

Tim Keegan

Retail analyst and knife sharpener

Born 1968.

Autobiographical life story.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk

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1. Childhood and Early Career



Tim Keegan's introduction, written in June 2020:

I was born in Chelmsford, raised in a tiny North Welsh village, went to secondary boarding school in Brentwood whilst my family moved to Australia, went to university in Dundee, (psychology, natural language processing for AI), meet and eventually married an Italian, went to work in retail (B&Q) on a mission to save the planet (timber certification and reduction of packaging), drifted into database design and resource optimisation (space management), then stopped all that and started sharpening.

I've been coaxed back into retail management (Homebase) half and half with working for myself, but they've had me on furlough for twelve weeks. I didn't even mention the time in India or the year in Thailand.

2. Interview with the Hertfordshire Comet

This chapter is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Comet, 23.12.2016.

Tim, who lives on Bearton Road with his wife Deborah Segalini and their two children, tired of his ‘soul-destroying’ hour and a half commute to work as a manager and analyst for big retailers.



So when his head office moved – resulting in his travel to work becoming four hours long – he took redundancy and launched his own business called Hitchin Sharpening

With the support of Deborah, courageous Tim hasn’t looked back since. He told the Comet: “The temptation to switch to another retailer was strong. I thought: ‘Be sensible, you’re getting older, build the career. The kids are only going to get more expensive, what about your pension – why give all that up?’

“But my wife and children supported me – so I took the crazy step.”

Tim spent the summer in Italy, where his wife is from. He’d always liked working with his hands and it got him thinking.

He said: “In the local market, every Friday, there was an arrotino – a travelling knife sharpener.

“I visited him often, as he sharpened my chisels and sold me a knife. He always struck me as happy when he gossiped and cheerfully grumbled with the old boys around his van.

“Then it struck me – I’ve never seen this in the UK. Not outside a storybook from the olden days. I thought – I’d like to do that. So I did.”

Busy Tim researched the trade, talked to experts, acquired machinery and undertook training. Before he knew it he was trading and sharpening knives for a whole range of people including chef Martin Burke, a restaurant, a farm – and neighbours looking for sharp knives to cut the Christmas turkey.

Customer feedback has been positive, and Tim can’t wait to introduce people to the joys of getting an edge.

Supportive wife Deborah added: “I’m so proud of him. If it’s got a blade he’ll sharpen it. He’s such a happy chap!”

3. Interview with Muddy Stiletto

This chapter is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Muddy Stiletto website at www.herts.muddystiletto.co.uk in June 2020.

What do your kitchen knives say about you? I have learned something valuable about myself, and it's nothing to shout about. My kitchen knives were pronounced 'Entirely average' by Tim Hitchin Sharpening Keegan, when I rocked up at his workshop with a car load of embarrassingly blunt knives.

Leaving your house carrying a knife is illegal by the way, just to be clear. The reason I score 'average', is because, according to Tim, 'Every blasted knife in this country is blunt.'



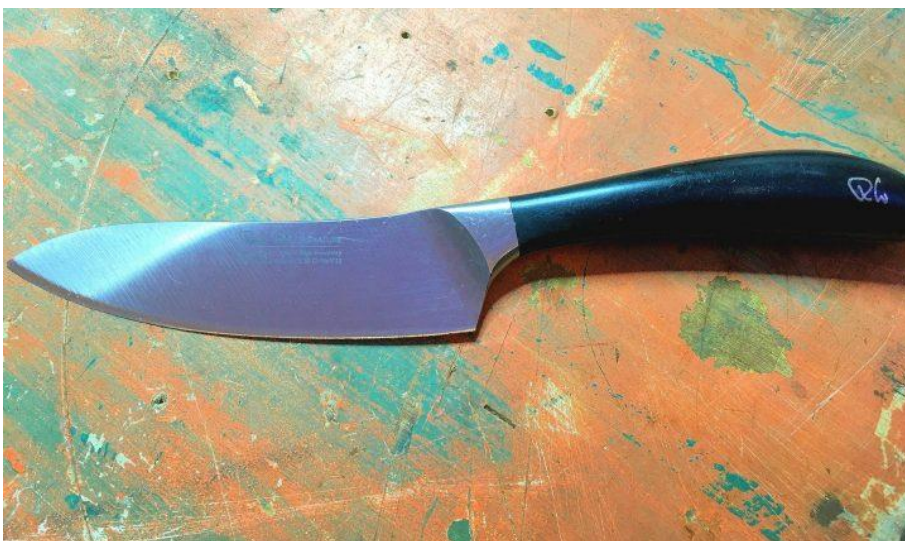
Tim looks rather marvellous when he is angry. He gets a steely glint in his eye. He is on a one man mission in Hitchin: to make sure that every single kitchen knife in the town is sharp. He recently gave up his job as a retail space analyst to become a knife sharpener.

This Damascus conversion happened last summer when he was on holiday in Italy. He saw a man on a bike, cycling from door to door sharpening people's knives and he observed that the man always looked happy. Tim has subsequently trained to become a bona fide knife sharpener. He has a certificate and everything.



Tim Keegan with a vintage Black & Decker drill

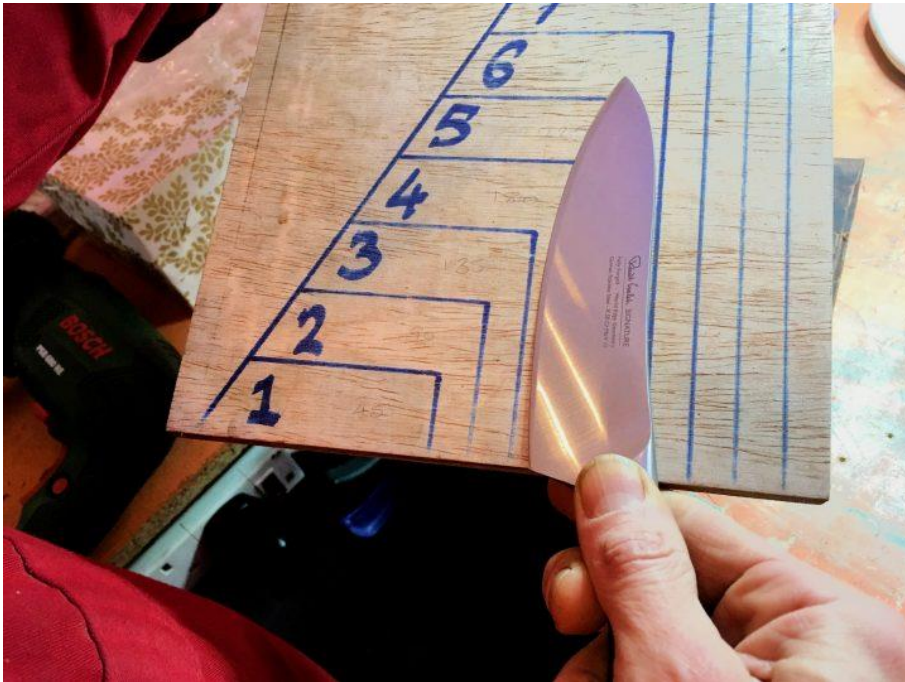
A desire to eliminate waste in the world has fuelled Tim's make do and mend philosophy. He toyed with the idea of having a stall at Hitchin market, but this was scuppered by the fact that it's illegal to take your blunt knife to market. So for now, Tim is sharpening at home, but he will also travel to collect knives from SG4 and SG5 free of charge. And the biggest market for sharpening? Scissors for dog grooming and clippers for horses. Who knew? I bet you're wondering how much it costs to sharpen a knife like this one? Well, I'll tell you. Tim charges 50p per inch. And he doesn't just sharpen knives! Oh no. He'll do garden tools and shears. And scissors! Building a brand is, as we know, all about brand stretch and diversification. I worked in branding and retail design before I became a journalist. Just saying. Tim and I had a good old chinwag about gondola ends and footfall.



Blunt instrument

Tim is clever. His 'A' Levels include maths and physics which now help him to understand the atomic structure of metal. He talks about quenching and tempering

and obsidian and volcanic glass. Apparently the Aztecs and Incas used obsidian, which has a very regular crystalline structure, to do appendectomies. Listening to Tim, I was very nearly blinded by science when all I'd been hoping for was to be empowered to cut a clean slice of onion. Tim is evangelical about knife sharpening: 'If it can be made sharp, I can make it sharp,' he vows.



50p per inch. That'll be £2.50, Madam.

And just in case you're wondering whether your knife needs sharpening or not, Tim taught me a handy trick. All you need is your knife, and a Biro. Other plastic pen brands are available and just as good. You hold the pen on a table vertically, and rest the blade against it. If it slips, call Tim immediately! If it grips the barrel of the pen, stand down. You and your knife are OK, at least for a while.



The pen test

Tim likes carving and whittling and wood turning. He tells me that he's studied massage. Oh, hello, here we go. Then he confesses that he can't play the piano.

Tim, you're already multi-skilled and talented. Enough already! Oh, and he can juggle. Well, that's just showing off. Tim, we get the message. You like working with your hands. We manage to get back on track with my knives. Tim uses a water cooled stone to sharpen. It's a very gentle process. I was expecting sparks to fly, but instead, it's a soothing kind of whirring sound, with a light splish splashing.





After the knife has been sharpened, it's time for the paper test. It makes a delightful schook! sound. It's clean and smooth to the eye, but most of all, to the ear. I don't think I am exaggerating to say that the sound alone gives me a shiver of pleasure.



The A4 paper test

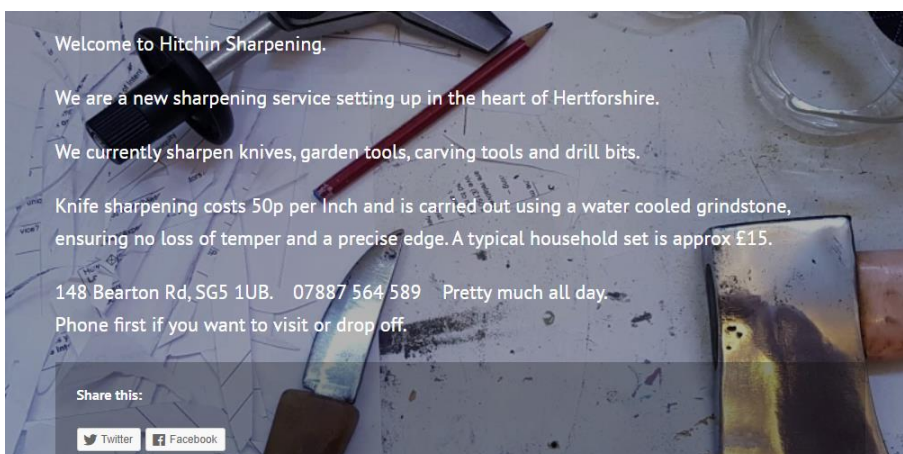
And then it's the plum tomato test. Now, I'm not saying that a tomato is necessarily putting a newly sharpened knife through its toughest test, but that's not the point. The first cut is the sweetest. Tim tells me that he loves being able to give everyone that feeling of 'Blimey, that was better than I ever expected'.



The plum tomato test

What can I say. I have seen the future and it is in sharp focus. Later that day, in the evening, I cut a carrot. And it is a glorious, beautiful experience. The carrot is blissfully butter soft and melts into batons. I text Tim. Now I understand, I tell him. Yes, he replies. It is genuinely pleasurable to use a sharp knife. We need to convert everyone! So gather up your Globals. Shepherd your Sabatiers. Make a pledge to transform your knives into a bevel of beauties. Contact Tim and come over to the sharp side. It's just a happier place to be.

4. Hitchin Sharpening



The home page of the website of Tim Keegan's company Hitchin Sharpening.

Hitchin is a market town in the North Hertfordshire district in Hertfordshire, England, with an estimated population of 33,350.

St. Mary's Church is remarkably large for a town of its size and was once a Minster. The size of the church is evidence of how Hitchin prospered from the wool trade. It is the largest parish church in Hertfordshire. Most of the church dates from the 15th century, with its tower dating from around 1190. During the laying of a new floor in the church in 1911, foundations of a more ancient church building were found. In form, they appear to be a basilican church of a 7th-century type, with a later enlarged chancel and transepts, perhaps added in the 10th century.



St. Mary's Church, Hitchin.