

Britain looks to Roger Smith

Isle of Man-based maker lends skills to campaign, writes *Kate Youde*

When it comes to symbols of what makes Britain great, luxury watches might not spring to mind.

Yet the UK government has chosen Roger Smith, the watchmaker, for an international marketing campaign showcasing the best of British – from sport to heritage, creativity to innovation. The UK luxury watch industry is estimated to be worth £1.1bn, according to research by GfK Retail and Technology UK (see also page 14).

Launched in February 2012 to maximise the economic benefits of hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games in London last summer, the GREAT Britain campaign aims to boost growth and jobs by promoting the UK as a place to visit and study, invest and do business in. By the end of March 2013, the campaign claims, it had delivered a return of about £550m on the government's initial investment of £37m.

The campaign is being used in 134 locations around the world and funds activities and events in important markets such as the Bric countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), the US, France, Germany, Turkey, South Korea, Indo-

nesia, Mexico and the emerging economies of Europe.

Mr Smith and his small team in the Isle of Man spent almost a year making a new watch – mostly by hand – for use at campaign events.

The timepiece has a platinum case, silver dial featuring the Union Jack flag and blued steel hands. It uses Mr Smith's version of the coaxial escapement designed by his late mentor, George Daniels, the British horologist, and combines traditional techniques with modern methods.

"It's showing that inventiveness and ingenuity are still very strong in Britain," says Mr Smith, who will hand over the watch later this month.

While the unique timepiece would cost about £180,000 to buy, the watchmaker is lending it to the campaign for free. He hopes his investment of time and effort will pay off. With the prestige to be gained from representing Britain, he recognises a business case for taking part in terms of publicity and reaching influential people in different markets.

His client base is mostly in Britain, the US, China and Hong Kong. "Apart



Delicate: the timepiece was mostly handmade

from in the local airport here [in the Isle of Man] we don't do any advertising," he says. "This [campaign] has a reach right into the centre of the business worldwide. That, to me, is exciting."

The way that Roger Smith's studio makes watches restricts the volume it can produce so his involvement in the campaign is about gaining awareness for his work. "We are making 10 pieces a year but there are ideas and [expansion] plans for the future," he adds.

"They are some years away, but nevertheless this is all good groundwork for future ideas."

Conrad Bird, director of the GREAT campaign, hopes to display the watch at events particularly in countries where British luxury goods are "seen to be highly prized" such as China, Singapore, Hong Kong and Russia. An accompanying film, promoted across the campaign's digital platforms, will explain the innovation, technology and craftsmanship behind the watch.

Mr Bird says the campaign is trying to change perceptions by presenting both the familiar and the surprising about Britain.

"The watch itself makes a lovely story because it does alter people's perceptions of the UK, that actually it isn't just in Switzerland, the home of watchmaking, that beautiful, amazing watches of this kind can be made," he says.

"If we can promote it correctly" Mr Bird adds, "we would love to use it as a symbol to encourage people to invest in watchmaking in the UK." The campaign may even promote the watch to the Swiss. "Switzerland is not one of our key markets but I could see, humorously, that if we could make it work there it would be a wonderful thing," says Mr Bird.