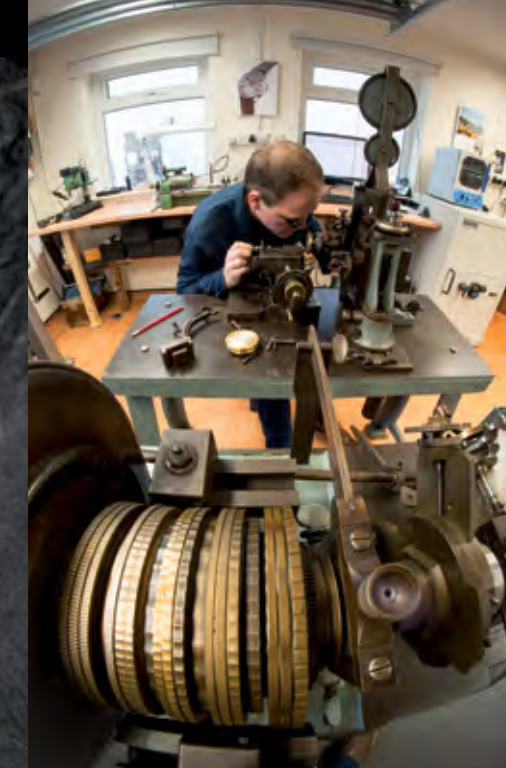


# BRITISH WATCHMAKING The Roger W. Smith Way

BY KEN KESSLER



As recently as 15 years ago, the notion of a “British watch industry” was strictly a memory or a fantasy. There was none, save for George Daniels making his remarkable one-offs in the Isle of Man, with the help of a young man named Roger W. Smith. The once-mighty British watch industry, responsible for the very foundation of timekeeping before the Swiss took over, had vanished.

What is now regarded as a rebirth started with a handful of historical British names being revived, with Arnold and Graham surviving the initial flurry of optimism. They have been joined by a number of all-new names, sufficient enough to demonstrate the presence of a trend that has inspired many column inches.

What we have yet to see, however, is a replacement for a commercially substantial, mass-market company like Smiths, the last major British watch manufacturer of mechanical timepieces (though quartz-powered fashion brands with British names remain plentiful). Instead, the new forces that have appeared so far are boutique-sized specialists, ranging from the Smiths-based creations of Robert Loomes to Bremont’s cheeky challenge to Swiss houses that targets buyers of pilots’ watches.

But matters are not clear cut – if anything, the revival in British watchmaking has been controversial as well as divisive. It has led to heated debates among enthusiasts as to what constitutes a British manufacturer. Simply put, British watchmaking is more of a cultural phenomenon than a return to the days when Great Britain was the most powerful manufacturer of timepieces

in the world. But it is a force nonetheless, and a source of pride for those who know that most of the greatest developments in watchmaking came from English watchmakers.

For this series, which could last a dozen installments based just on the British names we can count today, we must look beyond a definition of British watchmaking as actually manufacturing timepieces to a greater or lesser degree on British soil, because precious few qualify under those terms. This is the bone of contention that has

may not be enough either: one might argue that a brand should have a British office, pay taxes in the UK, or employ sufficient British staff to qualify.

But where do we draw the line? Greubel Forsey is half-British, half-French and based entirely in Switzerland. Peter Speake-Marin is so English that he names his watches “Piccadilly,” yet his company is best described as an Anglo-Swiss hybrid. Peter Roberts uses all-Swiss parts and assembles his watches there, as well as in Canterbury; with utter clarity and conviction, he

knows? If enough support is shown to these flag-wavers, maybe we’ll see British-made movements proliferate once more.

**ROGER SMITH**

It is fitting that the first issue of *Revolution’s* UK edition features the launch of a series celebrating the current state of British watchmaking. It is also apt that the inaugural figure is Roger W. Smith. One might assume that he was chosen because of his stature as a true master watchmaker, but that is only part of the reasoning.

As much as Roger is to be regarded as the standard bearer for British watchmaking, his story is unique, and his creations of such a rarefied nature that – if anything – he is wholly *atypical*. Rather, Roger represents an ideal that few can copy. It is precisely his role as the guardian and perpetuator of the late George Daniels’ remarkable legacy that places him apart from the rest of the British watchmaking industry. Moreover, his outspokenness has led to the need for the industry – as well as *Revolution* – to define what is British watchmaking in the 21st Century.

Although Roger’s tale has been told before, it bears brief recounting here, for it is one of watch lore’s greatest fantasies come true. Simply put, Roger chose as his mentor – as much as this mentor chose Roger to be his apprentice – the legend that was Dr. George Daniels. Arguably the greatest watchmaker since Breguet, Daniels was the first to master what he defined as the 32 “trades” needed to complete a watch singlehandedly. Daniels was the first watchmaker to produce every single component. He has been succeeded by Roger W. Smith, who – under George’s guidance – mastered those 32 disciplines.

While studying at the Manchester School of Horology, Roger first met George Daniels after a lecture in 1987. It was, in his own words, “a life-changing moment”: After viewing Daniels’ masterpiece pocket watch, *The Space Traveller*, Roger was inspired to pursue the art of producing a handmade watch.

Roger finished his formal studies in 1989, receiving the British Horological Institute’s Bronze Medal for “the most outstanding student in the final year.” He would present his watches to Daniels for counsel and approval, starting with his No. 1 handmade pocket watch, fitted with a one-minute tourbillon and detent escapement. While Daniels

proudly proclaims his brand as Anglo-Swiss, too.

Instead of discouraging this increased activity by insisting too much on purist values, or unrealistic expectations, we wish to encourage it – but with a critical eye. As the brands are quite open about their offshore input, we shall use that as a basis for explaining their intent. Perhaps unusually, this series will concentrate more on the people than the watches they produce.

If there’s a British heart beating somewhere in there, then it is by definition a British watchmaker to which it gives life. Schofield, it should be remembered, unashamedly signed “Made In Germany” on the dials of their first watches – but the watches are as British as the tweeds in their straps. Meridian’s watches carry a map on the caseback with England its dominant country. Who

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fuelled the debates: purists are unforgiving in demanding the same levels of manufacturing that one expects of any established, long-running Swiss house.

But this, in itself, is not enough to dismiss the groundswell of new and exciting British brands anymore than a change of ownership undermines a company’s national status. Does anyone think of Bentley or Rolls-Royce as anything other than British, even though both brands are now German?

Rather, the umbrella of “British watchmaking” covers a cultural phenomenon as much as it is a watchmaking rebirth. All that we seek is an element of genuine “Britishness,” whether it is the “eccentric chap” personified by Schofield or the “Chocks away!” attitude of Bremont. But that



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regarded it as a good first attempt, he encouraged Roger to do better.

From 1992-1997, Roger worked on the No. 2 handmade pocket watch, fitted with a one-minute tourbillon, detent escapement and four-year perpetual calendar mechanism. This, deemed Daniels, was a success.

Working with Daniels on the Isle of Man, Roger absorbed all that the master watchmaker could impart. His self-imposed, seven-year apprenticeship was spent perfecting the 32 skills required to make a handmade watch. This resulted in Roger being invited to work alongside Daniels on the famed Daniels *Millennium* series of watches. During 1998-2001, he collaborated on the *Millennium* series of 50 watches using the first Omega movements that marked the industrialization of Daniels' revolutionary co-axial escapement.

Establishing the Roger W. Smith Studio in 2001, Roger started production of his own eponymous models, each imbued with the spirit and ethos of George Daniels. During his company's first decade, the studio would produce the *Series 1* production wristwatches, including three for jeweler Theo Fennell. *Series 2* was launched in 2004, described by Roger as "the first high-end, skill-based, British production wristwatch to have been designed and made in its entirety within Great Britain."

Along with the series production models, Roger has undertaken the manufacture of bespoke, one-off creations, including the 2006 *Unique Commission, No. 3*, a tourbillon wristwatch fitted with the Daniels Coaxial escapement and resilient date calendar complication. In 2007, the first *Series*

2 watch was delivered; the model is the current mainstay of the brand. As with its predecessor, it remains the only production wristwatch currently being made completely within Great Britain.

A milestone was reached in 2010, with the release of Roger's collaboration with Daniels on the *Co-axial Anniversary* wristwatch to celebrate 35 years since George's invention of the Co-axial Escapement. This limited edition of 35 pieces was the first-ever Daniels wristwatch "to have been designed and made in its entirety within the shores of the Isle of Man and Great Britain." Roger's own watches continue to use the Daniels Co-axial Escapement: in 2010, Roger began developing his single-wheel version of the escapement.

After the passing of Dr. George Daniels in October 2011, his Riversdale Studio was incorporated into the Roger W. Smith's Studio, with his personal wish that Roger "should continue the fine art of the handmade watch." This was music to the ears of those who revered the work of Daniels, from the handful of collectors lucky enough to have acquired one of the very few pieces George made to those who were content just knowing of his contributions to horology.

During the past two years, Roger's profile has increased, thanks to a bout of creativity and productivity that belies a small atelier with seven staff. The second Generation Single Wheel Co-axial Escapement was launched in 2012, and a lucky client took delivery of the first *Daniels Anniversary* wristwatch. That same year, Roger started development work on the *Series 3*.

Roger took the time from his busy schedule to bring *Revolution* up-to-date with his activities.

"I have seriously considered producing watches in greater numbers as a possibility for the future, but certainly at the moment, our focus is purely on the handmade, bespoke watches. The problem is making the step to larger production. We make ten watches per year, but that is an incredibly difficult job. It may climb slightly, but let's say in five years' time that we're making 13, 14 pieces ... that would mean increasing the business hugely. Just to make three, four or five more pieces - it's a massive change that would require a huge amount of staffing and the educating of the staff.

"Education - that's the key ... and that's the problem," Rogers says. To suddenly turn around and start mass-producing watches would mean learning a completely new business discipline. We have seven staff at the moment, and it's a large number of people for so few watches, but that really shows the level of attention to detail needed to cope with these pieces."

While the Roger W. Smith Studio is a tiny operation making watches of the utmost exclusivity, Roger is aware of what would be needed to make the next move, and what faces the British "start-ups" with their eye on producing watches in far greater numbers. "I know how difficult it is buying in cases and dials, buying the movement - but to create your own movement is an incredibly difficult thing.

"Interestingly, if you look at George, he taught himself the 'Daniels Method.' He was able to create a watch from start to finish." Roger cites the late Derek Pratt and Stephen Forsey as two Englishmen of similar devotion to horology and mastery of the skills. "Unless you've got that depth of knowledge..." Roger trails off, the rest not needing to be said.

"We always have a backlog of work - our waiting list is something like two-and-a-half years, and it does give us a certain amount of comfort. I'm doing my bespoke pieces as well; we have our *Series 2*. I'm preparing a pair of unique watches for a client at the moment - it's a completely new mechanism, a completely designed one-off pair of watches.

"What we are doing now are variations of the *Series 2*, different dials, different engravings and so on, plus the standard *George Daniels Anniversary*, which we're completing the orders for, for the 35 pieces. We will have a *Series 3*, which I'm working on as well at the moment. I have several months' design work just to complete on the mechanism, but that is progressing well. That's what's been going on in the background."

Roger is cautious about the future, refusing to let thoughts of expansion or too much ambition interfere with existing commitments or the company's ability to maintain its standards without deviation or distraction. "We are looking toward moving to larger premises on the Isle of Man and that will enable us to take on an extra watchmaker. We're looking to take on another in 9-12 months' time. So, yes, we have a game plan, but it's all very long and drawn-out because of our method of making the watches."

Roger relishes the remoteness of his studio. "I think our location is also a great thing. Being here on the Isle of Man, we're cut off basically. We're so far removed from any industry that what it does do is enable you to be free of that. It enables me to sit down and design a watch which is unique, and there are no external influences. It allows me to focus on what I believe is important, which is the watches. There's no sense in going into a studio unless you feel you can make a difference."

But Roger is no isolationist. He lectures regularly at watch events, most recently causing a stir at SalonQP, regarding his feelings about British watchmaking beyond the shores of the Isle of Man. [ See ROGER SMITH ON THE STATE OF WATCHMAKING on page ] "There is something happening here, and it's obviously increasing awareness of watchmaking in Britain, which is brilliant. It's got to start somewhere. But if the new brands want to make their own movements, they'll probably have to do so with Swiss know-how."

As for his company's own position in the watchmaking world, Roger sounds like his mentor, the legend who was George Daniels: "What I've been focusing on for the last 15-20 years is making watches in their entirety within the UK, and that has been the ultimate goal. And I've proven that it can be done." ★



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### THE GREAT BRITAIN WATCH, AKA The Parliament Piece

Roger recalls, “I was contacted by No 10 – they phoned me up and they were talking about this ‘GREAT Britain’ campaign, championing the country’s characteristics. They’d noticed my work and how it tied in very well in telling the story of this great campaign: British innovation, the creativity, the technical abilities.”

“The project proceeded quite rapidly. I went down to No. 10, had a meeting, met the GREAT Campaign Director, Conrad Bird. It was all very quick, about 11 months. Literally, we had a couple of meetings within the space of a month, and I got busy with the watch. The watch itself took ten months to make – all very quick, very sudden. But it was a wonderful opportunity and an honor to be asked to make such a watch. A complete one-off.”

This unique watch, which Roger designed and built during that intense ten-month period during 2013, serves two purposes. “Firstly, and most obviously, it has been commissioned to celebrate the Creativity, Innovation and Technology which makes Britain, but,

of equal importance, it represents what is possible today for British watchmaking.”

The GREAT Britain Watch, in addition to embodying British watchmaking potential, is a realization of Roger’s mastery of the Daniels Method, as well as his own contribution to the evolution of Daniels’ Co-axial Escapement. The watch features a unique, one-of-a-kind mechanism employing Roger’s Single Wheel Co-axial. “By radically lightening the escape wheel by 23 percent, the performance of the escapement has been improved with a faster acceleration and less abrupt deceleration.”

Even the dial is something truly special. It consists of 34 individual parts to form a representation of the Union flag. It qualifies as “one of the most complex dials to have ever been designed and made by hand.”

The “GREAT Britain” Watch will tour key markets around the world during the next few years, to represent the best of British creativity, innovation and technology.



### ROGER SMITH ON THE STATE OF BRITISH WATCHMAKING

At last November’s SalonQP in London, Roger caused a stir with criticism of the current brouhaha surrounding the revival of British watchmaking. Because of his reputation and depth of knowledge, as well as his status as a true *manufacture* with a demeanor free of venom, people were all but forced to listen. He emphasized the need to embrace the opportunities being presented for a resurgence, but also called for the development of a true British industry “with a heart in mechanical timekeepers designed and built in Britain, rather than one devoted to case-making and adorning imported movements.” Roger, with the benefit of some months in which to step back and assess the situation, generously supplied *Revolution* with this eloquent and heartfelt statement:

“Of late, I have become increasingly dismayed and frustrated by the euphoria which surrounds the apparent imminent rebirth of the British industry. In the past few years, several companies have popped up and are now making great claims to being British or being responsible for reviving the industry and yet are still 100% reliant upon imported Swiss expertise and movements.

Of course, this energy must be applauded, as it creates British jobs and educates the public about our great watchmaking heritage and potential. Unfortunately, I am not excited, because in my view, what is being created is not sustainable in the long term, simply because there is no depth to the business other than a good story wrapped in a British flag, which demonstrates a complete lack of understanding about the complexities of creating a complete watch.

However, I am not completely dismissive and from personal experience, I understand that these fledgling companies need to start from somewhere.

George Daniels worked hard throughout his lifetime to preserve the knowledge from the dying industry for future generations, and I, in turn, proudly carry his banner forward with my own work in a small way. George’s and my goal have always been to encourage a revival of British watchmaking – but from the roots up.

The ultimate goal for a British Watchmaking Industry must be to stand

on its own feet and be able to manufacture watches in their entirety. To gain this ability, we could go with a fist full of cash to the Swiss and buy in their expertise and equipment to kick start the industry.

It’s possible, but I am concerned that this will only create an off-shoot of the Swiss Industry, because within Britain, there is not the watchmaking skill base to influence its direction throughout its rebirth. The British have always been entrepreneurial, and I believe that only by creating our own watches, can we create a new industry that is quintessentially British and of which we can be proud.

The way forward would be slow but has to begin with education. The current watchmaking courses within Britain are repair-based and are not suited to a future in watchmaking. I believe that the ultimate goal of an educational program should be to follow the Daniels Method, as this gives the student the depth of knowledge, which will form the basis of a strong watchmaking industry.

It is worth pointing out that two of the most creative and influential horologists of our time, George Daniels and Derek Pratt, were practitioners of the Daniels Method. If only they had been able to focus more on employing and training. If they had, then today we could be witnessing serious British watchmaking companies producing uniquely British watches.

I know from experience that this approach works, because I now see within my business three of my four watchmakers instilled with the Daniels Method, buying their own Schaublin 70 lathes and a growing collection of tools with ideas to make their first watch. All it needs is for one of them to succeed, and then you immediately have someone who could be a potential business owner, employer and educator producing British watches with a strong British DNA at their heart.

Admittedly, this process is small and slow, but I believe that we have to have long-term thinking to develop into what could be a substantial British Watchmaking Industry of which we – and future generations of British watch manufacturers – could be proud.”



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