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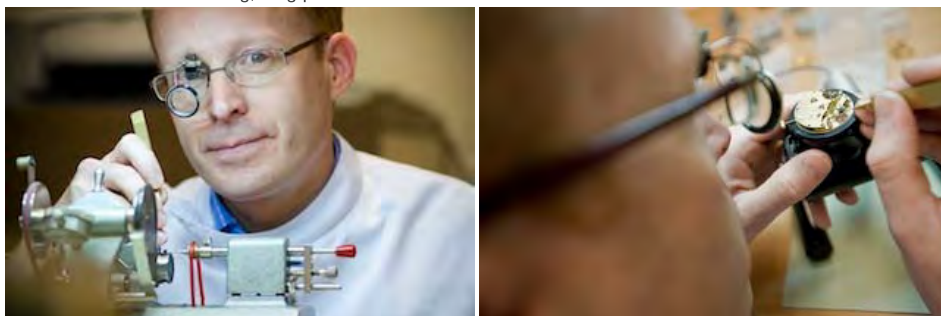
Roger Smith: WHAT MAKES ROGER SMITH TICK?

Isle of Man master-watchmaker Roger Smith produces only 10 watches a year. The apprentice to the late George Daniels shares his thoughts on watchmaking and speaks about why he cannot afford to buy one of his own watches. Seth Rowden talks to Roger to find out what makes him tick

"Well, it was wanting to prove to George that I could do it. It's also not wanting to be seen to fail." Roger Smith is a softly spoken man from Bolton who now produces some of the finest watches in the world. "My first watch took a year and a half to make, and George told me that it looked too handmade and that I should start again. There was only one option . . . I was in so deep. I don't know what it is, I suppose determination?"

Roger studied at Manchester School of Horology. The course was mainly focused on the repair of watches and clocks. George Daniels came to visit the workshop in Roger's second year, and made an impression on him that would change the course of his life. "When I saw his pocket watch, I couldn't believe how anybody could make a watch from start to finish completely by hand. That really grabbed my imagination. I started making my first watch a couple of years later using George's book, which is called *Watchmaking*. Basically, it is a guide, an incredible book, which tells you how to make a watch from start to finish," Roger says. "Without him being there, I wouldn't have been making watches."

The idea of making a watch from start to finish was a completely new idea. There have been people who have attempted it, usually badly. "The whole idea, where one person would decide to make a watch, had never ever happened before. This is a completely new approach to watchmaking. Previously, it was all divided between 30 to 35 different trades. It's a long, long process."



Photographs: Roger Smith in his workshop (above).

After Roger's first meeting with George, he wrote a letter to ask if he would offer him an apprenticeship. When he was 18-years-old, he was invited to George's workshop on the Isle of Man. "Basically he said: 'Look, watchmaking at this level — you can't teach it. If you're passionate and you really want to do it then you will find it easy and you will do it. There is no point sitting here with me telling you to get this file or that component. File a little bit of here and there. It's not what it's about. You have to be passionate. It has to be all consuming.' I understand where he was coming from with that. Especially now I have struggled through all that, I can see his point."

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TRAFALGAR ONE



George rejected Roger as an apprentice, instead preferring to give him advice and let him continue to develop under his own motivation. If it was proof George was looking for, it came nearly seven years later. Roger says, "I made two watches over a seven year period, trying to prove to him that I was capable, or able, should I say. Eventually he offered me a job working with him. That was the Holy Grail, you couldn't get better than that." The subtleties of George's art would only be discernable to a master watchmaker. As George's only student, Roger is the perfect person to explain the significance of George Daniels's name in the world of horology.

"George started making pocket watches back in the '60s when the quartz revolution was starting. The whole Swiss industry was gearing up to throwing out all the equipment, machinery and knowledge that had built them into what they were. George, who had devoted his whole life to mechanical watches, was furious at this." I ask Roger about his own views on quartz watches, and he explains, "There is nothing nicer than hearing a mechanical watch ticking. They are alive, they have a pulse, they have a personality. You never, ever get that from a quartz. You just can't form that same connection because they are so regular, a bit flat really."



Photographs: Open Dial (above left), Series 2 Movement (above right).

With the whole industry under pressure to change, George focused his attention on improving the mechanical timekeeper. Like with all work relating to watches, time passed slowly and, 25 years later, George had the answer. "He knew that the current escapement, invented by an Englishman called Thomas Mudge 200-odd years before, had a major problem with it, which was the lubrication. It was totally reliant on lubrication. With the level escapement, as the lubrication deteriorates, it effects the rate of timekeeping. George thought that there was a better solution to this." After many years of trying and failing, his solution was the invention of the co-axial escapement. Initially rejected by the Swiss industry, the superiority of George's escapement was eventually recognised by Omega, who introduced it to their watches in 1999.

George's contribution to horology is recognised to be one of the greatest developments in the last 250 years, and has continued to influence watchmakers ever since. "George proved to these people that it is possible to make watches outside of the Swiss industry. People just didn't think it was possible. It's incredible really, it has touched so many areas of horology."

The difference between independent watchmakers like Roger, and the Swiss industry, is notable. Roger is evidently passionate about watches and about furthering the art of horology, and is not in the least bit interested in mass-producing watches. "It's a different philosophy. You go to Basel nowadays and it's beautiful to see, but it has become almost like a fashion industry. People try to re-invent the watch every six months."

Roger's philosophy is the complete opposite of this. When I ask him how many watches he has made, he estimates that there have probably been only fifty-five watches that have left his workshop since he started making them in 2006. With only ten watches being made each year, there is a two to three year waiting list for the standard Series 2 watch. Unique commissions currently take approximately eight years to develop and two to three years to make. This immediately rules out buyers who want instant gratification.



Photographs: 40mm Red Gold (above left), 40mm White Gold (above right).

So who does buy a Roger Smith watch? "My clients have generally learnt a lot about watches from buying mass-produced. There are some excellent makers out there. So, they have learnt a lot from that process and have come to me because they see something very different, very unique, and they are wanting something which is so incredibly specialised." Making watches of this quality, outside of the main industry, means that a Roger Smith watch appeals only to those who are serious about the art of horology.

Although Britain might not be known for its watch industry, this wasn't always the case. Roger tells me that there used to be a wonderful tradition of watchmaking in England, and that you can still buy mechanical watches by English watchmakers that are 200 to 300 years old, restore them, and they will probably work as well as they did when they were first made. This sort of quality is rarely seen in a modern mechanical watch, and is unachievable to the same level when they are mass-produced.

As we discuss the development of the Series 2 watch, Roger explains that his original intention was to put some of the design and quality back into the modern mechanical watch. "The styling, in my view, has been taken away from watchmaking. With the Series 2, I wanted to put some of this design and quality back into the mechanical watch. Then my philosophy developed and I wanted this very three dimensional look. I'm just excited by ticking!" The Series 2 Open Dial evolved from this, and Roger speaks about the three dimensional elements in this model as if he is an architect. He explains that an incredible amount of time and perfection goes into making components that are often hidden from sight, and he wanted to show these off. "I want to see lots of interest, lots of heights, lots of different colours and contrasts and metal finishes. I wanted to show people what we are doing, which goes beyond anything you can buy in the mass-produced world."

The hours and skill that goes into hand-making each individual component to this quality comes at a cost. The Series 2 watch starts at about £85,000, but the unique commissions can cost considerably more than this. "It depends on the specifications, but the unique commissions start at about £300,000. There is one piece that I am starting work on that will probably end up costing about £750,000 by the end of it. But, that's an incredibly complicated — well, completely new type of watch. It is very unique and is incredibly involving."

Considering the time it takes Roger to make each piece, I ask him if he develops an emotional attachment to each watch, and if it is difficult for him to let go when it is time to hand-deliver it to its new owner. He seems to share a similar philosophy to George when it comes to possession and ownership. "George bought and sold watches and clocks throughout his life. He thought it was just good enough to hold it for a particular period and then you just pass it on to the next person to enjoy. He didn't really like, or agree with, museums. He wanted these watches and clocks to be out there and enjoyed. It's a great way to think, isn't it?" I agreed that it was.

There is one last question I want to ask him. What watch does he wear? "I wear a Rolex every day. It's a brilliant watch." Surely he wears a Roger Smith watch on special occasions? "Well, unfortunately I don't have my own yet. I can't afford one at the moment."

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