

Retail Jeweller

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Best of British: British watches

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British watchmaking is making a comeback more than 150 years after its zenith, says Laura McCreddie

Normally when you think watches you think Swiss. Something about the country's mentality seems to make it the ideal place for meticulous clockworks to be developed. However, it wasn't always so. Great Britain used to have a thriving watchmaking community and recently the British watchmaking tradition has been having a revival.

"It has been creeping up for a number of years," says Roger Smith, the man behind RW Smith Watches and one of the figureheads of this British revival. "There was George Daniels [who famously created the co-axial escapement] in the late 1960s and I think that started a new generation of people making their own watches."

British tradition

Smith is one such man. Apart from the balance spring, main spring, a few screws and the glass, all the components of his watches are made in his workshop on the Isle of Man, which, interestingly, is where Daniels also lives. Smith's aim was to start a production of wristwatches that followed the British, rather than the Swiss horological tradition. "British watches were made to a very high standard," he says. "Higher than any mechanisms from the great Swiss watchmakers. Watches have never been made to this standard since and I wanted to make a watch that had that level of finishing."



RW Smith Watches

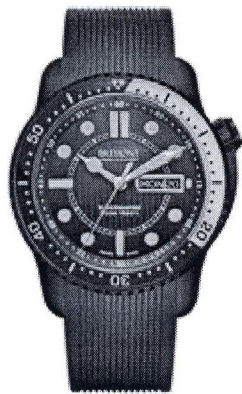
The golden age of British horology was spanned by men such as John Harrison, Thomas Mudge, George Graham, Thomas Earnshaw and Thomas Tompion - a pocket watch of whose was recently put up for auction. The Worshipful Company of Clockmakers of London, which was founded in 1631, gathered these men together and between them they created pieces that were prized by the wealthy and powerful. Tompion was such a recognised name that fakes were created of his timepieces while he was still alive.

In the 18th century, London's Clerkenwell was full of workmen who were employed in various elements of watch production such as escapement makers, finishers and fusee cutters. And output wasn't limited. A report of a committee of the House of Commons gives the number of watches stamped at Goldsmiths' Hall in 1796 as 191,678.

This continued until the 1850s, when the US started to mass-produce pocket watches and mechanised the whole trade. Pieces could be made to high standards at half the price. Then the Swiss got involved in making wristwatches, which wiped out both the UK and US markets. Soon, "Swiss made" were the two words that everyone wanted to see on the back of a case.

Restoring the balance

However, a shift is beginning. "I think people are looking for something different," says Giles English, who, with his brother Nick, started Bremont, a watch brand with a very British aesthetic and a company that finishes all its watches in the UK.



Bremont

It plans to bring its production back here as well. "There are still very few British-owned watch companies compared with the 400-odd Swiss watch companies. The UK has a huge history, love and passion for clocks and watches," he adds.

This history is also appealing to retailers and consumers. "Both retailers and consumers have been overwhelmed by the realisation that the history of watch and clockmaking is actually English," says Abbi Holland, PR and senior brand manager at Rotary, which supplies the J&T Windmills brand. "Since the industry is affiliated with Switzerland, it is a pleasant surprise to celebrate the English origins of the craft."

The renewed interest in, and desirability of, British origins has also brought a few long-forgotten names out of retirement. John Arnold and George Graham have been brought back from the dead by British Masters SA and have given their names to two different watch brands. And Edward John Dent, the man famous for installing Parliament's Great Clock, aka Big Ben, has now been revived thanks to a consortium of British watch enthusiasts, and in 2008 produced a range of watches, having been off the horological radar for the past 40 years.

Dent chief executive Twysden Moore says: "The decision was initially fuelled by the new directors' passion for watches and belief that their position, as custodians of a national institution, gave them a responsibility to bring a thoroughly British brand to a wider market through Dent watches. For the collector, the end of Dent's 40-year absence from the primary market would be a source of interest and curiosity. It was therefore important that the watches were iconic and individual. It was also considered essential to the success of the watches that they acknowledge an enviable horological legacy, the parallel of which only a handful of watchmakers in the world - let alone Britain - can claim."

Dent Parliament watch

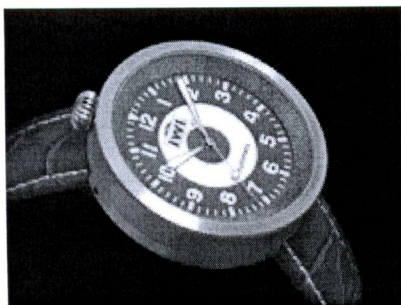
It is not just high-end horology that is going gaga for Great Britain; there are also options for those looking to attract the middle market. "We have always done very special watches but now we are moving into the middle market," says Benney Watches owner Simon Benney, a silversmith to both the House of Commons and the Royal Family and who also produces watches.

"I liked the idea of appealing to a wider audience and looking at a British pedigree from a craft point of view." He uses materials such as stainless steel instead of gold to keep costs down and also uses Swiss quartz movements. "This is a market dominated by the Swiss," says Benney. "We rely on them for our movements."

Which is the problem that lies at the heart of the British watch movement. The days of finishers, balance spring makers and fusee cutters lining the streets of Clerkenwell is long gone. Most British brands, however much they talk up their English roots, are often made in Switzerland and finished in the UK.

Swiss dominance

Ian Walsh, the British watchmaker behind the IWI brand, says: "It is not even a feasible proposition for a small business to try to start making its own movements at this point." Although Walsh finishes, tests and calibrates each timepiece, the heart that beats beneath its case is Swiss. "Cost is the reason for this," he explains. "Someone such as Roger Smith makes a very small number of watches and they command a price that normal people couldn't consider paying. We make watches that are the nearest thing that the man in the street is going to get to a bespoke watch."



IWI's The Mod

Lack of component makers is one of the reasons why brands such as Bremont and Benney have to make watches in Switzerland but finish them in the UK. However, the improvement in horological education in this country could see this change. "There are very high-quality people coming out of the British School of Watchmaking in Manchester," says Smith. "A new member has joined my team who came out of a two-year course there."

The school teaches the Watchmakers of Switzerland Training and Educational Program (Wostep) course, which is universally acknowledged. The other vote of confidence in British horological education has come from the Richemont Group. Cartier has teamed up with the School of Jewellery at Birmingham City University to offer graduates work placements with the luxury brand. Cartier has been recruiting students from the school's Horology course for years and this partnership will further strengthen the UK's position in watchmaking circles.

However, we need to try to keep British talent working in Britain. While having the likes of Stephen Forsey working his magic for Greubel Forsey out in La Chaux-de-Fonds can only be a good thing for the UK reputation, the only way we can prevent people such as George Daniels and Robert Smith from being an exception rather than a rule is by promoting British brands, inspiring British watchmakers and making the UK a place where those coming into the industry want to work, rather than thinking that heading to Switzerland is the only way to make one's name.

And maybe, one day soon, the three words any watch enthusiast will want on their timepiece will be "Made in Britain".