

# THE SPECTATOR

A GUIDE TO LUXURY AND STYLE

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# Our finest HOUR

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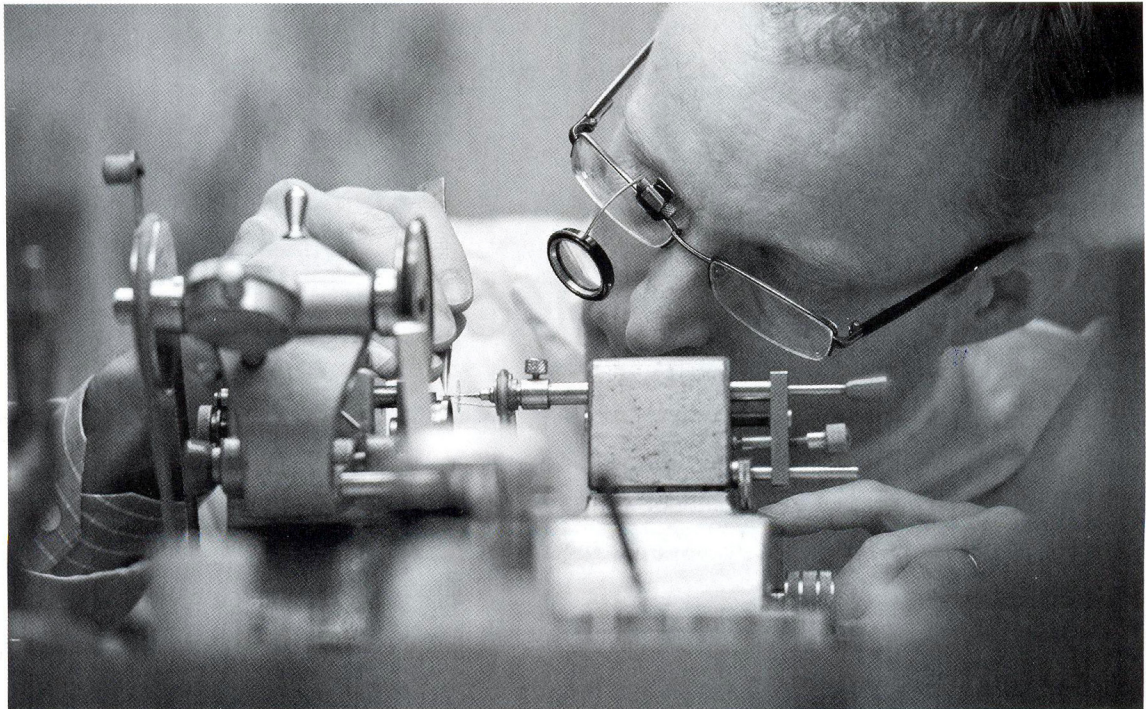


Image courtesy of Roger W. Smith Ltd



When talk turns to watches, the inclination is to think Swiss – but it is English horologists who have been responsible for most of the really important developments in the history of mechanical timekeeping. Dr Robert Hooke perfected the balance spring in 1664; Peter and Jacob Debaufre were the first to use jewelling 40 years later; George Graham developed the sweep seconds hand in the 1750s; Thomas Prest made the first keyless winding watch in 1820 and John Harwood patented the self-winding movement back in 1924.

Most of these names have been lost in the mists of time to all but the most ardent horolophiles, but now the world seems to be waking up to Britain's horological heritage and demand is steadily growing

for watches with a decidedly English flavour.

Those that are made in the true 'English' way are, however, few and far between. In order to get one, you'll need to look to the Isle of Man which has been the home of Dr George Daniels since 1982. Dr Daniels has come to be regarded by many as the world's greatest living watchmaker thanks to a career that began more than 60 years ago. His greatest claim to fame is the invention of the co-axial escapement that is, to be technically correct, 'unaffected by changes in the viscosity of its lubricant'.

The mechanism, which was invented by Dr Daniels in 1975, is now used in all of Omega's best products and is about to be celebrated in a limited run of 35 wristwatches being handmade by Dr Daniels and his colleague Roger Smith, his protégé who is also based on the island.

## Great British watchmakers

### BREMONT

The English brothers, Nick and Giles, launched Bremont in 2007. Inspired by their father Euan English, the brothers' mission was to create 'quintessentially English Swiss watches'. Their watches are made using Swiss components and assembled in Biel-Bienne, in Switzerland; but they are designed to look and feel British.

The English brothers are keen pilots, so their watches are inspired by aeronautical designs.

### OMEGA

1848 was a year of political revolution; it was also the year that Omega arrived on the scene and started to shape the watchmaking industry. Since then the brand has produced models for six lunar landings; the first drivers' watch; and also the only certified marine chronometer wristwatch.

### IWI

IWI watches – with their oversized crown and classic dial – are made with the great days of motorsport in mind. Designed by Ian Walsh, these watches are considered idiosyncratic by some, but they have also been described as modern classics.

### DR ROBERT HOOKE (1635-1703)

Described as 'England's Leonardo', Hooke, a natural philosopher, architect and inventor, was a leading protagonist of the scientific revolution. Yet as well as discovering a law of elasticity (Hooke's law), writing *Micrographia* and being the originator of the term 'cell', Hooke found time to invent the balance spring watch.

### PETER AND JACOB DEBAUFRE

Along with Nicolas Facio, Peter and Jacob Debaufre invented jewel bearings for watches and patented the idea in 1704. Originally, natural jewels were used, such as sapphire, ruby and garnet.

'As well as marking the 35th anniversary of the co-axial escapement I would like these watches to help put the Isle of Man on the map as the place to go if you want to buy a completely handmade watch in the English style,' says Dr Daniels.

Typical features of the English style are frosted movement plates, silver engine-turned dials, and jewels set in gold chatons rather than directly into the movement baseplate. The watches that emerge from the workshops of Roger Smith are all finished in this way and, as a result, cost upwards of £72,000 (the Daniels Anniversary pieces are expected to be priced at £142,000 apiece).

But it is possible to buy a wristwatch that offers some solid English heritage for considerably less. The young Bremont brand, for example, was launched in 2007 by the aptly named English brothers, Nick and Giles. Headquartered in Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, Bremont designs, tests, finishes and assembles a significant number of its watches here in the UK, notably the £2,850 'MB2' model that was developed in conjunction with British ejection-seat manufacturer Martin Baker.

Up in the Lancashire mill town of Darwen, meanwhile, Ian Walsh creates his IWI watches designed for aviation and motorsport enthusiasts. The time-only and chronograph models combine English-made parts with quality Swiss components and are assembled in Walsh's workshops. The latest £3,295 chronograph features an unusual leather cuff into which the watch case is set without the use of lugs.

Even Ireland has its hidden horologists in the form of the McGonigle brothers, John and Stephen, who trained at the Irish Swiss Institute of Horology (and we haven't made that up) before decamping to the Jura mountains to practice their craft. They returned to their native Athlone a few years ago and now create interesting tourbillon pieces costing upwards of €120,000 that use the best Swiss-sourced components.

Most of the watches they produce are personalised for clients, but all feature Celtic-style script on the main plates and decoration in the form of symbols from the ancient Ogham Irish alphabet. Their artist sister Frances helped to create the distinctive design of the McGonigle timepiece, which the brothers describe as 'being identifiable as Irish – but without leprechauns or four-leaf clovers'.



Bremont's Ship Chronometer depicted