Interview with Nigel Carren

Jon: You were saying this had to be classified as a factory.

Nigel: It wasn't just a change of use from a porcherie (of course, pig-sty) to a, an atelier, simplement, um, because unfortunately ... perhaps if I've made one error, it is assuming my work was artistic. So I hoped that I could register with the maison d'artistes. But having literally knocked on the door and having gone through all of their books with them, unfortunately I am classified as ... my work is artisanal. They wanted to have me down as a gunsmith, but I didn't like that because I thought that might also cause problems. It took a lot of, it was a lot of work to be classified as an armourier – that's technically what I am, but technically that it is artisanal, which means that my workshop, to answer your question, is classed as a small factory, which means that, er, often it's difficult with tax classifications.

Jon: And it seems the wrong classification anyway, doesn't it, because it's clearly not a factory – it's not mass producing.

Nigel: Absolutely, 100%. Everything I make is unique in that no two pieces are the same, and, er, they have no real use because let's admit it it's all decorative, which that fulfils alone the classification of registering for the maison d'artistes. I should have gone to the maison d'artistes, because then if I had discovered that my, my job was classified as artisanal I would have then bent the rules by saying, 'Forget what I just said, I actually make sculpture. In metal.'

Jon: That's an important point.

Nigel: Yes

Jon: A lesson for the many hundreds of armourers listening out there.

Nigel: Absolutely, indeed, yes (laughs). You don't do this job for many reasons, but, er, yeah ...

Jon: Right. You say they're decorative, but I mean I dare say that that suit of armour there, which is a replica ... ?

Nigel: No that's original. That is a 19th century original.

Jon: Right.

Nigel: Made in Paris.

Jon: So that would have had a purely decorative function of course?

Nigel: Indeed, you are quite correct, absolutely. Arts and Crafts movement...

Jon: I mean, for example that gauntlet there (16th century Italian looks to me from here) ...

Nigel: Yes, well spotted. Well done. The fact that this is period means, like, like modern armour ... and I worked for the Ministry of Defence once as a consultant on a very bizarre project, to help protect soldiers who were exiting helicopters – apparently, they were getting shot in the side and under the arm, so I had to work on a lightweight solution to that. And this is the same thing, in that just like modern armour, it's very light and very flexible. It might be thin (.4 mm) but of course it's flexible, which is the reason I suppose that you hit it with a blade, it will bounce back. If this was a thick, hulking great piece of armour, of course it would, it would dent. And also, nowadays again, I would be working with steel, whereas, whereas back in the day of course they really were only just discovering how to really make steel, so a lot of it was very brittle, some of it was probably very soft iron …

Jon: Right

Nigel: … very difficult to work. So now I think it's, er ... I think it's interesting now, the military even recently changed their, their tact re tanks. It used to be that you made the armour thicker and thicker and thicker and just like armour became ineffective because obviously we had firearms then, and firearms was penetrating, then they soon realised that actually if you used lots of small, thin layers, of course, then it would

absorb the energy like a modern car. An old car, the idea was to have it a strong chassis so that if it hit something it would be the strongest in the fight, but nowadays ...

Jon: So between the layers, though, would you have air, or some more absorbent material?

Nigel: It's certainly, yeah ... certainly riveted to another plate.

Jon: So, um, what are you working on at the moment?

Nigel: At the moment, my current nightmare, I say nightmare because this is a job I agreed to do without really doing any research. So this tiny egg-sized helmet is, um, soon going to be a complete Scudamore armour. So it was – I think it was – Sir John Scudamore. It's a 16th century piece. But the reason it was problematic is that I've not made a helmet quite like this before. This is called an armette – I can't show you because it's taped up before I make some holes in it, but basically you open the visor, then you open the ventail, which is the bit that covers the face, then the bevor, the bit that protects the chin, on an armette opens like a gate (there's a left and a right) whereas normally the bevor pivots in one piece. And to fine-tune of this, to fine-tune this has been a bit like a, a Fabergé egg. So the next thing is to make the neck and the shoulders, then I'm hoping it's going to pull itself together, really.

Jon: And who would actually commission those? Would they tend to be Americans and Japanese primarily, for example?

Nigel: Yes, but, um. This one actually is for an English chap, which is very unusual. Normally, my customers are American. I have several theories why that is, but it's great.

Jon: Why, why is that, do you think?

Nigel: Well, having discussed, er, this with a lot of American clients, I have the impression that the English have taken for granted the history that is on our doorstep. I used to live very close to a medieval moat and bailey, for example, and um ...

Jon: Judging by your accent I would imagine that's somewhere in Northamptonshire?

Nigel: No ... Yeah, right. Family from Birmingham, but, er, yeah, I'm from Northampton, that's right. Daventry, in fact.

Jon: So Americans, they realise that their history is relatively thin?

Nigel: Well, I think it's ... again, it's, it's a very simplified ... I'm generalising, but certainly, if they want to get a spoonful of medieval history, they, they can't get it from America.

Jon: Okay, Nigel thank you very much.

Nigel: Thank you.