

Union Jacks to half staff RON ACKERS

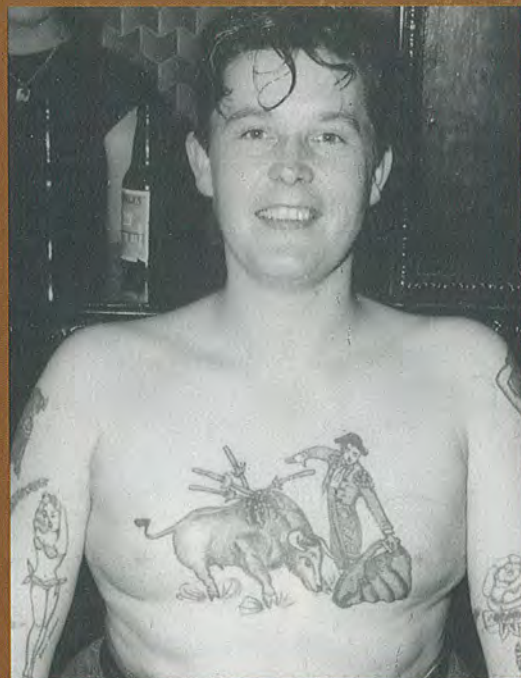
By Rich T

Ron Ackers was a tattoo icon. He spent more than 50 years as a tattooist, based mainly in Portsmouth, England. In recent years he had also developed a worldwide reputation as a top-quality builder of tattoo machines.

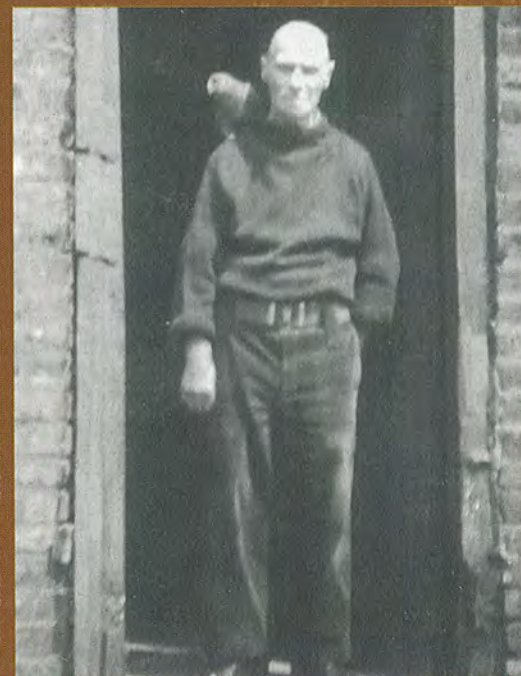
Ron died peacefully in his sleep on the evening of November 18, 2004. He was 72. Temple Tattoo's Rich T had been interviewing Ron and collecting images for an ITA profile in the year before Ron's death. Rich was going into great depth, exploring Ron's career from his Teddy Boy youth to his position as a grand old man of English ink. All of us here at ITA anticipated that Ron Ackers would appreciate the story as a salute for all he'd given to tattooing. Now we offer it as a memorial.

Born February 21, 1932 in Ellesmore Port, England—near Liverpool—Ron became interested in tattooing at an early age. “I had two uncles,” Ron said, “one was in the Royal Navy, the other in the merchant navy. The one in the merchant navy, he had a tattoo on. I always looked at it like magic on the skin. I must have been 9 years old. I thought I'd like to copy that, so I was sketching away. Because it was in the wartime, we never had much for toys and that, but we always had pen, pencil and bits of paper. In those days we had what was called a blue lead pencil. If you wet it you could make a mark on your skin with it. So, on my schoolmates I was up for drawing tattoos on them with a blue lead pencil. My dad used to give me a clip round the ear and say ‘What's all that blue you've got on your tongue?’ Of course it was the blue lead pencil, put in my mouth to wet it. That was really the start of it all. I couldn't wait till I could get a tattoo.”

Ron got his first tattoo at age 14 from Bill Stokes, a tattoo artist in Chester—about five miles from Ellesmore Port. The tattoo was a heart with a ribbon. “I had a sister and she died,” Ron said. “It hadn't been long, so I got my sister's name Daisy in the ribbon.” Ron became a frequent visitor to Stokes' shop after that, receiving several more tattoos over the next couple years.



Ron Ackers, Mid 1950s, bullfight tattoo by Les Skuse. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)

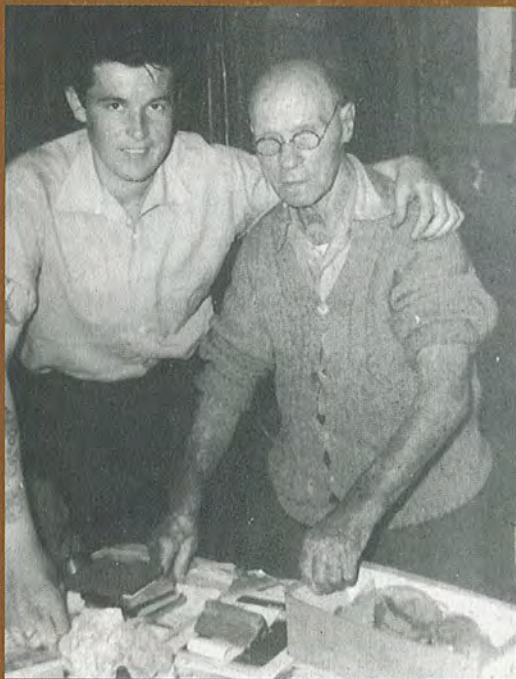


Billy Stokes and his parrot, late 1940s. Ron said, “When you'd knock on the door the parrot would say ‘What do you want?’” Stokes sometimes tattooed his customers with his parrot on his shoulder. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)

Ron went to see Bill Stokes again after he read in a local paper that Stokes was going to retire from tattooing. "I wish you could have taught me tattooing," Ron told Bill. According to Ron, Stokes said, "I can't teach anyone to tattoo now but I'll see you half way. I'll give you the equipment." It was 1949 and Ron was 18. Stokes gave him two old machines, some transfers, colors, packets of needles, and two batteries. Now living in Chester, Ron began his tattoo career working from a flat that he shared with a pal.

In 1950 and 1951 Ron did his national service [compulsory draft] in the British Army medical corps. Stationed in Mostyn, Wales, he honed his skills by tattooing in the evenings with his fellow soldiers as clients. At the end of his service he returned to Chester, and in 1954 he opened his first studio keeping evening and Saturday hours to allow for a day job. In 1956 he moved his studio to Rhyl, a seaside vacation spot in Wales. There Ron saw work from other artists on customers who came from all over the British Isles.

Les Skuse was among the artists whose work Ron saw in his Rhyl studio. Skuse was, and is, famous for his Bristol Tattoo Club. "When I saw the colors Les was using and the bold lines," Ron said, "well, I was still working fine line, the old British way. Les was the first one in England to tattoo like they did in America. It was brilliant, fantastic. So when I got one of his cards I thought I'll write to him. I did, and lo and behold he wrote back to me."



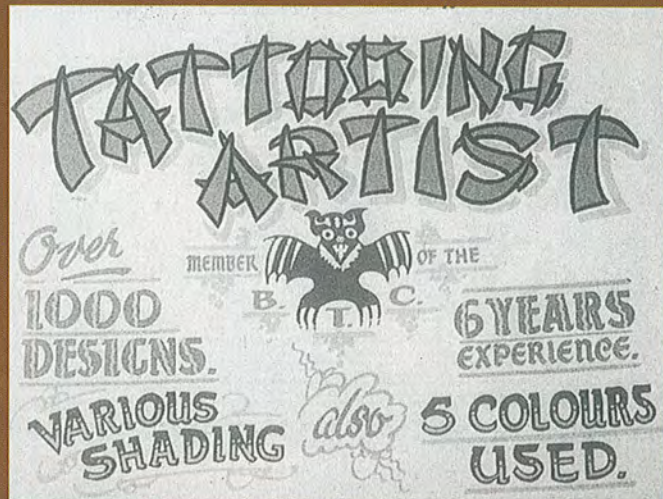
Ron Ackers and Billy Stokes. On the table is the equipment he gave Ron to get him started tattooing in 1949. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)



Ron Ackers with several machines in his test tube rack and a Jonesy machine in his hand. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)



Stan Davies and Ron Ackers in front of the arcade in Rhyl where Ron had his booth for many years. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)



Ron's signboard in Rhyl in the 1950s, which proudly boasts five colors used and proclaims his membership in the Bristol Tattoo Club. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)



Business card from the Arches, 1970s.



Ron Ackers with 1950s Jonesy machine in hand. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)



Ron Ackers tattooing in London, 1960s. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)

After several letters Ron wrote Les that he'd like to come and visit him; it was the end of the season and he had the time. Les replied, "Yes, certainly, you come down."

Les Skuse's shop really stunned the young artist. "When I went there it was like a Mecca," Ron said. "I couldn't believe it. All the designs under glass, all these American machines and colors, I was flabbergasted." Les would be a big influence on Ron's work. "Les gave me the address of [American supplier] Owen Jensen. I sent over and got Jensen's catalog with the machines Les was using. I thought 'Oh I got to have one of those.' I paid \$12.00 for that. But I couldn't send the money from England; I had to go to Dublin."

At that time, English citizens were not permitted to send money abroad. An import license was required to purchase items from the States. Ron traveled by ferry to the Irish Free State where he made fast friends with Johnny O'Brien in Dublin. O'Brien was "the only tattooist in all Ireland at that time," Ron said. O'Brien helped Ron with getting his American equipment and agreed to bring it over to England when it arrived from the States. "When Johnny O'Brien brought me the machines over," Ron said, "he told me where I could buy a rheostat to couple up on the batteries so the machines would run smoother. That's what I did. So I got the American machines and there was nothing to stop me."

The arcade studio in Rhyl was seasonal. During the late 1950s when the seaside got quiet, Ron took his craft abroad. Sometimes he traveled from army camp to army camp in Germany. Other times he chased the fleets into Spain and Italy. The trick was to make sure that English and American ships were in port with loads of sailors on liberty, their pockets full of cash. He traveled by car, and he would work on the sailors and soldiers in pubs.

Ron Ackers was an innovator, as well as ambitious and adventuresome. In 1959 he bought a motor home and fitted it out as mobile tattoo studio. Mobile studios are commonplace at today's bike rallies, but at that time it was unheard of. Ron worked the studio on wheels with another tattooist named Inkie Dinkie and their driver Larry. They worked assembly-line style. Ron did the outline and shading; Inkie Dinkie did the color.

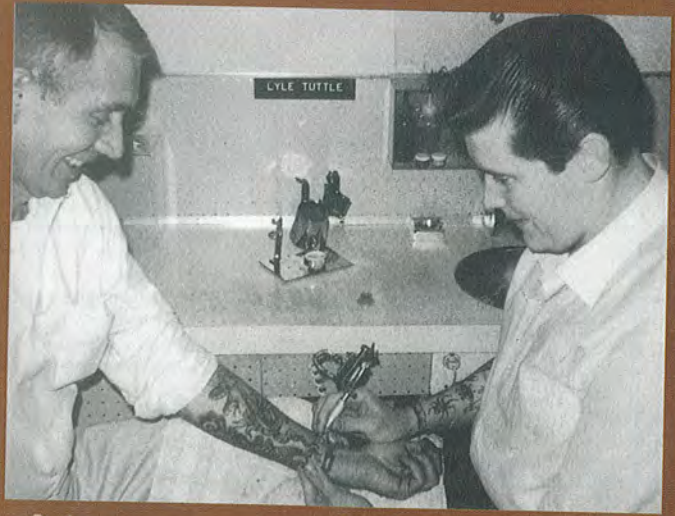
"We was in Germany at first," Ron said. "We were going around to all the English army camps. When you'd go to the camp the guards would tell you what bar the lads would be at when they were off duty, so we'd set up there. That's how we done it. We had a map and we'd go from one camp to the next. It was getting winter time; I suggested that we should go to a warmer climate. So we went to bar and had a

few drinks, and we tossed a coin for whether we'd go to Spain or Italy, and it came up Italy. We set off across the Alps and as we got into Genoa, down at the harbor we could see a big American aircraft carrier, it had just come in. This was the place for us; we'd just got lucky. We went right down to the harbor and that's where we stayed for a week, we tattooed just outside the barracks. They were queued up outside everyday."

Ron corresponded with other tattoo artists throughout his life, and many of them influenced his work. He formed lasting friendships with other prominent talents. Beyond Les Skuse, there was Rich Mingins, Doc Forbes, Tattoo Peter, Hanky Panky, and Ed Hardy. Ron and Lyle Tuttle wrote each other frequently throughout the 1950s. This would lead to Ron visiting the US for the first time in 1962. He worked in Lyle Tuttle's 7th and Market studio in San Francisco for six months. "Ron Ackers was the world's greatest freehand tattoo artist," Lyle said. Ron remembered the trip fondly. "I saved up for two years for that," he said. "I flew over on Pan American Airways; in them days there was hardly anyone on the plane. I went to his shop in San Francisco. It was marvelous. Everything was sterile, the only thing that wasn't done like it is done today is we didn't have any gloves on. So when I got back to England I thought I'd work like Lyle. I was one of the first to work like that in England."

Ron was involved with several tattooing organizations, including Les Skuse's Bristol Tattoo Club. The North Western Tattoo Club that Ron started in the 1950s was modeled after the Bristol Tattoo Club. He was also a founding member of the British Guild of Tattoo Artists in the 1960s. "We started the club up to be more professional and so the authorities would take more notice," Ron said. "We all met up at Les's and they made me the secretary. I don't know why; I can't even spell. We made Bill Skuse the treasurer, because we knew he was tight and wouldn't give anyone any money. Les was the president; Bob Madison was vice president. All the tattoo artists who joined had to prove themselves by their standard of work and how they conducted themselves. So we never had many members. I think we had maybe twenty members. Of course in them days there weren't that many tattooists around."

In 1966 Ron left Rhyl to work with Joe Cleverly at the Arches in Portsmouth. There, his customers were mostly sailors on liberty. Work was steady, and Portsmouth would be Ron's home for the rest of his life. He worked in many locations in the London and Portsmouth areas over the years. In 1976 Ron



Davy Jones and Ron Ackers at Lyle Tuttle's studio in San Francisco, 1962. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)



The Arches under the railway lines, Portsmouth, England—it is still open today. (photo courtesy of Temple Tattoo History Museum)



The Arches, a stone's throw from the pier, Portsmouth, England. (photo courtesy of Temple Tattoo History Museum)




1960s inside the Arches, sailors looking on at a young customer sporting an exquisite geisha dragon tattoo. Note the flash displayed on the vaulted ceiling. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)

traveled again to San Francisco to visit his friend Lyle. On this trip he met Ed Hardy, Pinky Yun and Jack Rudy. The trip fired Ron's boilers and he returned to England with a new enthusiasm about his work. In 1979 Ed Hardy visited Ron on a working vacation. Ron lined up clients for his guest, mostly other artists from all over the UK.

Ron was a lifelong champion for the advancement of tattooing both artistically and technically, and he strove to make it seen in a good light. When the popularity of tattooing soared, Ron kept up with the times. He traveled all over Western Europe and the States for conventions and visits to other tattoo artists. By the mid 1980s Ron Ackers had become a living legend, highly respected as a tattoo artist, painter and machine builder extraordinaire. He tattooed actively until 1999 and kept his hand in to the very end by doing paintings with tattoo-related themes. He was a living bridge from the present to England's rich tattoo history.

Ron Ackers is survived by his wife Ophelia and his two daughters, Dianne and Tracy. He will be missed.

In researching this story, Rich T taped conversations with his friend Ron Ackers from December, 2003 through June, 2004. Toward the end of one of their sessions, Ron said: "I enjoyed every minute of it; I must have been a traveling gypsy in my past life. I've done things in my life that most people have never done. It was all an adventure; I often look back and think about it. I wouldn't change it, met lots of exciting people. Tattooing has been good to me. I've done the things I wanted to do." 



Ron Ackers tattoo 1960s. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)



Ron Ackers tattoo 1960s. (photo courtesy of Lyle Tuttle)