



FASHION & STYLE | SPECIAL REPORT: WATCHES

Perfecting a National Symbol

By SARAH WHITEHEAD FEB. 24, 2014

RAMSEY, Isle of Man — When the horologist Roger Smith received a request from 10 Downing Street, the British prime minister’s office, to make a wristwatch for a national marketing campaign, he thought it was an opportunity to put a new face on an old tradition.

Holding up the finished watch in January, in his Isle of Man workshop, Mr. Smith pointed to its silver dial, decorated with a motif recalling the British flag, known as the Union Jack.

“The complexity of the dial is what I’m most proud of,” he said. “We went to extraordinary lengths to make it resemble the flag — that took three months.”

The dial is composed of 34 parts, making it one of the most complex ever fashioned by hand.

“Roger is the current guardian of a method of making watches that is completely unique,” said Justin Koullapis, co-founder of the vintage watch retailer Watchclub, in London, and a self-taught watch repairer who has taught at the watch school at Birmingham City University.

“Every part that is possible to be made by hand is made by hand,” Mr. Koullapis said. “He starts with a pile of metal and turns it into a watch.”

“Everyone loves the idea of a bespoke suit because it is unique and such craftsmanship is a rarity — it is no different with watches,” Mr. Koullapis added. “Roger is a master of every single discipline. We have only had two or three people in the past 300 years who have done that.”

When the government wanted to spotlight a craftsman epitomizing

Britain's traditional industrial skills for its "GREAT Britain" marketing campaign, Mr. Smith was a natural choice, said Conrad Bird, the campaign's director.

"Watchmaking is a unique niche industry, one of many sectors we want the GREAT campaign to help highlight," he said.

The dial, and every single component of the watch movement, was made by hand in the watchmaker's workshop, "drawing on over 300 years of British watchmaking history," he said.

"Britain did pioneer many of the developments in time-keeping instruments," said Alan Middleton, curator and librarian of the British Horological Institute. "This is often forgotten."

British clock and watchmakers have been responsible for some of the most important developments in watchmaking over the centuries: In 1664, Robert Hooke perfected the balance spring; in the next century John Harrison made the first marine chronometers; in 1924, John Harwood developed the self-winding movement. In 1974, George Daniels invented the co-axial escapement, a design that virtually eliminated sliding friction, increasing accuracy and reducing the need for lubrication in watch movements.

Mr. Smith, who was born in Manchester, England, apprenticed with Mr. Daniels and became his heir, learning from him the full range of watchmaking skills and inheriting his workshop on the Isle of Man when Mr. Daniels died in 2011.

One of the most significant components of Mr. Smith's watch for the marketing campaign is his own evolution of Mr. Daniels's iconic co-axial escapement, a game-changing invention that reduced friction within a watch to almost zero.

Finding a way to make Mr. Daniels's invention dramatically lighter, Mr. Smith has produced a movement that can oscillate faster with reduced momentum forces, making it even more accurate.

The Isle of Man, halfway between the English mainland and Ireland, is far from Britain's industrial heartland. But it was once the center of an ancient Celtic trading empire and — equidistant among England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales — it offers an unexpectedly

fitting setting for a symbol of a national craft tradition.

The GREAT campaign, which began in 2012 alongside preparations for the London Olympic Games, “aims to raise international awareness of the country’s unique assets,” Mr. Bird said. “Roger Smith’s watches are the first production watches to have been designed and made entirely within the British Isles for over 50 years.”

The watch is technically “very advanced,” he added, “but it shows old-fashioned hand-craftsmanship, quality and an approach to watchmaking that I think is quite rare in modern mechanical watchmaking today.”

Mr. Smith, working with a team of seven, produces just 10 watches a year. “Financially it’s been a long road, and we nearly went bust quite a few times,” he said.

Still, standing by his principles has paid off: Now “we have a constant waiting list of clients,” he said. “I think as our world has become more saturated with technology, people are increasingly taking pleasure in seeing a watch that has been almost entirely handmade. People who come to us love the fact that every piece has been made from scratch.

“You don’t get that story with a Quartz watch.”

The workshop is a rare sight in today’s world. In one room, a craftsman is engraving the surface of a piece of silver, soon to become a dial, turning the handle of an iron machine dating from the 1820s. Mr. Daniels refurbished the machine after finding it in an old factory in Clerkenwell — once the heart of London’s watchmaking and jewelry district.

“Today, nearly all watch dials are pattern-stamped,” Mr. Smith said, “but George mastered the trade of hand-turning these patterns. We continue to use it because it is still the best way.”

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