

Making timepieces the British way

Horology In his workshop on the Isle of Man, Roger Smith is in pursuit of perfection, says *Simon de Burton*

Much has been made lately of the revival of British horology. More than a few young, UK-based watch brands are enjoying international success by dint of the gravitas many overseas buyers attach to the words Made in Britain. But how many truly British watches are made today? Watches in which virtually every component is conceived, designed, formed and assembled into a finished timepiece within the confines of the British Isles?

The answer? Well, a precious few – probably fewer than 10 a year – do emerge from a workshop in that British dependency (not technically part of the UK) in the Irish Sea where cats have no tails and motorcycles race on public roads at speeds approaching 200mph.

The Isle of Man might seem an unlikely place for watchmaking but it is where, from 1982, the late horologist George Daniels – regarded by many as the greatest watchmaker since Abraham-Louis Breguet – chose to settle for its favourable tax regime. It is where he tutored, mentored and encouraged the only apprentice he ever took on in a career spanning more than half a century.

At a time when the mechanical timepiece was in danger of disappearing (and most British makers had already sunk without trace), Daniels embarked on a solo crusade to show the world there was still a market for superb quality watches with components made

entirely by hand and finished in the traditional British way. Characteristic features include frosted movement plates, silver, engine-turned dials and jewels set in gold chatons rather than directly into the movement baseplate.

His apprentice, Roger Smith, born in Bolton in 1970, adopted the same philosophy and carried on what Daniels had started by founding his own dial name on the island and perpetuating what he terms “the Daniels Method”.

That was in 2001 when the mechanical watch industry was in the relatively early stages of its revival and far from holding the position in retail luxury that it commands today. In pure business terms, therefore, the chances of Mr Smith’s fledgling business surviving, let alone progressing, seemed slim.

However, this year marks the 15th anniversary of RW Smith watches – the W is for William. Its founder now employs eight people (with another joining shortly), and is preparing to move to larger premises and make a £500,000 investment in machinery.

Along the way, he has been chosen by the UK Cabinet Office to produce a one-off watch that is touring the world on the UK government’s “Great” campaign to showcase British skills.

He has featured on the BBC Radio 4 programme *In Business*, been the subject of the 2015 documentary film *The Watchmaker’s Apprentice* and last year picked up a Walpole award for the outstanding example of British luxury craftsmanship.

Mr Smith, a considered and mild-mannered individual, courted controversy at the end of 2014 by writing an open letter to watchmakers and collectors. In it, he expressed his dismay at the growing number of brands capitalising on the concept of British watchmaking when, in fact, they had merely revived a long-forgotten name, or added some appropriate British touches to a piece comprised largely (or entirely) of foreign-made components.

Although his outspokenness caused a minor storm, he has no regrets about voicing his opinions on a subject which is close to his heart and to which he has devoted almost 30 years. Since he unveiled his £250,000 “Series 4” watch two months ago – featuring an escapement that he spent years designing – sufficient orders have come in to ensure the workshop is kept running to capacity until well into 2019.

For a leading Swiss player that would mean producing thousands of pieces. For Mr Smith it means low, double figures – which is how he likes it.

“People have often asked me why we don’t try to make more watches, and the answer is that I simply don’t want to,” he says. His products have an entry-level price of about £100,000 and take up to three years to deliver.

“Our clients come to us because they want a watch which is genuinely English and completely handmade and hand finished. Often, they have worked their way up through other independent brands and that has given them an

interest in exclusivity, rarity and extreme quality which they perhaps don’t find with the better-known, high-end names.”

Mr Smith says more than 90 per cent of the brand’s components are made in-house. The only parts that are bought in are straps, sapphire crystals, balance and main springs, screws and jewels, all of which are made in the UK.

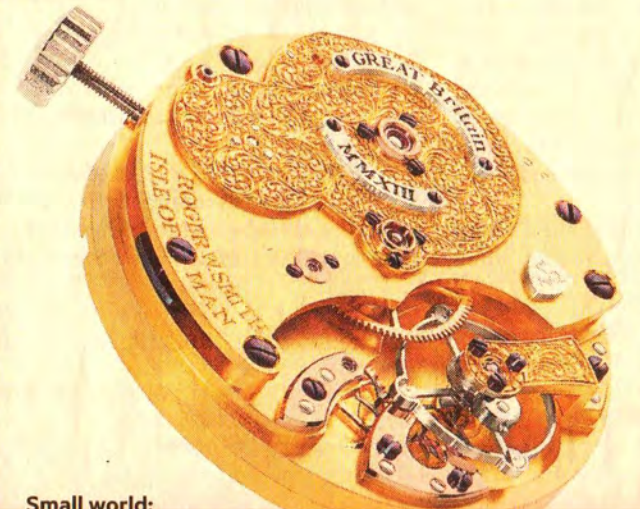
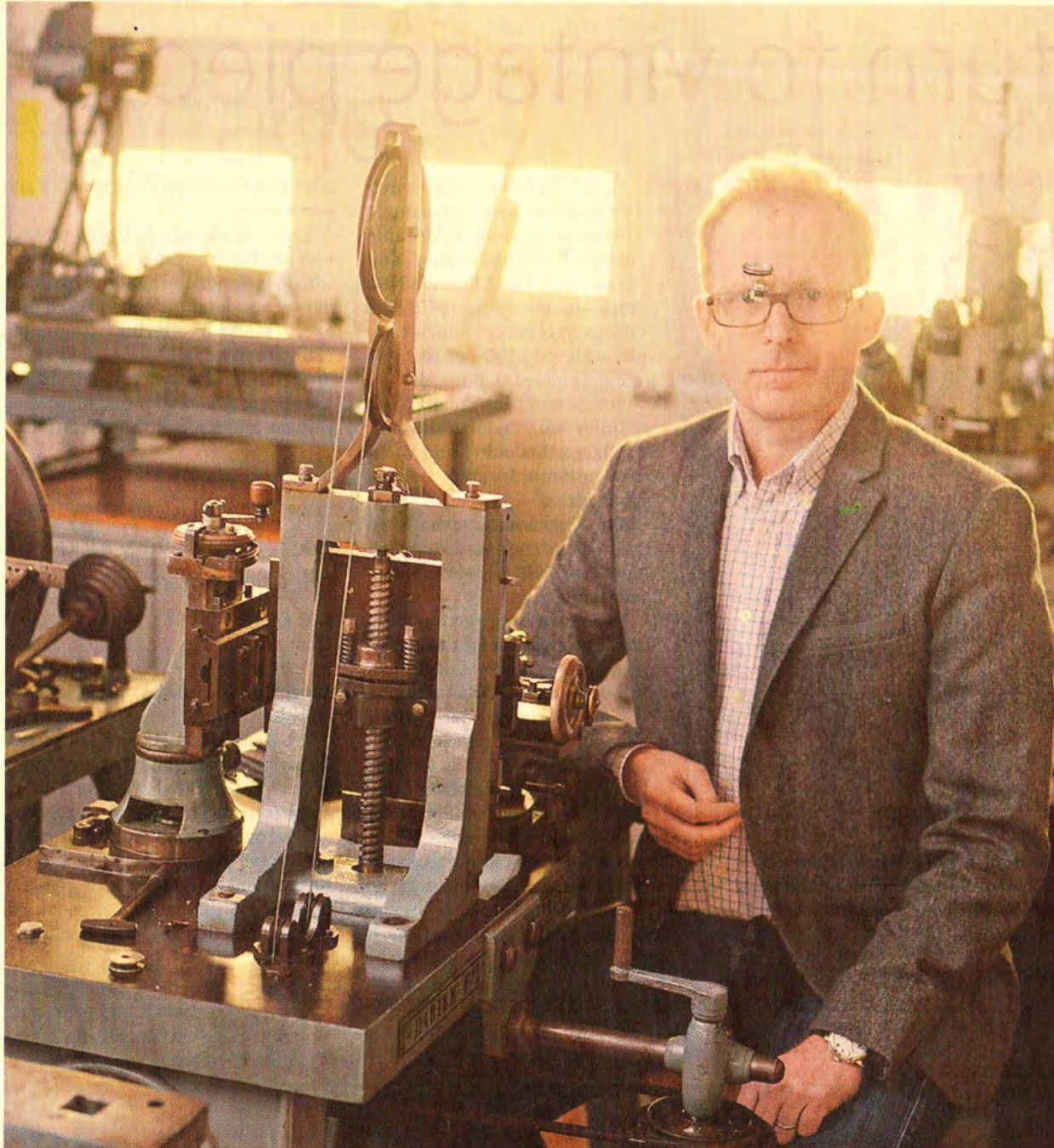
Each watch takes about 11 months of continuous work to make. “It just isn’t something that you can do quickly, especially since we use this very particular style of finishing. If you place one of our watches beside a 200-year-old English pocket watch, you can immediately see the continuation, both in the architecture of the movement and the overall appearance. The style of the frosting, the purple-blue of the screws. It is all done in the traditional English way.”

Unlike the globe-trotting bosses of many large watch firms, Mr Smith is content to stay put on the Isle of Man. “I am happy to say that I spend at least 85 per cent of my time at the workbench and probably take one international flight every year or two. Clients often come to us when they have decided to buy a watch but often the whole process is conducted via email.”

When he started the business, he recalls, he was apprehensive and did not know what to expect. But the brand has grown and he believes is taken seriously. “My ambition remains to spend every waking hour working towards making the perfect watch,” he says.

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