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DRIVING FORCE

In search of America's native spirit



THE SCOTCH MALT
WHISKY SOCIETY

BEYOND ROGER W SMITH MEASURE

WORDS RICHARD GOSLAN // PHOTOS SIMON PARK

Any master distiller will tell you that you can't cheat time in pursuit of a perfectly matured single malt – no matter what lengths some producers might go to in a bid to speed up the process.

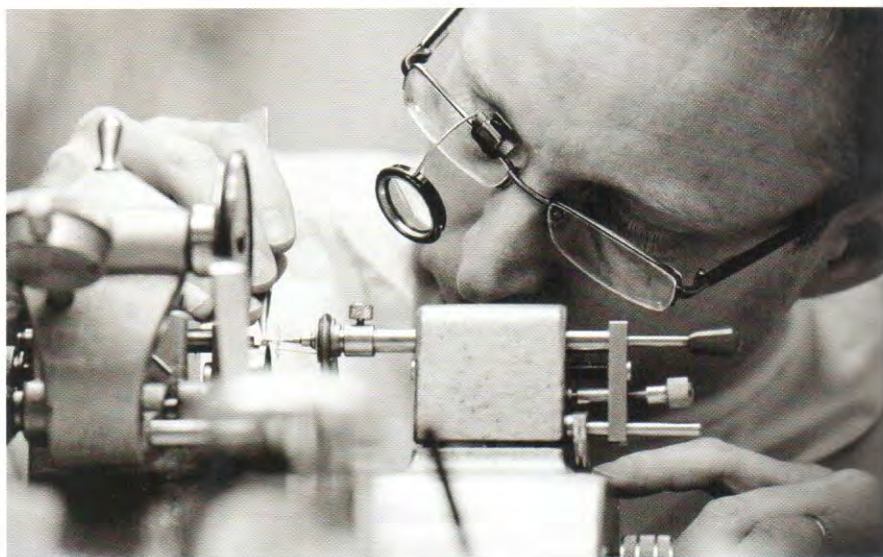
They might like to take a lesson from Roger W Smith, the master watchmaker based on the Isle of Man. Roger's most recent creation took over three years to build, and is the result of a lifetime's study of the craft learned from the man recognised as one of the world's greatest-ever watchmakers, George Daniels.

"I was studying horology, the craft of watchmaking, and we had a visit from this man and I was blown away," says Roger. "It was a life-changing moment and from then on I was entranced by the idea of making a pocket watch by hand. I've never really given up on that idea."

Roger set about learning the skills involved in building a watch entirely by hand, and 18 months later he took his first creation to show Daniels. Unfortunately, the source of his inspiration was less than impressed, and sent the young Roger away to think about what to do next.

"It was disappointing, but I had already invested so much time and effort in this project that I couldn't just walk away – I'm not that kind of person. I was determined to prove that I was good enough."

That determination saw Roger dedicating himself to refining the skills needed to build a watch single-handedly. Daniels had been the first person to master



ABOVE
Roger makes minute changes

all 34 trades required, and that's what Roger focused on replicating. It took him five and a half years, during which time he remade his watch four times, before he was prepared to knock on Daniels' door again.

"He didn't suffer fools gladly and it took me a long time to get a second meeting with him," Roger recalls. "It was terrifying, I remember walking down his driveway and thinking, 'Well if he doesn't like it this time, I really do have to consider another career'. It was make or break at that point, but fortunately it went better that time." ▶





Roger mastered 34 trades and trained for more than seven years to craft watches by hand

In fact, Daniels recognised enough potential in Roger that he took him on as an apprentice, requiring his protégé to move to the Isle of Man, where he continues to run his studio. The two men worked together for more than three years, and continued to collaborate until Daniels' death in 2011.

"Before he died, he asked me if I would design a watch for him, and for him to think that I was good enough to do that and handle the complete project was an incredible honour for me," says Roger.

The working relationship between the men has been captured on film in *The Watchmaker's Apprentice*, which is due for release in the UK by the end of this

year. Not one to embrace the limelight, Roger finds the experience unsettling but appreciates the possible benefits of a feature-length film about watchmaking.

"It's very uncomfortable watching myself on screen," he says. "But some people find the story interesting, and if it encourages someone else to get into watchmaking, like my first meeting with George did, then I think it's well worthwhile."

The apprentice has now turned master, with a team of seven studying under his lead at his workshop on the Isle of Man. They fill Roger with confidence that the future of handmade watchmaking in Britain is looking bright.

"We have a good, young team who

have demonstrated the patience and the enthusiasm to learn all these skills," he says. "They realise there are no short-cuts, I'm not interested in that – I'm interested in the craft and the way we are able to create something totally different from anything that is mass produced. I hope that by the time I retire some of these guys will be able to preserve these skills and secure the future of watchmaking in the UK."

Roger's studio currently produces around 10 watches a year, with a lead time of three years – and a price tag of around £100,000. He says there is also a crossover between customers who combine a visit to the Isle of Man with a tour of Scotland's distilleries.

"I have a few clients who are very keen on whisky, and like to spend a few days in Scotland before coming here. They love the story of Scotch, they appreciate the time and the intricacies of creating it. It's the same with whisky as with watches."

And the ultimate satisfaction – for Roger as well as a distiller – must be to see people appreciate the finished product.

"I design and build my watches to be wearable, not to keep locked away," he says. "They are created with strength in mind and the mechanisms are robust enough to last hundreds of years." ●



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