

PROFILE: JEWELRY HISTORIAN JACK OGDEN

Brecken Branstrator, GIA GG

The industry expert dives into his journey in writing and consulting on the history of the trade and the craft of jewelry-making, what he's learned along the way, how AI has changed the research process, and much more.

With a family background in jewelry, it was no wonder Jack Ogden found his way into the industry. But, after trying out retail and realizing it wasn't for him, his path and passions—which include archaeology and jewelry-making materials and techniques—took him down another road that would lead him to studying and researching jewelry history.

Ogden is an FGA of the Gemmological Association of Great Britain (Gem-A). He has also held several official roles in the industry, including secretary general of CIBJO in the 1990s, CEO of Gem-A for 12 years, and chair of the jewelry and gem committee of the British Standards Institution, among others.

But Ogden is now known for his role documenting the techniques and jewels from eras past. He has published several books on jewelry history and often gives talks on the subject. For this profile, though, *GemGuide* wanted to turn the spotlight less onto his subject and more on how he got into it and what he's learned along the way.

GemGuide: What is it that drew you into jewelry history?

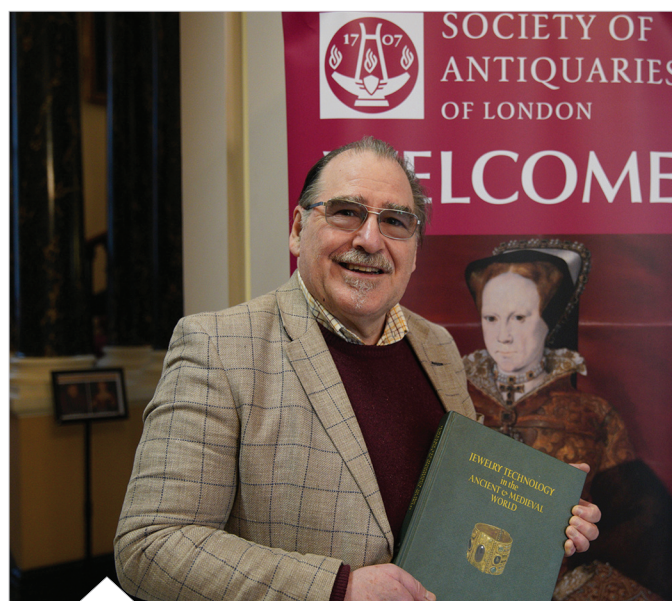
Jack Ogden: All intertwined “fate.”

I was born into a fourth-generation jewelry business—upmarket retailers. They had two shops: one in London and one in Harrogate, a spa town in Yorkshire, North England. When I was 7, we moved from the South to Harrogate for my father to run that shop. He was a frustrated farmer (WWII had killed the possibility of that career), so he had little option but to join the family form. But he decided to fulfill an ambition by buying a very old and derelict Yorkshire farmhouse and renovate it as a family home. For a few years, I was up to my neck in mud, woodworm, and rubble, and endless horseshoes, sheep skulls, broken pottery, etc. So, by 8, I had my “museum.”

My parents, seeing this obsession, gave me a book on archaeology for Christmas when I was 8 and told me that my great-grandfather, as well as founding the jewelry business, was a keen amateur archaeologist who visited Egypt, Iraq, etc., several times, knew Howard Carter and other big names, and

raised money for their excavations by lecturing. A couple of his books and a small box of odd beads, etc., from various excavations had been lurking in an attic above the Harrogate shop, and those were duly passed to me.

One of the books was a 1920s one on Egyptian jewelry—the only one then written about the technology. The other book was on ancient Egyptian metallurgy. I was hooked! I stocked my archaeological interests: tried to teach myself Egyptian hieroglyphs, worked on excavations in the school holidays, etc.



Jack Ogden is pictured here at the launch event for his latest book, “Jewelry Technology in the Ancient & Medieval World.”

I joined the family business on my 17th birthday but was bored to tears. The high point was working for Dr. Gübelin in Luzern, Switzerland, in 1968; he recognized my interests and really encouraged me. He had had a small exhibition of pre-Columbian goldwork, and let me examine it all. To best do that he, as I often say, gave me my first ride on a microscope.

In 1972, now in the family's London shop, I persuaded them to let me start dealing a bit in early jewelry. I studied gemology—FGA, of course—some metallurgy, a bit of Egyptology,

including really learning hieroglyphs, and studied and studied ancient jewelry materials and techniques. More and more, I was being consulted by others—auction houses, museums, etc.—and eventually moved entirely into consulting and writing. It came with a lower income, but I feel that doing something you are passionately interested in is the most important thing in life. You only live once.

GG: What's been your favorite project so far?

JO: Whatever project I am working on, until it gets to the last 10% of the work, and then the next project seems much more alluring!

GG: What's one area you'd like to learn more about and why? Or one area that seems a mystery that you'd like to dig into more?

JO: A year or two ago, I would have said to know more languages to be able to access a much wider range of sources. AI has made that all so much simpler now. I can translate a PDF article in Russian or Chinese, say, into English in two or three minutes. Or get a succinct summary, or even get it made into a podcast to listen to on a walk. I can find online a text or even handwritten document in any language, select a bit I want using Google Lens, and get an instant translation. Wonderful. Works well with Latin, but is not so good with ancient Greek—yet, but it's getting better!

So, to your question, what now? I guess to understand more about how AI works. I feel so privileged to live at this incredible time of advances in technology. If AI doesn't kill us off (wouldn't blame it), it will open up incredible knowledge to us all. When all archives and media and books are absorbed by it, any questions will be at our fingertips. It would make human research in dusty libraries or corners of the web unnecessary.

That brings us to the fascinating debate about research. I see research as a way to find answers to the questions I have. To find patterns and links across our history. If AI makes me redundant by providing more comprehensive answers faster, I think that would be great. Getting the information is the important thing. On the other hand, if research is a way of earning an income and ticking boxes on the ladder of pay scales, then it is frightful prospect! But what is research for? Fun to ponder!

I also play the five-string banjo. I'm reasonably good but would



"Jewelry Technology in the Ancient & Medieval World" was released last year, offering a comprehensive overview of four and a half thousand years of jewelry technology.

love to get better, but I guess that's not so easy now. That all went downhill a bit, literally, 40-odd years ago when I broke two fingers in a freestyle skiing display.

GG: I'm curious about your research process. I imagine you must have to really dig to get primary sources for your projects. Tell us a little bit about what that process looks like. What kinds of sources or resources do you use? Does AI play any part in that?

JO: AI has changed my life—see last answer! I use it all the time in many ways. You need to be wary; it's amazing at distilling the stuff you give it, but if you ask it questions, it can still hallucinate a bit, so I don't rely on it answering questions fully accurately. Check and double check.

GG: What's one of your favorite facts you've learned while researching jewelry history that members of the trade probably don't know?

JO: Most are a bit esoteric and geeky and would perhaps only enthrall a few in the world. But I suppose in general, the trade might do well knowing that being aware of the long traditions and stories (genuine ones!) in our jewelry world can add to the pleasure of the business and give customers confidence. In all areas, not just jewelry, we know that buyers want the sales people to know more

about something than what they can read on the ticket or box.

Years ago, I was visiting a friend who was managing a jewelry shop in New York. A woman came in in a hurry wanting to buy a present for her husband but had no idea what to get. My friend asked what her husband did. "A lawyer," came the

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answer. Out she brought a pair of hematite cufflinks. “These are hematite. The ancient tradition was that this stone was good for lawmakers. I don’t believe that. I’m sure you don’t, but your husband will. Lawyers believe anything.” Instant sale. Humor is important too!

GG: Why do you feel it’s important for the modern jewelry industry to learn about the manufacturing techniques and pieces created in history?

JO: It adds a dimension to understanding your business. To do something in life in which you only have a superficial interest is a sad fate. If you are not inquisitive about all aspects of jewelry or gems and anxious to learn as much as possible, try another career. One might add also that if you cannot find pride in your work, try to find a job where you can and want to.

GG: Are there any challenges, obstacles, or issues that seem to have long plagued the industry?

JO: The extraordinarily superficial “research” many people, from drafters of PR to some book authors, seem to do, scraping the web for the well-worn and often unfounded “facts” they can cite. Just look at the endless social media posts that show a pretty gem or piece of jewelry with some drivel about it and get a million little hearts! People have learned to be just so unquestioning.

GG: What do you see as the biggest issue facing the modern jewelry industry from your perspective?

JO: It has become too much bottom line-driven rather than a vocation. There seems less true passion for the art and craft and beauty of jewelry, and more focus on how much can be made on it. Money is important, of course, but it’s a downward spiral unless we inject some joy and pride into it all.

The trade magazines have a lot to answer for here. Look at the older ones, U.K. or U.S.—they used to have lots of detailed articles on materials, techniques, history, perceptive and sometimes brutally honest reviews of jewelry exhibitions, etc. Now they seem mainly to be regurgitated PR blurbs sent by brands. So few on the editorial staff seem to have real gem or jewelry knowledge (cause or result?). They are also cowed into being sycophantic because a priority is to keep advertisers and potential advertisers happy rather than providing true insight and objectivity to help the trade.

GG: In addition to your many books, of course, where would you tell an interested trade member who wants to learn more about jewelry history to turn?

JO: Try and handle as much as possible, and have your 10X lens with you at all times. Learn to gauge quality and workmanship and signs of age. Visit museums as much as possi-

ble, and don’t be content with the three-line labels (if that); take photos and try to find out more information from your own desk when you get home! And be critical, and very, very wary of the historical “facts” you see on websites—always try to check back as far towards primary sources as you can. And just because a book is big and glossy doesn’t mean that it is well researched.

GG: Last but not least, my obligatory question: Do you have a favorite historic piece of jewelry? Or gem?



Ogden sits at a scanning electron microscope in 2004, looking at a Roman chain.

JO: Again, it tends to be what I am researching at the time. I was living and breathing the so-called Black Prince’s Ruby in the United Kingdom crown jewels a few years ago. This large spinel was always called that in recent times, but, naturally, we should know if there is any historical basis for it. After a huge amount of research, including Medieval Spanish manuscripts and Old English royal archives, turns out the “Black Prince” bit only appeared in the 18th century, seemingly based on the mistaken identification of a painting. I published all that stuff and it is available online, but you still find the Black Prince’s Ruby cropping up on myriad websites. Good lesson for me! People won’t let fact get in the way of a good story. It is actually all a fun spectator sport.

I might come across as a bit of bitter old man, but actually, I have a lot of fun and am a realist enough to know that I have an odd obsession! And far from being stuck in the past, I take continual delight in new advances in technology in particular. I was at a dinner party in New York a few years ago and the host, trying to get conversation moving, asked each person to say who they would most like to talk with if they had a time machine. The usual suspects came up: Napoleon, Christ, Moses, Alexander the Great. Me? I said, one of my great-great grandchildren. I want to know what happens. ♦

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