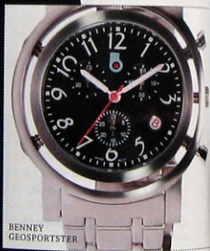


alive and ticking

WATCH OUT, SWITZERLAND. AFTER DECADES IN THE DOLDRUMS, BRITAIN'S WATCHMAKERS ARE BACK MAKING CLASSY AND INVENTIVE TIMEPIECES



ROGER W SMITH SERIES 2



BENNEY GEOSPORTSTER



DENT MINISTRY



ROGERS LONDON THE ART SERIES



BREMONT MB

Mention mechanical watches and most people immediately think of Switzerland, but it was we Brits, dammit, who came up with most of the good ideas. Just as we used to make the best motorcycles, the best cars and the best ships before Johnny Foreigner came along and did the same thing only, er, better, so we were pioneers in the world of horological invention.

If you want some evidence, it is only necessary to cut along to the wonderful yet relatively little-known Clockmakers' Museum at London's Guildhall where you'll discover that Robert Hooke invented the balance spring (c. 1660), George Graham introduced the sweep seconds hand (1700a), Thomas Mudge created the lever escapement (1765) and that John Harwood patented the first self-winding movement (1924). There are more examples, but let's not labour the point.

BRAND REVIVAL

It was the arrival of the Japanese quartz movement during the 1960s, however, that led British watchmaking to sink almost without trace. But now things are changing. During the past five years there has been a long-overdue revival that has seen the establishment of several new UK-based brands. Before going any further, however, we should perhaps explain that the Swiss watch industry is so dominant that while the names discussed here have

their roots in this country, in many cases they have been forced to look to Switzerland for the component-making and assembly skills required to make their vision become reality.

One of the most notable British brands is Bremont, which was established just three years ago by the aptly named brothers Nick and Giles English, a pair of highly respected display pilots who have been flying vintage aircraft since their teens. They decided to start the company partly as a tribute to their late father, Euan English, who died while practising for an air display in 1995. He had been a lover of quality watches and was a talented engineer.

'There just appeared to be a gap for a watch brand that had a British heart', explains Nick English. 'It seemed strange that a

country that is still an incredible nation in terms of producing things and was once so renowned for building the best of everything, from motorcycles to aero engines, wasn't calling on its heritage in terms of watchmaking. We had to go to Switzerland to find the production facilities we needed, but all our cases are finished in the UK by a company that makes components for Formula One cars.'

Bremont watches are all chronometer-certified, the range now comprising chronograph and time-only models, the excellent Supermarine (see our dive watch feature) and a new, ultra-shockproof model called the MB, which has been developed in conjunction with British jetplane seat maker Martin-Baker.

Dent is another new enterprise that has made quite an impact on the market after being revived a couple of years ago. The London-based brand takes its name and philosophy from the celebrated 19th-century English clockmaker Edward Dent, whose timepieces were carried by Charles Darwin on HMS Beagle. Most notably, however, it was Dent who constructed the Great Clock (aka Big Ben) for the Houses of Parliament during the 1850s. As a result, the current Dent watches lines are named Ministry and Parliament.

Another thoroughly British brand is Rogers London, established last year by Irishman Gregory Rogers, whose love of the rectangular, curved Rolex models of the 1920s and 1930s inspired him to design something similar carrying his own name on the dial. The result is The Art Series, a range of beautifully finished bespoke watches that are exquisitely decorated by a Clerkenwell engraver.

The blue steel hands are also fabricated in London, along with the crystals and straps – and the presentation boxes are made either by a craftsman in Dorset or by aristocrat joiner David Linley. Prices range from £16,500 for basic automatic models to £45,000 for tourbillon versions.

Simon Benney, silversmith to the House of Commons and the Royal Family, has also launched his own watch line, the signature design feature of which is a case made from two steel rings interlocked with sprung 'shock absorbers'. The Geosportster (men) and Geostart (women) models have Swiss-made quartz movements and are made in-house.

But if you insist on your watch being entirely made by Brits as well as conceived by them, your best bet is to visit the Isle of Man with around £42,000 and ask for Roger W Smith. This young horological genius is currently working on his simple yet stunning-looking Series 2 range of wristwatches, more than 95% of the components for which are made in-house.

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