

Obituary

Michael Esmond Bennett-Levy (2 October 1946-28 September 2016)

Michael died three days before his 70th birthday. He joined our Society in 2006. For 40 years, he had been an antiquary and antiques dealer and specialised in rare and sought after 'Early Technology', the name of his business started in 1972, trading from his historic fortified laird's house near Edinburgh.

He has advised and sold to collectors and museums all over the world. He was also a noted restorer of all manner of objects including scientific instruments. A fine example is the eighteenth century Grand Orrery at Dumfries House which Michael was asked to restore by the Great Steward of Scotland's Trust. It is now one of the most popular exhibits and stands as a testament to Michael's remarkable skills (Fig. 1). A short documentary of this restored masterpiece can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7gtrtKPJVY>.



Fig. 1 Michael with the Grand Orrery in his workshop.



Fig. 2 Michael as we remember him.

Michael was born in London but moved with his parents to Churt in Surrey aged 8. He attended Seaford prep School followed by Tonbridge School. At Seaford, he assembled countless balsawood models and began his love of working with his hands. He attended Edinburgh University where he achieved

two degrees - BSc and BCom which he always said fitted his future career very well, and met his future wife, Zoe. He also began collecting early technology after taking over a record stall at an antiques market in St Stephen Street, especially pre-war televisions perhaps because his grandfather was Dr Leonard Levy, whose research into phosphors helped Britain lead the world in

television, radar and x-ray technology in the early 20th century. Few had the foresight that televisions might become collectable because of their cultural significance in the emerging mass media in the electronic age after the

Second World War. This collection became the subject of Michael's *Historic Televisions and Video Recorders* (MBL Publications, 1993), which was reviewed in *Bulletin*, no. 39 (December 1993), p. 37. Michael's business, Early Technology, reflected his extraordinary eclectic interests: historic televisions and other key electronic apparatus from computers to early missile guiding systems; mechanical music; magic lanterns; scientific instruments; vintage operatic records; and automata. His final restoration, Michael's 'swansong' completed shortly before his death, is the 'Ethiopian Harpist' automata by Gustof Vichi of Paris from c. 1870, which can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UsmsVt7Ulw>.

I have many fond memories of Michael (Fig. 2). Both he and our mutual friend Mark Butterworth, travelled all the way from Scotland to listen to the Society's Annual Invitation Lecture which I gave at the Society of Antiquaries in London in November 2012. Neither were in good health. Mark's obituary was published in *Bulletin* no. 122 (September 2014), p. 11. Michael died as he lived, on his own terms, peacefully at home surrounded by the whole extended family. I shall miss him greatly.

Willem Hackmann

(with thanks to Zoe Bennett-Levy)

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