



The great *apprentice*

THERE'S LITTLE DOUBT THAT ROGER SMITH PRODUCES THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HANDMADE WATCHES IN THE WORLD, BUT WHAT REALLY MAKES HIM TICK? MIKE FRANCE MEETS THE MAN WHO LEARNT HIS TRADE UNDER THE STEWARDSHIP OF THE GREATEST WATCHMAKER OF THEM ALL, GEORGE DANIELS

Roger W Smith is the brightest hope of the British watchmaking industry. From his modest-looking studio in the Isle of Man, Smith's company produces just ten timepieces a year, following the methods of George Daniels CBE, the master watchmaker who devised 34 disciplines that a horologist must master to produce a timepiece entirely on his own.

It should come as no surprise that Smith's methods follow Daniels' so strictly. As a teenager, he was enrolled at the Manchester School of Horology, given a copy of Daniels' classic *Watchmaking* book and went on to build his own pocket watch from scratch, a process that took two years.

After showing it to Daniels – and being told that it looked “handmade” – Smith went back to work on a second model, one that took five years to create. Taking it to Daniels once more, this time the master watchmaker gave it his seal of approval and invited the Mancunian to the Isle of Man to become his apprentice. Roger set up his own studio there in 2001.

In 2011, Daniels died, and it was left to Smith to carry on his work. Today, Roger's watches, like the Series 2, are regarded as some of the best in the world, unsurpassed in their elegance and mechanical ingenuity. Here, Christopher Ward co-founder Mike France speaks to Roger about Daniels, Swiss mass production and the future of British watchmaking.

MF: Hi Roger. So, why watchmaking?

RS: I'd always been practical and excelled at making models and working with my hands. My dad was interested in antiques, and I loved going around and meeting antiques dealers. Clock-and watch-repairing were related to that world.

After reading *Watchmaking*, you decided to learn the “Daniels Method” of watchmaking. An intimidating task, surely?

To me it seemed reasonable, really. Here was a man I first met aged 17 and he pulled out this pocket watch which was astonishing. I read his book, and I re-read it several times. At first ➔

Smith uses antique watchmaking machinery that once belonged to his mentor, George Daniels





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I thought it was impossible, but I became convinced I could make a watch by hand. Was Daniels dismissive when you took him your first watch?

Yes, he was very disappointed when he saw it. He did rally slightly and say I had a watch that was working, but I had to concentrate on making a watch that looked nice, that was a beautiful piece of work. That’s what I did for the next five years.

What was your aim? Did you want to work with him?

Of course I was hoping that would happen. Initially, I wrote to him at the age of 19 and asked if he’d apprentice me but he told me to go away and make a watch. I was trying to prove myself to him. I trained as a repairer of quartz watches, but that really didn’t excite me, it worried me that I could be spending the rest of my life repairing watches.

Moving on to today, you said in your speech at Salon QP that you think there’s a lot of PR puff around British watchmaking?

Yes, there’s a distinct lack of honesty. My comments on that day were out frustration on what’s being said about watchmaking. Open a magazine and every watchmaker is a great watchmaker. It’s damaging the new era in British watchmaking. We should all be honest and open. There’s no shame in buying a Swiss movement – after all they’re the best at making mechanisms.

They’re the only people who’ve industrialised that level of quality...

They’re creating a wonderful product. That’s why many people in England are using their

mechanisms. We can never touch the Swiss, but if we can start being honest and open, it’s a way of starting something new.

What needs to happen so we can get to a point where we can manufacture movements in this country that are affordable?

The education in the watch industry is good, but it’s generally orientated toward watch repairing, which is never going to give people a helping hand toward making watches. The Daniels method gives somebody a foundation in building timepieces – it enables the person to visualise a complete watch.

Where’s that being taught?

The only place it’s being taught is here in the studio. We have six people and they’re being indoctrinated into that education on a daily basis, but it’s a tiny drop in the ocean.

Perhaps the only thing we can aim for in Britain is intellectual leadership. We won’t see an industry like Switzerland...

The Swiss are great at what they’re doing, making mass produced, high quality mechanisms

What the British have always been great at is the hand-crafted side of things. If you look at luxury goods like Bentley, Rolls-Royce or even Brompton folding bicycles, they’re getting a worldwide audience. There’s room for British watchmaking at a handcrafted level.

At Christopher Ward, we have a low cost model that allows people to access high quality watches. How do you price yours? People have said I could charge anything,

Smith’s Series 2 watches can take up to two years to make, all of which are inspired by the beautiful movements created by George Daniels

but it’s a world I don’t understand. I’m comfortable with our prices. If I added another name on the dial they’d be a lot more expensive, but our clients understand what we’re doing and it seems to work.

Not like George Daniels, only selling to people he liked then...

Ha-ha! I haven’t exactly refused... it’s almost self selective. We’re not in a world of easy money.

We don’t get celebrities. People have to wait for it, they like my story. My clients are self-made businessmen and they’ve created wealth. They’re all fascinating.

Have you got any grandiose plans for your company?

Well, we make ten watches a year, but can’t see us making more than that because it’s so labour-intensive. It takes about nine months for each piece.

What’s the hardest part of the process?

There’s no individual part, it’s a culmination of all them, particularly when you get to the finishing. Every part has been hand-finished. One lapsed moment could set you back hours, sometimes days. It’s about bringing everything to that pinnacle.

Finally, do have any unfulfilled ambitions?

What I’m trying to do is create a body of work. To remind people how watches can be made – and were made in the past. There’s still a lot to do.

