

Master of time inspired by UK's handmade past

Elizabeth Anderson learns about the appeal of bespoke watches

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If you want an exquisitely designed timekeeping instrument, you don't necessarily need to look to Switzerland. Mechanical miracles are being designed and handcrafted in a cottage on the Isle of Man.

Welcome to what is probably the world's most exclusive watch factory. Roger Smith's team of seven produces watches from scratch, each watch taking up to 11 months. They sell for £100,000 to £250,000, and there is currently a four-year waiting list for an RW Smith watch.

"Watch making at this level is very unusual," says Smith. "I compare it to a Ford Fiesta and a Bentley. The Bentley has a leather interior and immaculate piping. It doesn't make any difference to the running of the car, but it's nice to have."

He has mastered 32 distinct trades to design and build every component of a watch from start to finish – and learnt his craft from the master watch maker George Daniels in a partnership that lasted 20 years.

Daniels was the first to make every component of a watch from scratch and

by hand, and dedicated some 60 years to the art. His "co-axial escapement" invention of 1974 – designed to make a watch's mechanism run more precisely – was regarded as one of the most significant horological developments in 250 years and was taken up by the Swiss watch making giant Omega in 1999.

"The introduction of the modern quartz watch in the late 1960s meant the world was talking of the end of mechanical timekeeping, but George Daniels refused to accept that," says Smith.

Since Daniels' death in 2011, Smith has taken over the workshop and continues the watch maker's method. "Our customers want something unique. They appreciate the technical side of the watches and are fascinated by nuts and bolts. They like the idea that someone sits down and makes them a completely bespoke watch." Buyers come from around the world, from the US to China.

Smith graduated from the Manchester School of Horology, followed by a seven-year, self-imposed apprenticeship with Daniels. His first handmade pocketwatch, presented to his mentor in 1992 after two years of hard graft, was greeted with a "good first attempt but try again". Five years later, his second attempt

was approved and Smith's watch making career took off, with his Series 1 watch.

His Series 2, which took three years to develop, was the first wrist watch to have been designed and made entirely within Britain for more than 50 years. Series 3 will launch next summer.

The key to Smith's watch making method is dedication, detail and patience. Each component will be worked on for weeks. Even a small lever, hidden inside the watch, might take two days to polish to get it just right.

"It's all been self-funded. I've nearly gone broke a few times," says Smith.

His team has an engineer who builds the components, and the others have a watch repairing or restoration background. They aim to recreate the standards of English watch making in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Nowadays, Swiss watches are synonymous with precision, but 300 years ago, Britain led the world in watch making. Smith wants to rebuild that.

"We have this incredible heritage. I see no reason why we can't build on that. But it takes investment. The industry's all but gone in the UK, but this is my life's work and I'm willing to keep at it. It's wonderful to create something that's going to carry on working beautifully for 200 years."



Roger Smith, making top of the range British watches by hand again on the Isle of Man, and (left) his 40mm yellow gold Series 2