

# Tattoo History : England

Contributed by WaterTattoos.Net  
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During the nineteenth century tattooing flourished in England as nowhere else in Europe. This was due in a large part to the tradition of tattooing in the British Navy, which began with the first voyage of Captain Cook in 1769. During the decades which followed many British seamen returned home bearing souvenirs of their travels in the form of exotic tattoos. Sailors learned the art, and by the middle of the 18th century most British ports had at least one professional tattoo artist in residence.

Tattooing gained royal sanction in 1862 when the Prince of Wales visited the Holy Land and had the Jerusalem Cross tattooed on his arm. In later life, as King Edward VII, he acquired a number of additional tattoos. When his sons, the Duke of Clarence and the Duke of York (later King George V) visited Japan in 1882, Edward VII instructed their tutor to take them to the studio of celebrated master Hori Chiyo, who tattooed dragons on their arms. On the way home the two Dukes visited Jerusalem and were tattooed by the same artist who had tattooed their father 20 years before.

Following the example of the dukes, many wealthy Britons and naval officers acquired tattoos from Japanese masters. By 1890 tattooing had become so popular among British aristocrats that an American writer complained: "society men in England were the victims of circumstance when the Prince of Wales had his body tattooed. Like a flock of sheep driven by their master they had to follow suit."

The first British professional known to us by name was D.W. Purdy, who established a shop in North London around 1870. The only existing record of Purdy's work is a booklet published toward the end of his career. It bears the practical title *Tattooing: how to tattoo, what to use, etc.* (1896-Medical tracts-London). Purdy apparently drew all his designs freehand without using stencils, for he admonished the beginner:

Before you commence to tattoo any individual you must be able to sketch well, as it is a very difficult matter to sketch on a person's arm or on any other part of the body; you will have a good deal of rubbing out to do before you get the figure drawn correctly. Whatever part of the body you have to tattoo you must see that there are no large veins in the way, as they must be avoided ... Before you commence drawing out your figure you must see that hairs are all shaved off or you will have some difficulty in trying to sketch with these in the way; shave them off with a razor and nothing else. You cannot draw the lines of the figure too fine as your needles are fine and you must have a fine line to work on."

As for subjects suitable for tattooing, he suggested such ambitious projects as portraits of sweethearts, the Tower Bridge, the Houses of Parliament, the Imperial Institute and British battleships.

During the 19th century tattooing was approved of and even encouraged in the British army. Field Marshall Earl Roberts, who was himself tattooed, directed that "every officer in the British Army should be tattooed with his regimental crest. Not only does this encourage esprit de corps but also assists in the identification of casualties." Field Marshall Roberts' own son and Queen Victoria's grandson, Prince Christian Victor, both of whom were tattooed with their regimental crests, were among the approximately 22,000 British soldiers who died during the Boer War.

One of the most prominent British tattoo artists of the late 19th century was Tom Riley. Riley's father was a professional soldier, and as a youth Riley followed his father's example and embarked on a military career. He had a natural talent for drawing which he developed by tattooing thousands of regimental crests and other military designs during the South African War and the Sudan Campaign.

After leaving the army, Riley established himself as a tattoo artist in London. His American cousin, Samuel O'Reilly, was a successful New York tattooer who invented and patented the first electric tattooing machine in 1890. Samuel O'Reilly shared his invention with Tom Riley, who became the first British tattoo artist to use the machine. Riley quickly rose to the top of his profession and enjoyed a long and profitable career, during the course of which he traveled extensively and tattooed many continental aristocrats.

Riley's success was due both to his skill as an artist and to his flair for showmanship. One of his most original publicity stunts was the over-all tattooing of an Indian water buffalo at the Paris Hippodrome in 1904. His performance lasted for three weeks and was widely covered by the press. According to one reporter, "the animal was covered with a lovely variety of ineradicable ornaments ... there are now about twenty Indians burning incense and worshipping this animal."

Riley's greatest rival was Sutherland Macdonald. Like Riley, Macdonald learned tattooing while serving in the British Army and later enjoyed the benefit of formal art school training. In 1890 he opened a fashionable London studio and strove to establish himself as a respectable professional. To this end, he dressed formally, cultivated a dignified bearing and called himself a "tattoosit" rather than a "tattooer" (the word commonly used at the time) on the grounds that "ist" sounded like

"artist" whereas "er" sounded like "plumber."

Macdonald enjoyed a privileged status with the Royal Navy. At Plymouth, he was taken in the admiral's yacht to visit battleships, where he added to the decorations of Admiral Montgomery and other naval officers.

Macdonald also advanced his career by courting journalists and was the subject of many flattering magazine and newspaper articles. In April of 1897, *The Strand* reported that Macdonald's work was "the very finest tattooing the world has ever seen" and that "he has not only equaled the work by the Japanese, but has excelled them. His fame spread to the Continent, where he received rave reviews in the French press. In 1897, *Le Temps* reported that he had elevated tattooing to an art form, and in 1900 *L'Illustration* referred to him as "the Michelangelo of tattooing." Macdonald continued to tattoo in London until his death in 1937.

The greatest of the early British tattoo artists was George Burchett, who began his professional career in 1900, when Riley and Macdonald were at the height of their fame. Burchett was born in Brighton in 1872. As a child, his imagination was fired by tales of travel and adventure told by old sailors he met on Brighton beach. He was fascinated by their tattoos, inquired as to how they were done, and, at the age of eleven, began tattooing his schoolmates with soot and darning needles. His clients were pleased with Burchett's efforts but their parents were not, and when Burchett refused to give up his art, he was expelled from school. At the age of thirteen, he enlisted in the Royal Navy.

In the navy he was befriended by an older sailor who was an accomplished tattooist and taught him the rudiments of the art. Burchett was inspired by the superb Burmese and Japanese tattoos on the arms of his shipmates. When his ship docked in Yokohama in 1889, he was tattooed by Hori Chiyo, the same tattoo artist who had tattooed the Duke of Clarence and the Duke of York seven years earlier.

After roaming the world for twelve years as a seaman and itinerant tattoo artist, Burchett returned to England. At the age of 28, he opened his first studio in London and embarked on a career which earned him much fame, a small fortune, and the title "King of Tattooists."

Burchett is the only early British tattoo artist who left a written record of his life and work. Because of his lack of formal education he was reluctant to write for publication, but he kept a diary, wrote many letters and made detailed notes in his appointment book. In addition, he was an avid collector of documents, pictures, memoirs and instruments used in tattooing. Toward the end of his life, he wrote the outline of a book based on his diaries and other material from his collection. Before his death Burchett completed several chapters, and after his death the remaining material was compiled and edited by his friend Peter Leighton with the assistance of Burchett's widow and other family members.

The result of this collaboration was published in 1958 as "Memoirs of a Tattooist", an informal record of Burchett's experiences and observations during more than half a century of tattooing. In it the author emerges as a man of intelligence and wit who loved his work and felt at ease when dealing with clients from all walks of life, from convicts to royalty. During his remarkable career, Burchett developed one of the largest practices in the world and employed numerous assistants, including his brothers and his sons, who at one time ran three London studios under the name of Burchett. He was the subject of numerous newspaper and magazine articles, and his royal clients included King Alfonso of Spain, King Frederick IX of Denmark and King George V of England. His energy and enthusiasm did much to promote the popularity of tattooing in England and throughout the world. Burchett continued his busy schedule until he unexpectedly collapsed and died while preparing to go to work on Good Friday, 1953. He was 81.

Riley, Macdonald and Burchett were outstanding for several reasons. As young men they had the opportunity to travel and gain much practical experience; they were influenced and inspired by the outstanding artistry of Japanese tattooing; and they worked in London at a time when Japanese prints, Art Nouveau, and the Arts and Crafts Movement were introducing new concepts of design in all forms of graphic art. They enjoyed the patronage of kings and, in addition, had many wealthy customers who paid generously for work of outstanding quality. In this environment they developed their talents to the fullest and founded a tradition of artistic tattooing which is alive and well in Britain today.

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 The following selection is taken from "Memoirs of a Tattooist" by George Burchett, and is quoted here by kind permission of George Burchett's son, Leslie Burchett.

The "Victory" dropped anchor in Kobe, Japan, on a fine summer's day in 1889. This port, then the gateway to Japan, had known what it was to have the fleets of Britain, America, France and Holland standing off it, with decks cleared for action. By dint of this encouragement, the deliberations between the Occidental Powers and the representatives of Imperial Tycoon had been brought to a satisfactory conclusion and the gateway had been opened. By the time I arrived only thirty years had passed since Britain and America had wrung the treaty out of Nippon's rulers which allowed Europeans to settle and open the harbours of Nagasaki, Yokohama and Kobe to foreign ships.

The fantastic tumult of Eastern ports was not new to me. But I expected something new in Japan. I was disillusioned. Kobe and, as I discovered later, Yokohama and Tokyo were less "oriental" and outlandish than the British ports in China and Straits Settlements. The streets of these Japanese cities seemed to have been westernized overnight. They were broad and straight. Most houses were built of stone and had many stories. There were imposing, dull buildings for banks, offices and shops which would not have looked out of place in the City of London. There was Japanese quarter in Kobe, of course, but it was not as much in evidence as in Yokohama, which preserved the Eastern look to a greater extent. However, Kobe Harbour itself was then one of the most beautiful in the East. A panorama of countless islands spread out in all directions from the bay, and it was on these islands that the Japanese lived, in tiny houses, built of paper and thin wood. The houses huddled together in little groups, as if to make up for their flimsy weakness by facing the elements together. Their curly roofs looked jaunty and some of the houses overhung the sea. But more people lived on board the junks and sampans with which the bay seemed to be alive.

Over this scene the sun set in wonderful glory. I did not have to wait to see some of Japan's art close-to before I realized what had inspired for centuries the tattoos I had admired. As I looked out to the islands and their delicate silhouettes I was, in my boyish way, moved for perhaps the first time in my life by pure beauty, and I also felt a kind of sadness which I did not understand. Now, I think, it simply meant that I realized that there are some things in life which will always keep on the other side of the shop window. In my case, I would never be able to achieve anything so lovely as the view from H.M.S. "Victory" over Kobe with my own hand.

In the streets of Japan there was a mass of colour. Everyone seemed in a hurry and one had to be agile to keep out of the way of the jinrickshas, the fleet-footed coolies. But I found a corner from which to watch undisturbed and I shall always remember the Japanese girls tripping along in their brightly coloured kimonos, with brilliant reds, greens, yellows and violets. Even the children were dressed in the most extraordinary style. They looked like little cardinals with long robes of scarlet, violet and black, all padded out so that they looked dumpy and very, very serious. In this respect it was as well that my first glimpse of Japan was at Kobe and not Yokohama and Tokyo, where the taste in dress was much quieter. There they wore dark blue and rarely relieved it with any contrasting colour.

But once again it was not until the evening that Japan really came up to my high hopes. Then the lanterns were hung from the shop fronts and the men and women carried more glowing lanterns as they walked through the streets. Possibly my introduction to mulled sake stimulated my imagination, but I returned to the "Victory" like a man who has just visited fairyland. Needless to say, I did not reveal such sloppy thoughts to my shipmates whose requirements of a port were not so delicate.

We were given shore leave at Yokohama and I was able to visit the greatest tattooist there has ever been. Or, to be more accurate, I was able to visit his house ...

"Hori" is the ancient Japanese title for all tattooists. They are, or were, more like a priesthood than anything else, possessing deft skill which, to my mind, bordered on the supernatural. Not the least wonderful aspect of their talent was the speed at which they worked. But no Hori had surpassed the delicacy of line, the precise detail, and, above all, the glowing colours and subtle shading created by Hori Chyo.

Perhaps only an oriental, with his patience and devotion, which is religious in character, could get so near perfection. I knew that Western tattooists, however skilled and gifted, were only imitators of an art which had been cultivated in Japan for 2000 years. Hori Chyo was the inheritor and custodian of this tradition and its secrets which had been handed down for generation after generation.

I decided that somehow, I had to visit the workshops of this master and, if humanly possible, meet him myself. Chyo had his studio at the Esplanade, a westernized thoroughfare. But his house was a Japanese bungalow with an elegant and peaceful forecourt where his servants and pupils greeted the visitor. I was overawed.

Tattooing had just been forbidden in Japan by an Imperial decree in one of a series of measures designed to westernize the Land of the Rising Sun. Forbidden, that is, for Japanese skins, but not so for foreigners. They were free to patronize the horis. This was not logical in the western sense, and I do not think it pleased the Japanese, who continued to be tattooed in secret. But the result was that Chyo was compelled to cultivate western clientele and, as I, a humble rating, stood in the forecourt, I felt embarrassed by the steady procession of officers and wealthy business men who were arriving for their costly appointments with the famous tattooist.

Nevertheless, I was treated with the utmost courtesy. One of the pupils departed bearing my stammered request to meet the master. I did not admit that I had never seen any work by Chyo as it was always placed on bodies beyond my rank and station at that time. As I waited I was offered cigarettes and a bowl containing a sort of fish soup. This was given to all visitors, the soup being kept in a large vessel on a bamboo pedestal. For those who fancied it, there was also cold tea, hot water and mulled sake.

I was gingerly testing the fish soup when another pupil came up and asked, in broken English, whether I would like to be

attended to by himself or another young hori. Obviously he suspected that I could not afford the master's stiff fee. When I told him that I wished to meet the master because I was an amateur tattooist, he smiled, bowed, and left me alone.

At last I was called forward. In my eagerness I nearly collided, at the entrance, with a Lieutenant, R.N., who gave me a dirty look when I sprang to attention. He acknowledged my salute and departed without saying a word.

Then I saw Hori Chyo. He was sitting on one of the cushions which were laid out all over the room. He smiled and beckoned me forward.

He was a small, slightly built man, with a short, silvery goatee beard. He looked more like a Chinese mandarin than a Japanese samurai. He was wearing a magnificent yellow silk kimono with rich embroidery showing dragons and chrysanthemums. So this was the man who, in his youth, had studied with the legendary Hori Yasu of Kyoto, and had then taken the art of Japanese on to unsurpassed glory.

In excellent English he said he had heard that I was a tattooist and that he was honoured by my call. Hastily I explained that I was just a beginner and that it was the greatest event of my life to be allowed to meet him. This was no attempt at Oriental courtesy on my part. Chyo asked me whether I would like to be tattooed, and I had to explain that I had only a little money and that I could not spend more than fifty yen. It was quite enough for me to spend, as it equaled about five shillings.

He smiled again and said that he would be happy to make a small design as a souvenir of our meeting. But, he added, I might be interested in watching him at work, and he asked me whether I would allow him to ask in another client who had an appointment. I readily agreed and a fat Frenchman, who had arrived aboard a large French merchantman which I had seen in port, was ushered in by a pupil. He was asked to strip and lie on the cushions. Chyo bent over him and, after a short, whispered conversation - apparently the master also spoke French - Chyo murmured a word or two to the pupils kneeling by him.

They all had tattoo needles in their hands and jars containing coloured dyes on small lacquer trays. To my astonishment I discovered that the needles were in fact thin ivory sticks, the size of a pencil, carved and brightly painted with designs. Chyo neither showed his customer a book of designs nor did he look at one himself. Rapidly he applied the ivory sticks, changing them again and again, using points of varying thickness for the different lines he was so quickly puncturing. In the meantime, several other customers arrived, were told by the pupils to stretch out on the cushions and rugs, and Chyo darted from one to another, while his pupils continued to work, following his outlines.

When at last the master approached me, he asked: "Would you like a little lizard on your arm?" I just nodded, unable to utter a word. A pupil gave him an ivory stick, and he punctured my skin so gently and rapidly that I hardly felt it at all, dipping the stick into jars which another pupil held in front of him. He changed them again and again. Within a few moments I had a wonderful small lizard darting up my forearm, green, brown and yellow, with finely shaded scales and red eyes and tongue.

Before I realized that he had finished, Chyo was already attending another man across the room. My audience was at an end. A pupil wiped my forearm with a pleasantly smelling wet piece of silk or paper and said: "Will the honourable gentleman now be so good as to tender a note of fifty yen?" This I did, bowing now myself as deeply to the little fellow as he did to me. I tried to catch Chyo's eye to bow to him to express my gratitude, but the master was far too busy to see me.

During my shore leave I went three times more to Chyo's bungalow, just to sit in the forecourt and to snatch a glance at his work or even that of his pupils. Although I was never allowed to enter the sanctum again, I could watch some of the pupils tattooing some of the British and American sailors in the forecourt, apparently at cut rates. These pupils, some boys of my own age or even younger (one told me he was fourteen), were tattooists in their own right and as quick as Chyo.

I was told that Chyo was a very rich man. He had tattooed many royal personages, including the Duke of Clarence and the Duke of York, who later became King George V, when the two brothers served as midshipmen aboard H.M.S. "Bacchante", which visited Yokohama in 1882. The two dukes had been on a world tour which lasted nearly three years, and had come from Australia to Japan, where they were received with great ceremony by the Mikado. The Duke of Clarence was eighteen, his brother sixteen months younger. That the two young men were allowed to visit Hori Chyo puzzled many of the informed people in London, because the princes were in the charge of Canon Dalton, their tutor (the father of Dr. Hugh Dalton, who was later a famous Labour Party politician). However, as I later heard, it was the wish of King Edward VII that his sons should acquire some small adornment from the hand of the great Japanese master. I have forgotten what design he gave the Duke of Clarence, who died from a chill in 1892 at only twenty-eight years of age, but I have had the privilege of seeing Chyo's masterpiece, a dragon, on his royal brother's forearm.

Chyo had also tattooed the Czarevitch of Russia, later Czar Nicholas II during the Russian state visit to Tokyo some years after. When I visited the master his eyesight must have been already failing; indeed, I was told he had only one

good eye left. The other had become blind, probably from the constant strain caused by executing the extremely minute details of his designs. But his eye trouble did not prevent him from accepting an invitation to New York. The story was that he had been accused of tattooing a Japanese samurai whom the Mikado disliked. To spite the nobleman, the Emperor arranged that Chyo should be prosecuted by the police for tattooing a subject of the Emperor. The hori staunchly denied the offense, but he was fined. The fine was small, but Chyo's indignation about this treatment was so great he announced that he was leaving the country. He was enabled to do so by an American millionaire, Mr. Max Bandel, of New York, who had acquired some beautiful tattoos during a stay in Yokohama. Mr. Bandel invited Chyo to New York at a retainer of ¥2,400 a year, which would be in addition to any fees Chyo cared to charge individual customers. Chyo worked for several years in New York, and he and his American pupils were responsible for the designs of some of the monumental works executed for Barnum upon the skins of Mr. and Mrs. Williams and Frank and Emma de Burgh. Frank had a reproduction of Lenoardo da Vinci's "Last Supper", Emma a representation of the crucifixion. While these two pieces were not by Japanese artists, Chyo's influence upon the American tattooists was obvious in the great detail of the picture.