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Jonathan Betts

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(Read free) Time Restored: The Harrison timekeepers and R.T. Gould, the man who knew (almost) everything

## **Time Restored: The Harrison timekeepers and R.T. Gould, the man who knew (almost) everything**

**Jonathan Betts : Time Restored: The Harrison timekeepers and R.T. Gould, the man who knew (almost) everything** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Time Restored: The Harrison timekeepers and R.T. Gould, the man who knew (almost) everything:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The rest of the story...By T. StibalAn excellent book on a

compelling man, written by the man who chronicled Gould's work on his book on the marine chronometers. What has been turned up here is a fascinating story of a conflicted and tortured soul, dealing with severe mental conditions (two breakdowns, both coinciding with periods of active military service), an incredibly complicated marital situation, and an obsession with the restoration of the Harrison timepieces. The author does his subject justice, even if some of that justice leaves a less than savory picture of the beloved figure that was R. T. Gould as seen by English society. I was sympathetic to the subject, as I love Gould's books (those of them that can be purchased, at least), but if you read this book you will walk away with a different picture of the "beloved author and commentator". A complex work about a complex man obsessed with a complex subject.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. EverymanBy DutchmanThe subtitle "The Harrison Timekeepers and R.T. Gould, the Man Who Knew (Almost) Everything" would be more accurate if reversed. After reading a library copy of Gould's book "The Marine Chronometer", I picked this up to learn more about the Harrison chronometers. I found myself captivated by the actual subject of Betts' book, which is Gould himself. In his 1928 book "Oddities" Gould wrote about "an eccentric seventeenth century inventor Orffyreus" (Betts' phrase), saying "He passes from our sight... an exasperating and yet pathetic figure--morose, self-centred, childishly passionate, vacillating and yet tenacious, his own worst enemy, forgetting the duties of ordinary human intercourse in his passion for mechanism and wrecking his life as a result." Annotating his own copy of "Oddities" in 1940, Gould acknowledged that this description applied just as well to himself. After finishing Betts' book, Gould's self-judgment seems overly harsh. There is a great deal to admire about the man, and unique as he was, more than a hint of Everyman appears in his character.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Rupert Gould: the Fortean perspectiveBy Mike DHas there ever been a man so gifted, yet so burdened, as Rupert Gould? Britain's answer to Charles Fort (the two men were contemporaries; Fort's dates were 1874-32, Gould's 1890-1948) will be known to those interested in Fortean as the author of *The Case for the Sea Serpent*, *The Loch Ness Monster and Others* and two incomparable collections of essays, *Oddities and Enigmas*. Yet 'scientific mysteries' (the phrase is Jonathan Betts's) were merely one of Gould's areas of expertise. He was, inter alia, a naval officer, distinguished hydrographer, authority on Arctic and Antarctic exploration, master horologist and 'name' broadcaster -- not to mention a talented artist in the style of Aubrey Beardsley, a leading expert on the history of the typewriter, and an umpire at Wimbledon. Such achievements would be remarkable enough in a man who had devoted a long life entirely to his interests. Yet Gould died aged only 58, worked for years in a relatively humdrum office job, and was prone throughout adulthood to mental illness. As Betts notes in this exceptionally well-researched and sympathetic biography, he was confined, speechless, to bed for the best part of a year by his first breakdown, suffered three further severe outbreaks of depression thereafter, and could be prostrated by any one of several irrational fears, including those of being struck by lightning and getting caught up in a revolution. These frailties undoubtedly restricted his output, and so did a dubious talent for taking on far too many commitments. Among numerous projects begun but never finished were books titled *Nine Days' Wonders* and *Mares' Nests* -- works fit to rank with Fort's X and Y in the damned library of lost literature - and a proposed study of bisexuality, *The Third Sex*, which would certainly have seemed pretty radical had it been published, as planned, in 1947. The upshot of all this was that Rupert Gould never quite achieved the fame, nor received the credit, that his admirers have long felt was due to him. Much of his life was spent in genteel poverty (he was forever selling valuable items from his various collections to raise a few pounds), and according to his waspish son Cecil -- one of Betts's chief sources, a very different character who by his own admission never much liked his father -- his life was 'as he himself realised, a sad waste of great and varied talents.' Betts is kinder, observing simply that Gould's parents' choice of a naval career for their son was a mistake, and that Rupert would have made an exceptional academic or barrister. As it was, however, the nervous breakdown Gould suffered on the outbreak of the First World War led to a 'soft' posting to the hydrographer's office at the Admiralty, where he studied the history of navigation and had sufficient leisure time to read widely -- everything but literature, Cecil recalled, though in fact there were other lacunae in even his father's fund of knowledge, notably in the field of zoology. And what went into Gould's head stayed there: the secret of his success as a fount of wisdom (drafted onto the renowned Brains Trust panel, he was the only member never to be hauled up by a listener for making a mistake) was a photographic memory. 'I can visualise the actual page of a book where I read the information,' he once explained, and no reader who has made his delighted way through the footnotes of a Gould book, where information drawn from *Wild Sports of the World* rubs shoulders with the *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society*, is likely to doubt it. Given Jonathan Betts's own interests (he is Senior Specialist in Horology at the National Maritime Museum), it's no surprise that the bulk of *Time Restored* is given over to Gould's work in a field few Forteans will know much about: horology, specifically the study of the marine chronometer. It was Gould's signal achievement to restore to a going condition all four of the timekeepers invented in the eighteenth century by John Harrison, the subject of Dava Sobel's best-selling *Longitude*. He was self-taught, both as a mechanic and an horologist, and Betts gives an account -- well-balanced as one of Harrison's machines -- of his subject's achievements, praising his imaginative and systematic efforts (the restorations took well over a decade all told) while condemning some of the actual workmanship as unforgivably botched and hardly in tune with the modern museum curator's preference for conservation over restoration. There is much, even here, of interest to Forteans, though, for the years of working on the 'Harrisons' display Gould's character in the round. He possessed, the

reader learns, an stubborn stamina, fragility and a spectacular facility for procrastination, an odd mix that eventually cost him his marriage and -- thanks to the scandal attendant on the divorce -- his job, his home, his children and his best friend. Disaster on such a scale would have been sufficient to destroy men far more robust than Gould, and perhaps the most extraordinary achievement of his far from ordinary life was to meet these devastating blows with a determination that saw him crank out most of his best-known works in an astonishingly short time. (Oddities, a book of 75,000 words complete with 27 original drawings, was written in less than a month.) This at least left time for other obsessions, including -- as Betts recounts without sensationalism -- a lifelong interest in bondage and, apparently, ritualised group sex activities involving London prostitutes. One wonders whether the current generation of Fortean will make such compelling subjects for future biographers. Betts, by his own admission, knows little of Fortean, and if the book has one failing it is that its (finely detailed) account of Gould's contributions to our field cannot match that of his achievements in horology. There's nothing, for example, to equal Ronald Binns's revealing analysis, in *The Loch Ness Mystery Solved*, of Gould's influential excursion to Loch Ness. Betts has also been poorly served by his proof-reader; the text is littered with typos. But these are small gripes. Even the most dedicated Fortean will learn something new from this book. At this price, unfortunately, *Time Restored* seems destined to reach only a limited audience, and one can only hope that a paperback edition will follow in due course.

This is the story of Rupert T. Gould (1890-1948), the polymath and horologist. A remarkable man, Lt Cmdr Gould made important contributions in an extraordinary range of subject areas throughout his relatively short and dramatically troubled life. From antique clocks to scientific mysteries, from typewriters to the first systematic study of the Loch Ness Monster, Gould studied and published on them all. With the title *The Stargazer*, Gould was an early broadcaster on the BBC's *Children's Hour* when, with his encyclopaedic knowledge, he became known as *The Man Who Knew Everything*. Not surprisingly, he was also part of that elite group on BBC radio who formed *The Brains Trust*, giving on-the-spot answers to all manner of wide ranging and difficult questions. With his wide learning and photographic memory, Gould awed a national audience, becoming one of the era's radio celebrities. During the 1920s Gould restored the complex and highly significant marine timekeepers constructed by John Harrison (1693-1776), and wrote the unsurpassed classic, *The Marine Chronometer, its History and Development*. Today he is virtually unknown, his horological contributions scarcely mentioned in Dava Sobel's bestseller *Longitude*. The TV version of *Longitude*, in which Jeremy Irons played Rupert Gould, did at least introduce Gould's name to a wider public. Gould suffered terrible bouts of depression, resulting in a number of nervous breakdowns. These, coupled with his obsessive and pedantic nature, led to a scandalously-reported separation from his wife and cost him his family, his home, his job, and his closest friends. In this first-ever biography of Rupert Gould, Jonathan Betts, the Royal Observatory Greenwich's Senior Horologist, has given us a compelling account of a talented but flawed individual. Using hitherto unknown personal journals, the family's extensive collection of photographs, and the polymath's surviving records and notes, Betts tells the story of how Gould's early life, his naval career, and his celebrity status came together as this talented Englishman restored part of Britain's - and the world's - most important technical heritage: John Harrison's marine timekeepers.

"Horologist and author Jonathan Betts, the current curator of the Harrison timekeepers at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, has crafted a chronicle of a poignant moment in the history of time. *Time Restored*, his extensively researched biography of Rupert Gould, brings back the man who brought back John Harrison's sea clocks. Just as Gould lovingly restored the long-neglected timepieces (now recognized as national treasures) Betts has taken apart Gould's tumultuous life and reassembled it in perfectly readable order -- sea serpents and all." --Dava Sobel, author of *Longitude*, *Galileo's Daughter* and *The Planets* "Betts has produced a finely crafted biography full of lovingly observed insight into Gould's character, including his many personal failings. But the book is much more than a biography" -- Lisa Jardine, *Nature* "Time Restored, like the works of the subject R.T. Gould, is an important contribution to horological literature. It is very accessible and highly recommended." --*Horological Journal* "Betts tells his tale very well. In addition to being a 'good read', *Time Restored* is a work of considerate scholarship; there are over 400 footnotes and six appendices including a bibliography reading list, and glossary. Most usefully there is a comprehensive index...Packed with information for the serious student of horology, there is also so much in this book for the general reader, especially those interested in social history." --*QP Magazine* About the Author Jonathan Betts is with the Royal Observatory at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.