

Safari Power Saver
Click to Save Flash Plug-in
SKIPTON
Her life ahead

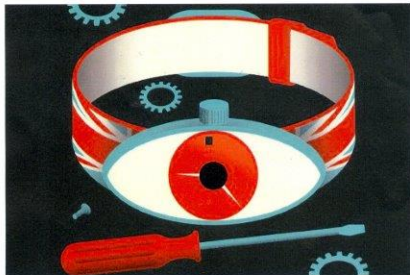
Plan your perfect retirement
and win a fantastic overnight getaway for two*

Click here

*Provided by The Times.
Terms and Conditions apply.

THE  TIMES

Roger W Smith keeps the art of George Daniels' watchmaking alive



Niall Webb

Roger W Smith
Published at 12:01AM, October 30 2014

The one-time apprentice of the revered watchmaker tells of the importance of reviving the heritage of the British horological industry

As a child, I was always more practical than academic, so in 1986, at the age of 16, I embarked on a three-year course at the British Horological Institute in Manchester. In my second year, watchmaker Dr George Daniels came to the school as a guest lecturer, giving me my first inkling that it was possible to make a watch by hand. Until that moment I had thought I'd become a watch repairer, but George's visit changed the direction of my career.

After graduating, I handmade a couple of pocket watches and, after George saw the second one, he offered me a job on the Isle of Man working with him on a set of watches that would become known as the Daniels Millennium series. I was meant to stay for a year and make ten pieces, but the project grew to more than 50 timepieces and I never left the island, eventually setting up my own workshop in 2001.

All of my timepieces are based on the "Daniels Method", where one person designs and builds a complete watch from start to finish. I always design the dial and hands first because these are the key features that denote everything else. When these are complete, I move back to the mechanism. I never repeat anything or rely on an existing movement — in my view, there is no point in simply recasing an existing movement; I follow George's approach and try to improve on existing horology with every new project. In the beginning, I did consider buying in a Swiss calibre for Series 1, but then I found I couldn't sleep at night for thinking about it — it always came back to the question of whether or not I would be happy with it. At the end of the day, I decided I wanted to do George's name justice and to push British watchmaking forward.

Since 2006, I have made 60-odd watches, which is fewer than most Swiss independents produce in a year. There are five watchmakers in the Roger W Smith workshop, all hugely skilled and all following the Daniels Method. Our youngest apprentice joined us three years ago. He had never handled a wristwatch before, but now he goes home at night and reads Daniels' texts.

I hope that one day he will go on to make his own watch. There is no other company in the world making watches like we do. It is exacting work but, at the end of the day, we are not restricted by anyone else's limitations. This is what I've always wanted. I don't want to be influenced by anyone or to make what someone else is expecting. I suppose that means I am on the outside of the watchmaking world, because my approach is so unique. I hope we are keeping the craft alive and proving watches can be

made in the UK again.

Back in February 2013, the prime minister's office contacted me and asked if I would contribute a watch to the "Great" campaign — a project aimed at promoting Great Britain around the world. I do think we could revive the British watchmaking industry, but the big problem is that we have lost the core knowledge and it would take years to get it back. It would be possible, but it would need huge amounts of money and time to replace the skills we have lost. I am aiming to build a body of work that will be around long after I'm gone. My next project, Series 3, is already designed and I'm currently making the prototype. I also have plans for a Series 4, 5 and 6. We're almost at the stage where my apprentices could continue my work if I weren't around — that's what I always intended: to make a contribution and to keep the traditional methods and techniques of watchmaking alive.

rwsmithwatches.com

Four favourite watches of Roger W Smith

(For pictures click tab at top of article)

The space traveller

George Daniels

I first saw this watch when I was just 17 years old and George visited my college. It was spectacular — not only was it beautiful, but the technical prowess was out of this world. It showcased a chronograph with Daniels' independent double-wheel escapement, mean-solar and sidereal time, age and phase of the moon and equation of time indications. There was a lifetime of work in that one piece and the depth of knowledge involved was unbelievable. It is truly one of the greatest timepieces in the world, made even more special as one man created it under one roof.

Pocket watch

Thomas Mudge

Early on in my career, I had the chance to work on a 1770s pocket watch made by the great English watchmaker Thomas Mudge. It was a stunning gold-cased timepiece with an enamel dial, but the cylinder escapement was worn and not working. I spent a week replacing it and learning how to polish and restore it. It was an amazing education in making parts, as well as a good lesson in design. The watch had survived more than 200 years of dusty and damp conditions and still kept time as well as when it was made. I learnt a lot from the design of this piece.

Explorer 1

Rolex

I wear a Rolex on a day-to-day basis. Over the years, the brand has certainly had its fair share of critics; however, its timepieces are brilliantly designed with mechanics that have been tried, tested and improved over time and great attention has been paid to the smallest details. There is nothing fancy with an Explorer — you just get a great watch. I have taken note of Rolex's long-term view and, in the same way, I will always make Series 2 simply because it is a good watch. Years of effort have gone into its creation and I am incredibly proud of it.

Calibre 266

Omega

While I was at college, I bought an Omega from a fellow student for £30. It was made in the Fifties and houses a 30mm Calibre 266 manual-wind movement, still one of the finest mass-produced calibres ever created. It stripped down effortlessly and reassembled easily. Today, timepieces are not necessarily designed with a long-term view, but this is a watch that was developed by people who made watches to last. That was the idea behind my Series 2 — I tell owners not to service my watches every three years, but to wait for them to stop, and that may well take decades.

0 comments

livefyre

 Roger Smith

1 person listening

+ Follow
Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

Livefire