His amazing reproductions have been acclaimed for many years as stimulating and exciting aids to the world's history lessons and lectures as well as being a necessary part of historic cinema and television productions.**

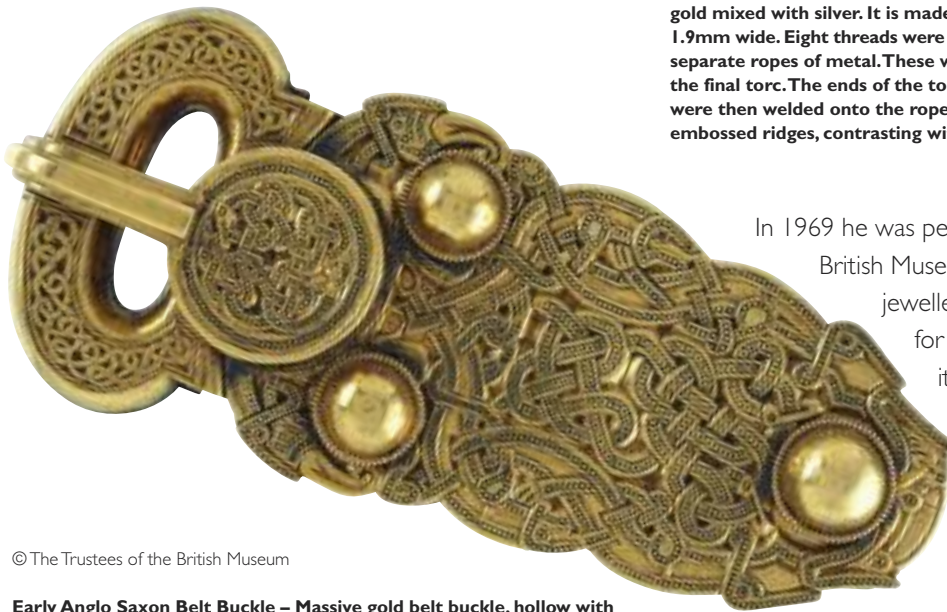
Peter left school at 14 in 1938 to take up an apprenticeship in Jewellery Design at the Central School of Arts & Crafts later known as the Sir John Cass College. This followed three generations of jewellers and goldsmiths. Whilst there, Peter was selected by the Trustees of the British Museum as a boy-learner to work with antiquities.

The excavation of the Sutton Hoo Burial ship resulted in a huge hoard of silver artefacts, which in June 1939 had to be carefully packed along with many other priceless pieces, to be sent away to various secret places for safe storage for the duration of the war:



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**The Snettisham Great Torc – 75BC (circa).** Electrum torc with ornated terminals. The torc is made from just over a kilogram of gold mixed with silver. It is made from sixty-four threads. Each thread is 1.9mm wide. Eight threads were twisted together at a time to make eight separate ropes of metal. These were then twisted around each to make the final torc. The ends of the torc were cast in moulds. The hollow ends were then welded onto the ropes. The terminals are ornamented with embossed ridges, contrasting with areas filled by chased 'basket-work'.



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**Early Anglo Saxon Belt Buckle – Massive gold belt buckle, hollow with cast ornament.** The upper surface is covered entirely with zoomorphic interlace, the design picked out in tiny punched circles and inlaid (except on the loop) in niello. Dimensions: length 13.2 centimetres, width 5.6 centimetres, weight 412.7 grams.

In 1940 Peter worked with Assistant Keepers Bruce Mitford and William King to set up exhibitions of artefacts that remained at the museum, in order to keep some galleries open to the public. But in 1941 parts of the British Museum were damaged during bombing raids including the Reading Room. What items that could be rescued were stored in the basement but the museum continued to be open to the public with a temporary exhibition.

Peter was called up in 1942 to serve in Royal Navy Coastal Forces becoming a Leading Torpedo man on MTBs (Motor Torpedo Boats) in the Mediterranean.

At the end of the war in 1946 Peter returned to the British Museum. One of his first duties was to unpack and put on exhibition many of the treasures he had packed up seven years before, including the Sutton Hoo treasure.

In 1969 he was permitted by the Director of the British Museum to make reproductions of jewellery and artefacts from museums for retail in museum shops. The first items were the decorated terminals from Gold Torcs from the Ipswich Treasure, which were immediately bought by one of the British Museum Trustees.

*“...an appreciation of the ability of ancient craftsmen, of many periods of history and cultures, for the pleasure of members of the discerning public.”*



© The Trustees of the British Museum

Peter was privileged to be permitted to mould the original antiquity, with adequate skill and consideration for the antiquity, which provide an appreciation of the ability of ancient craftsmen, of many periods of history and cultures, for the pleasure of members of the discerning public.

Other functioning antiquities had been reproduced for special occasions. One being the Valentia Astrolabe, in the National Maritime Museum. First for their own use and then for Robin Knox-Johnston when he undertook the voyage from England to America, under sail, using Peter's reproduction for his navigation aid. Later, the V&A museum commissioned Peter to reproduce four rings and other pieces from their collection.



© The V&A Museum

**Celtic gents gold ring, 3rd century BC.** This masculine gold ring is decorated with a rather kindly mask using the Celtic curves in the Plastic style of the period. The original is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The method used was to make a silicone rubber mould from the original antiquity then produce a copper electroform master from which copies could be cast in precious or base metals.

One of the spectacular archaeological underwater finds that Peter worked on was from the Galleass 'Girona' of the Spanish Armada, which sunk off Locarda Point, Northern Ireland. One piece was a gold salamander set with rubies, most of which were still in the setting after 400 years on the sea bed. For this a two part mould was made and rubies cut to fit in the missing spaces.



© The V&A Museum

**Anglo-Saxon silver-gilt ring**



© The V&A Museum

**16th century ring.** Sometimes known as the Darnley Ring. It is engraved with the initials 'MH' and true lover's knot. The gold ring was thought to be the betrothal ring of Mary Queen of Scots and Lord Darnley, because the engraving inside shows a crowned shield of arms, a lion rampant and 'Henri Darnley 1565'. This inscription is now thought to be an early 19th century addition.



**Replica of Gold Salamander brooch set with rubies by Peter Shorer.**

The gold original, 16th century AD, set with rubies was recovered from the wreck of the Girona. It was regarded as a charm against fire. It may have also represented a flying lizard, Draco Volans. The scales on the body and the markings on the face are examples of fine craftsmanship.

**Peter Shorer**

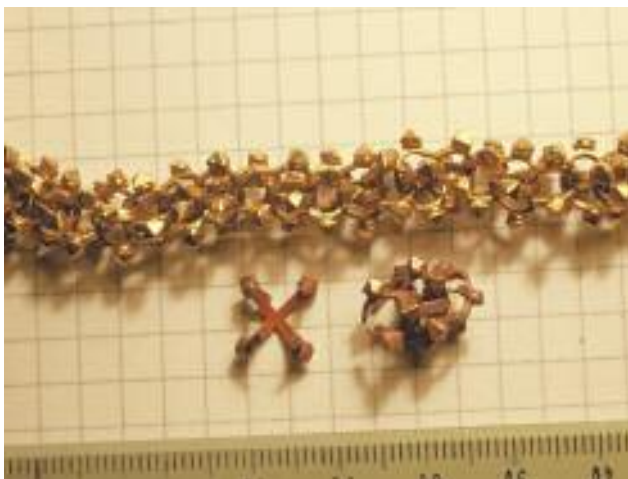
In 1979 Peter was invited to fly out to the Dominican Republic to conserve and reproduce treasure being brought up from the Nuestra Senora de la Concepcion, sunk in 1641. Along with thousands of 'pieces of eight' was a gold necklace 5ft long (1,600mm) weighing 350 grams.



**Original Gold Necklace recovered from the wreck.**  
Image courtesy of Seaquest International Inc.



**Each of the 300 links consisted of 2 circles of gold wire soldered at right angles with a hollow pyramid soldered on the end of each arc.**  
Image courtesy of Seaquest International Inc.



**Replica of Gold Necklace by Peter Shorer**

During Peter's time in Santo Dominica the area was struck by a hurricane for three days. After the storm, Peter's boat had an escort of gunboats patrolling the area to prevent piracy.

Not all Peter's commissions were jewellery, some were large pieces such as the Roman Shield, 36 x 18 inches, found in the Thames mud at Battersea, the Roman Cavalry Helmet from Ribchester, the bronze Birdlip mirrors and the ship's bell from HMS Illustrious, complete with shell hole from a direct hit, presented to the Maritime Museum.



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**Ribchester Helmet – Roman Britain, late 1st or early 2nd century AD. Copper alloy cavalry helmet with face-mask visor. Decorated with a scene of a skirmish between infantry and cavalry. Fittings for a crest-box and a pair of trailing streamers survive on the head-piece.**



**Replica of the Ribchester Helmet by Peter Shorer**

Sometimes an article might be too fragile or delicate to mould in silicone rubber in which case a thin sheet of rubber latex was used for protection whilst making a 2 part plaster mould. Peter was asked by Mr O'Leary, Curator of Valence House Museum, Dagenham, to restore an Anglo-Saxon glass drinking horn and make a mount suitable for its exhibition in the 1951 Festival of Britain Exhibition on the South Bank of the Thames. For this project he invented a new method of moulding which enabled him to achieve other commissions that were considered by other people to be impossible, without detriment to the original antiquity.

Peter's work at the British Museum as a Conservation Officer enabled him to handle many exquisite treasures from all periods of history. He was always full of admiration for the intricate work of the early craftsmen and would argue the point when anyone called them primitive; 'They were not primitive, they were highly-skilled craftsmen who lived a long time ago'.



Dr. Catherine Johns, retired curator of the Romano-British collections in the British Museum says; "I met Peter Shorer in December 1967, when I started work as a young curator in the British Museum. I already had academic training as an archaeologist and five years' museum experience, but because my previous jobs had both been limited, specific projects, I still had much to learn about the full range of museum work. I benefited from the knowledge and generosity of many mentors, and Peter was one of them.



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**The Mold Cape – Early Bronze Age 1900-1600BC.** The cape is one of the finest examples of prehistoric sheet-gold working and is quite unique in form and design. It was laboriously beaten out of a single ingot of gold, then embellished with intense decoration of ribs and bosses to mimic multiple strings of beads amid folds of cloth.



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**Battersea Shield – 350-50BC.** Bronze shield facing; scrolls in relief; made of several pieces of sheet bronze. With twenty-seven red glass 'enamel' framed studs.

There was no dedicated conservation department in the museum at that time. The role of the museum conservator was still evolving as a separate academic discipline, and its earliest practitioners tended, like Peter, to have a background in practical and craft skills. Formal specialisation in the conservation and treatment of different materials, as well as the close connection with the Department of Scientific Research, all still lay in the future. Instead, each antiquities department had its own conservation laboratory or workshop, where a wide range of tasks was carried out, from the cleaning and repair of artefacts to the design and manufacture of display mounts and storage containers.

Peter's skills were uniquely well-suited to this wide-ranging and flexible approach. Like a good archaeologist, he had a fundamental curiosity about objects and about the past, and he was interested in everything, regardless of its age, its purpose, the material of which it was made, or its value, beauty or completeness. Perhaps the single most valuable thing of the many I learned from him was how to examine an object minutely, to let it speak directly to me, and to see it not only from the perspective of the person who had owned and used it in antiquity, but also through the eyes of the craftsman who had created it.



**Peter making a replica of the Ampulla of Thomas a'Becket 1270 – 1350 AD. The lead original is a Pilgrim's Ampulla, designed to hold Holy water. It is decorated with pierced surround and Latin inscription 'Thomas is the best Doctor of the worthy sick'. Obverse: Thomas a'Becket; Reverse: Martyrdom of Thomas a'Becket with one Knight. Excavated in crushed condition at 13th century Waterfront Revetment, Swan Lane site, London in 1982. It may be seen in the Museum of London. The reproduction is in domestic pewter, in re-formed condition.**

I had been taught about ancient technologies as a student, but Peter's effortless grasp of the myriad ways of making things lent a new dimension to that theoretical knowledge, and brought me to understand that although there are many differences between our own society and the ancient societies that archaeologists study, craftsmanship is a quality that remains essentially the same: it is one of the unbroken links between past and present. Over the years, I have frequently quoted a passing comment of Peter's that summarises this. He was asked by a journalist writing a piece on his jewellery business about his interest in studying prehistoric antiquities, the work of 'primitive craftsmen', and he replied, 'they were not primitive craftsmen; they were highly-skilled craftsmen who lived a long time ago'.



Image courtesy of Museum of the Order of St. John

**Key to St. John's Gate – A replica made by Peter of a 120 year old key in the Tudor style made for the Museum of the Order of St. John in Clerkenwell. The replica keys are awarded to donors, 'Gate Keepers', to their museum project, called Open Gate. The key is to the door beneath the archway of St. John's Gate, which, rather amusingly, has no keyhole on the outside of the door.**

Peter was a master at what is now often called 'thinking outside the box', and during his long career as a conservator, he pioneered many ingenious methods of solving conservation problems, from the challenge of consolidating whole Roman mosaic floors and large areas of painted wall-plaster, down to the most delicate and intricate of tasks, such as examining and interpreting the tool-marks that revealed exactly how an ancient metalworker had engraved a design: he was equally at home with heavy lifting gear and with a binocular microscope.

*“His contribution to the work of the museum over many decades was immense... in the form of countless precious antiquities safely preserved for future generations.”*

He had an original mind, infinite patience to the point of obstinacy, and the kind of resourceful creativity that is vital in a pioneer, but which can sometimes be regarded as disruptive within an established hierarchy with comparatively rigid rules and processes. He did sometimes rock the boat – an apposite metaphor – but his contribution to the work of the museum over many decades was immense, not only in the form of countless precious antiquities that have been safely preserved for future generations to study and enjoy, but also through his influence on colleagues. Everyone who worked with him learned something from him. ■