

Charles Holtzapffel Obituary

Charles Holtzapffel died on April 11th, 1847. The following obituary notice (as reprinted from the Artizan) probably appeared in that same month.

THE DEATH OF MR. CHARLES HOLTZAPFFEL

During the past month the mechanical world has sustained an irreparable loss in the death of Mr. Charles Holtzapffel, the author of the "Treatise on Mechanical Manipulation" of which the second volume was lately noticed in the Artizan, and the ablest mechanist of his time, Mr. Holtzapffel sustained a severe shock a few years ago from the death of his eldest son - a calamity referred to in the second volume of his work; but he had rallied again from this visitation and a long career of usefulness appeared to lie before him when he was seized rather suddenly with an affection of the liver which in a short time terminated fatally. The loss of such a man is at any time a national misfortune; but the weight of the affliction is increased when proofs of high capacities have been given by the departed which he has not been spared to exercise and he is cut off before having gathered all his fame. As it is, Mr. Holtzapffel has left a name that will long survive him; but all that he has already done is but a faint specimen of what he was competent to publish or of which he would have accomplished had life and health been accorded.

Mr. Charles Holtzapffel was the son of Mr. John Jacob Holtzapffel, a native of Germany, who, about 60 year ago, established himself in London as a maker of mechanical apparatus for the use of amateurs, and who was among the first to introduce into this country machinery for ornamental turning. Mr. Charles Holtzapffel when he attained the age of 21 became associated with his father in the management of his business and he succeeded his father in 1835. While a very young man, Mr. Holtzapffel's fastidiousness respecting the accuracy of his work had induced him to discard the arbitrary system of gauges as a method of mensuration, adopting in their stead a new system of measures based upon the decimal sub-division of the standard inch; and notwithstanding the important commercial duties which devolved upon him, he found time to mature a vast number of new devices or material improvements upon existing mechanisms, of which the best-known are his machinery for printing bank-notes, machinery for cutting rosettes for ornamental turning, pentographs, dividing engine for the graduation of drawing scales, machinery for tracing ornamental geometrical figures upon the surface of glass, machinery for carving and a multitude of other contrivances which cannot be mentioned here. There are few of the tools or implements which did not receive improvement from his ingenuity, though in the majority of cases, perhaps, the ameliorations have passed into general use without the public being cognizant of the hand from which such rich gifts flowed.

But perhaps the most remarkable proof of Mr. Holtzapffel's exhaustless ingenuity and profound mechanical skill is afforded by the fact that he habitually lent such aid to inventors in working out their devices, as sufficed in many cases to render hopeless schemes successful; and many a reputation has been built up of the merit thus silently transfused into an impossible project. Whoever had a vague conception in his mind of some mechanical device which he could not

reduce to a practical shape, carried the crude idea to Mr. Holtzapffel, with the request that he would construct a machine on the prescribed principle to answer the specified end; but leaving him to supply from the depths of his information all the mechanical details; to reconcile every difficulty, and symmetries every proportion. It is clear that a task such as this must have amounted in the majority of cases to the invention of the machine; but Mr. Holtzapffel never claimed credit for such achievements; and when this was his course of procedure, not in a few cases merely, but in most of the cases which came into his hands for a series of years, it is not difficult to conceive how great must be the obligations of mechanical art to such a resolver of enigmas, and how inadequately his merits must be represented by those works alone which have come before the public in his own name.

Mr. Holtzapffel probably never put his hand to a machine which he did not improve and his practice in the construction of machines has been more miscellaneous probably than that of any other mechanist, his workmanship more accurate, and his general mechanical arrangements more refined. The only occasion for regret is that so much talent should have been expended in rescuing from oblivion or defeat the frivolities of amateurs: for although Mr. Holtzapffel always made whatever mechanism he undertook successful, yet the end itself was not, in all cases, of dignity enough to be worthy of his solicitude, nor such as he would have proposed to himself had he been left a free choice.

In private life, Mr. Holtzapffel was one of the best human beings, and has been observed of another great mechanic, those who knew only his public merits knew not half his worth. He had all the humility of genius without its eccentricities, and his heart habitually overflowed with kindness towards everyone around him. His business, which latterly very much increased, will now be carried on by his family: and although nothing can compensate for the loss of the master spirit, yet with the able men he has trained up in his system, it is to be hoped that the business will not suffer much diminution of prosperity. The work on "Mechanical Manipulation" is still far from finished; but a large stock of materials have been accumulated for the remaining volumes, and we trust that at no distant period they may be given to the world.