



# TAKING GREAT PRIDE

A watch made by Roger Smith for Downing Street's campaign to promote British excellence abroad is a superlative demonstration of home-grown, world-beating horology. *James Gurney*

— One off: the GREAT Britain watch, on loan to the British government. Smith's layered, strengthened approach to movement design is inspired by historic British pocket watches.

— There are 34 components to the Union Flag dial.

**R**oger Smith's workshop on the Isle of Man is in the literal sense a long way from the Cabinet Office at 10 Downing Street, and light-years away politically, Manx folk having as little to do with Westminster as possible. So it was something of a surprise to learn that Westminster's focus had settled, albeit briefly, on a small farmhouse in the middle of this distant island.

Roger Smith's watchmaking and his stature within the horological world had come to the attention of those behind the 'GREAT Britain' campaign, a post-Olympics initiative to promote British skills, trade and commerce internationally. Smith was commissioned early last year to design and make a special watch to go on show around the world wherever the drum is being banged. Quite who in government knew enough about watchmaking to see how Smith's work could contribute to the campaign is obscure, which is a pity as

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he or she is to be congratulated. While there are plenty of parliamentarians keen on fine watches, it's probably unwise for anyone to show too much appreciation, post-expenses scandal and post-austerity sensitivities. All understandable, but all meaning that this initiative has a basic, though not fatal flaw, of which more below.

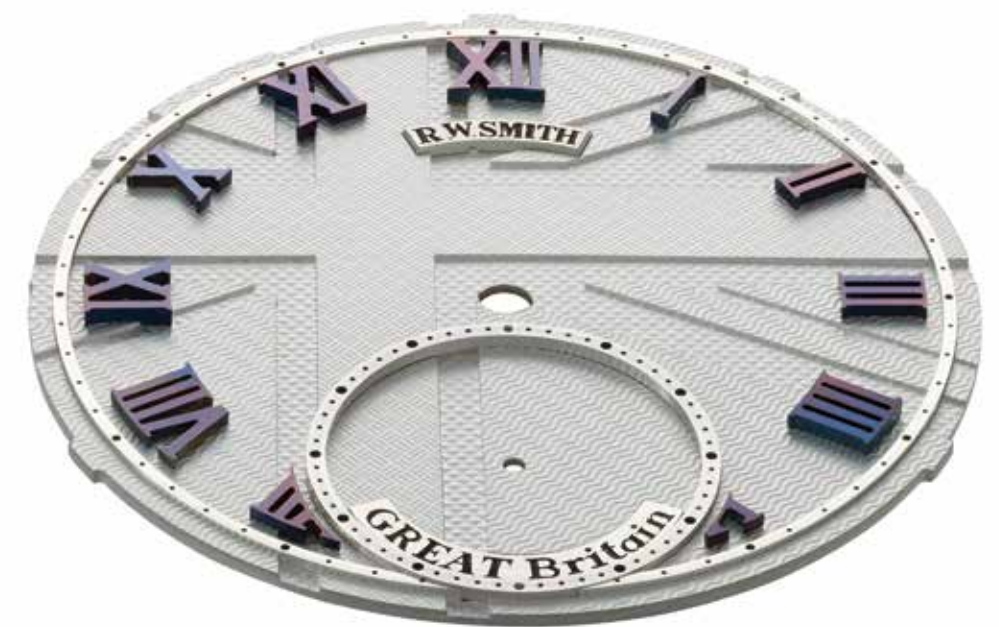
### THE DANIELS METHOD

Roger Smith, however, can only be congratulated on the speed with which he has taken up the challenge of producing a one-off GREAT Britain watch. Taking no payment, he seems to have treated the exercise as a kind of statement of his development so far as a master watchmaker, and an opportunity to make a watch that lives up to the title.

"It was out of the blue," Smith recalls. "I had a phone call from Downing Street and they were talking about the GREAT campaign and wondered if it was possible for me to be part of it... Within a month of meeting them [Campaign Director Conrad Bird and his team], I was starting designs for the watch."

So, even for those already familiar with Roger Smith's output and ideas, it's worth a look at the detail of the watch and the thinking it represents.

As many QP readers will know, the





The GREAT watch is based on Smith's Series 2, of which he makes about 10 pieces annually.

starting point for everything that Roger Smith makes is the 'Daniels Method', a doctrine of watchmaking that combines the learning, craft and determination to make the best watch possible. Dr George Daniels' ambition was to match the likes of Breguet and Arnold, but without the benefit of easy access to masters in the 30-or-so crafts needed to make a watch. This handicap, Daniels realised, was actually an advantage if he mastered them himself, giving the watchmaker total control, if only at the price of enormous investment of time. Smith himself put in tens of thousands of hours at the workbench before qualifying as Daniels' only-ever assistant.

While the Daniels Method is universal in theory, the GREAT Britain watch has a more specifically local element: a definably English style of watchmaking that places longevity and durability even before finesse. This does not mean lack of finesse, though – almost predictably it means achieving the most finesse, just via a harder route.

**THE SMITH METHOD**

"I have a very personal aesthetic motivation when designing my movements. In particular, I have always avoided the slimmer and flatter movements which lack strength, life and a certain spirit," he says. "This is why, from

the outset, the aesthetics have to be very three-dimensional in appearance, in line with the tradition of great British watchmaking at its peak some two to three hundred years ago".

The case is typical of this approach. Noticeably more massive than continental watches, it is formed from strips of platinum that are compressed in a tapered steel form, a more efficient and effective method compared to machining from a solid block – and, not coincidentally, the traditional way.

Similarly, the dial of the GREAT Britain – a multi-layered tour de force based on the Union flag – is a history lesson covering three centuries of practice.

Each level of silver has engine-turned patterns using the machine Smith inherited from Dr Daniels, while the numerals were cut by hand and silver-soldered. According to Smith, it is one of the most complicated dials ever made for this sort of watch. With 34 separate elements going into its construction, most of the three months it took to make were spent on working out how to put it together without causing damage.

"Each of the 34 components had to be heated and soldered into position, but with such a fine piece of metal you're continually heating it to near-melting point, which could ruin it, while if you slightly overdo the solder it'll flow through and fill in the engine-turning pattern," Smith explains. "One wrong move throughout the build of the watch could have rendered the dial completely useless, with weeks or possibly months of work having to be repeated."

**POP THE BONNET**

Moreover, time wasn't on Smith's side, having taken on the project at what, for Smith, was the last minute. Normally those requesting one of his Series 2 production watches, of which he makes around 10 a year, will join a two-year waiting list, while a bespoke piece can take seven years or more to emerge. Smith says that in his career he has presently produced only around 60 watches.

Hawk-eyed readers will note that the GREAT watch is based on Smith's Series 2 and uses the same basic pattern, though with the power reserve removed to allow for that extraordinary dial design. As with all Smith's watches, at its heart lies a Daniels Co-Axial escapement. But this being watchmaking according to the Daniels Method, nothing is allowed to remain un-examined, and in 2010 Smith improved on Daniels' Co-Axial

A better example of Britain's ability to mix tradition and innovation than Smith's watch would be hard to imagine



design with his Single Wheel Co-Axial escapement. The GREAT Britain watch now takes things another step forward, using a 23 per cent lighter escape wheel. As Smith explains, "I've removed some excess metal to lighten the escapement, and that has real efficiency benefits. Acceleration and deceleration is improved [meaning] we can drop the strength of the mainspring that drives the watch, and that means we can increase the life of the movement. There's less force on the gears and pinions, and also on the pivots."

And then there is the level of finish, a quality anyone can appreciate given time and a loupe. Characterised by the gilded and frosted plates and bridges, 'black-polished' cocks and chatons and beautifully blued screws, Roger Smith's watches repay endless amounts of time both in their making and enjoyment. The hands alone take five days to complete, while the depth of the floral engraving on the back has to be seen to be believed.

**THE GREAT'S FATE**

A better example of English watchmaking art and a better example of Britain's ability to mix tradition and innovation would be hard to imagine. So while the Downing Street team can't be faulted for including Roger Smith in their GREAT Britain campaign, which will see the watch toured around the world, it does seem a bit of a pity that there are no plans for it to be 'worn officially'. After all, were the Prime Minister to sport it at the next big trade summit, what better way to alleviate a diplomatic impasse than a little watch chat?

So what will become of the watch when it completes its tour of duty? One could wonder at the price a unique piece with such provenance might command, but Smith's plan is rather humbler than that: he intends to keep it.

"I've never had the luxury of being able to afford one of my own watches, but now it'll be great to have this one to show to clients," he says proudly.

Further info: [rwsmithwatches.com](http://rwsmithwatches.com)