

# THE BRIT PACK

Beth Druce

A NEW BREED OF BRITISH WATCHMAKERS IS INJECTING STYLE AND KUDOS INTO THE WORLD OF HOROLOGY. SWR TALKED TO SOME OF THE MOVERS AND SHAKERS.



Roger Smith spends his working year invested in the production of less than a dozen timepieces. In his five-man workshop, the studio he founded in 2001 on the Isle of Man, the British dependent island to the west of England, every stage of the 34 elements of the watchmaking process are executed with a level of precision and meticulous complication that would pain the average person merely to comprehend. If one was seeking to equate the watch world to that of fashion, Smith would find himself firmly at the couture end of the scale.

"I was hopeless at school, but I've always had an obsession with detail", explains Manchester-born Smith, whose relationship with the late George Daniels has influenced and determined both his work and career to date. Indeed it is Smith's vehement "obsession" with detail that finds him heading up perhaps the most esteemed mechanical watchmaking company operating in Britain today.

Then there's the brothers of Bremont, whose Aviation-inspired timepieces, with their strong investment in technical functionality get every red-blooded male giddy with excitement. Founded following a flying accident during which they lost their father, Nick and Giles English channelled



► ABOVE: BREMONT'S NICK AND GILES ENGLISH

their love of aviation into horology, building a business that combines state of the art timepiece functionality with an adrenalin-fueled appetite for adventure sports. And that's not forgetting Schofield, whose eccentric detail-driven designs are a playful dalliance with founder Giles Ellis' rural Sussex homeland. Taking inspiration from the visual reference points found in the British countryside, everything from freshly ploughed fields to the flicker of a lighthouse is referenced in watches that are accompanied by straps and accessories that make for customisable, one-of-a-kind timepieces that have the kind of following that would put the Pied Piper to shame. All in all it points to the flourishing of an industry that, only a few years ago, was difficult to pinpoint. Since the late 1980s, when so marked was the improvement in accuracy created by Quartz technology that it single-handedly removed the demand for mass market mechanical watches, Britain's position within horology has been limited to say the least. While companies such as Dent and George Graham have done much to keep the clock ticking over,

what's pertinent about the new wave of British watchmakers is the attention they are attracting in the style stakes.

For Bremont, which produces approximately 4-5,000 units a year, the feat has been to produce a watch that combines technical function with a modern British aesthetic. Childhood memories of their father's eclectic collection of vintage watches from the likes of IWC and Omega as well as a Breitling won in a flying competition, provided inspiration for the distinctive Bremont blueprint, combining traditional aviation elements with a modern distinctive watch style.

While both brothers love the vintage style, the petite size wasn't something they wanted to replicate. Furthermore the aviation aesthetic dictated numerical digits rather than roman numerals. Thus the unmistakable style of the Bremont watch was born.

Their watches embody all the technical values and principles of Bremont 'Tested Beyond Endurance'. The ALT1-C Classic



brings together innovation and the 'centuries-old art of watchmaking', while the Supermarine 500, Bremont's diver model, features a sapphire bezel that provides 'luminosity in low light conditions'. Pairing function with style was a trait the Bremont boys learned from their father who "... had a big passion for clocks. It wasn't [as much] about the cogs and gears as it was the look", explains Nick English.

This fascination with function filters through every one of Bremont's chronometers, not least the MBI and MBII which are a collaboration with Martin Baker. The brief was a watch that would withstand an ejector seat and Martin Baker afforded them access to the facility where vibration testing and line of ejection could be explored. "We knew we were going to make a better watch out of it", says English. The MB watch is described as embodying all that is meant by 'made in Britain'; namely quirky, innovative technology alongside classic British styling. If all this talk of boys' toys leaves you cold, why not turn your attention to the Bremont Solo collection, arguably the jewel in the crown of their repertoire. Inspired by the classic pilot watches of the 1940s, it captures completely the essence of that era and as such it has become the timepiece of choice for women who desire a British watch. Building on its success Bremont will soon release a 37.00mm edition, smaller than the standard model and with the female customer in mind.

It was while attempting to make a bespoke watch for himself, that antiques restorer Giles Ellis stumbled into watchmaking. After four years building his timepiece he discovered he had all he needed to roll out the procedure on a much larger scale. This timely investment in finding the right suppliers to fulfill his own very specific requirements turned out to be the blueprint on which Schofield was founded: the

creation of a limited number of high quality timepieces that afford the client with a very novel form of customisation.

It might be a strap made from ventile (used for expeditions to Everest in the 1960s), remborde sharkskin or vintage suede, but with Schofield, the devil is in the small quirky detail, born out of Ellis' love for a defined and individual style. Schofield's debut into the watch market was with the Signalman, limited edition in two guises, black polished stainless steel and a smaller run of a DLC (diamond-like carbon) polished version. With a choice of straps, possibilities are broadened. Moreover the quality of Schofield accessories is of such an exceptionally high quality that they

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become desirable purchases in their own right, helping the client to tick the one-of-a-kind box.

For the man who covets a Roger Smith creation, a lengthy two year waiting list beckons, increasing to seven or eight for a bespoke piece. Much more than luxury timepieces, the R W Smith watch is the culmination of an enduring love affair between Smith and his craft, during which a strong bond is formed: "When you are

producing ten watches a year, each one comprises a huge part of that year's work. It's what helps us produce such unique watches, there is so much that goes into each one". R W Smith watches have a refined, classic aesthetic, one that Smith has championed in the creation of the Series 2, which he describes as 'the culmination of all my years' work.'

"When I was making my first pocket watch, I had the idea of a craft-based watch, a watch made to the highest possible standard", he explains. This was the inspiration for the Series 2; the exceptional quality and craftsmanship of vintage English pocket watches. Smith was intrigued by why such qualities had not been carried through with the introduction of the wristwatch, which remained a mass-produced piece. The Series 2 is Smith's attempt to rectify this, with its three-dimensional design reflecting the ethos of 'sculpting time' envisioned by his workshop.

On the question of making a purchase, English talks of how Bremont have "... a lot of guys who have done their research, and they come and they buy your watches. We've got collectors buying our watches who may have a Patek [Philippe] which they wear with their suit or their dinner jacket, but at the weekend they don't want to wear a Rolex or a well-known brand, they want something a bit quirky, a bit different. They want a 'made in England' watch, and for a collectors watch we're not ridiculously expensive, but the quality is there."

This new wave of British watchmaking also finds itself artfully engaged with the notion of a 'clubbable fellow'; the idea that the acquisition of a specific timepiece represents access to a certain social cache. While this is natural when timepieces are of a limited number, increasingly brands are capitalising on the appeal of a traditional gentleman's club as a way to articulate their





► ABOVE: BREMONT AND SCHOFIELD ARE LEADERS IN THE BRIT PACK.

demographic and secure their position in the market.

Luxury timepieces have long been one of the few areas of retail where men show a penchant for an indulgent purchase. At Schofield this means enquiries are made about products that haven't even been created yet, so keen are clients to have a stake in what the company is producing. It's much like those waiting lists that appear behind desks of boutiques the moment a new 'it-bag' is released by a fashion house. Men, it appears, also want to feel part of an exclusive club, via association with a brand: "They do", confirms Ellis, "and we milk that. We have cigars and we run limited edition products. We contact people individually via a bespoke email telling them this [product] has become available".

These products could be anything from a horse leather watch strap or a collector's cigar tube to a linen lanyard for the famous ACME Titanic Whistle that was made to accompany the Schofield Signalman wrist watch. Recently Schofield even made a set of hankies representing semaphore flags from linen that they stained using tea and

sea salt; apparently it's the first time a hanky has been successfully cut on the bias.

While Bremont might not be expanding their repertoire of accessories in this fashion, they are wholly invested in creating a sophisticated dialogue with their clientele. A recent advert in the UK Financial Times luxury supplement 'How to Spend it', rather than pandering to the glitz and glamour usually associated with the magazine played on the wry English sense of humour, while simultaneously styling itself on the more understated British ad campaigns of years gone by. English is keen to point out that compared to Rolex, for example, Bremont are not necessarily an aspirational brand. "The guy who buys a Bremont knows we are a luxury brand. We don't have to keep shouting out that we are luxury, it's all about the product."

If fashion in the UK is increasingly looking to bring production back home, then the hot topic for watchmaking is the sticky issue of manufacture. Bremont opens a new workshop in Henley-on-Thames in December, a development that has enabled all their watches to be assembled in the UK (the movements are still produced in Switzerland). At the moment, Schofield watches are manufactured in Germany,

however Ellis says he is "absolutely striving" towards re-shoring.

R W Smith might exist in a market of its own, yet Smith himself is not indifferent to the transformation that's happening in horology "We're witnessing the very first stages of a possible (UK) watchmaking industry. I hope and feel it will happen, but it will probably take Swiss skill and engineering. It will probably be a long time away because at the moment all the skills are in Switzerland. We'll see how it goes. I'm trying to put the making back into English watchmaking." His allegiance to the cause is infectious, it seems: "We all have to thank Bremont for putting English watchmaking back on the map", exclaims Ellis. "They have a huge influence and now we have an industry where journalists are writing articles about British watchmaking. That couldn't have happened five years ago."

What characterises the new mood of British watchmaking is the stir it's causing. These new brands are redefining the 'made in Britain' label by successfully gauging the direction in which the luxury market is moving. Yes these are watches that are stylish, functional and desirable, of course, but they are also timepieces that set the tone for a new watchmaking era. ■