

# A New English Master

The Isle of Man is fast becoming the capital of English watchmaking

Simon de Burton



Considering the small size of the Isle of Man (around 30 miles by 15), it seems to contain a disproportionately large number of highly talented English watchmakers – two. The first is the almost legendary Dr George Daniels (profiled in issue two), and the second is the not-so-well-known-but-soon-to-be-extremely-famous (in my opinion) Roger W Smith, an example of whose work I came across during this year's charter day at the Clockmakers' Company in the City of London.







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As you have probably guessed, it is no mere coincidence that two such talented time masters should end up on this small piece of land in the Irish Sea – it is more a case of one being summoned by the other and not having to think twice about leaping into action. The summoned was, of course, Smith, a gently-spoken doctor's son from Bolton who now looks set to find himself at the vanguard of a revival of English watchmaking, having spent 3 years working under the discerning eye of Daniels at what could reasonably be described as the ultimate horological finishing school.

But how, I ask myself, did Smith come to be employed by a man who is notoriously independent and whose standards are so high that most people are content merely to aspire to them? What was his route to the great man's door?

### Inspiration

"Well, it all began in 1986 when I was accepted at the Manchester School of Horology as a 16-year-old," explains Smith. "I had considered a course in furniture restoration, but the place on the watch-making course came through first so that is where I ended up. It lasted 3 years, and one day George came along and gave us a lecture about his work and watchmaking in general, and I was inspired to try and make my own pocket watch."

Smith finished the course in 1989 and was taken on by Duval, the then distributors of, among other brands, TAG Heuer. "I was put to work in the service centre carrying out trade repairs, but it was not my idea of watchmaking – most of the repairs that came in were on quartz watches and I spent much

of my time mending bracelets and fitting crowns and hands. I wrote to George asking him to take me on as an apprentice, and he invited me to visit him on the Isle of Man, where I was shown around his workshop. Over lunch he encouraged me to sit down and teach myself using his book on watchmaking as a tutor – and then, before I left, he presented me with a mandrel lathe. As a result I left Duval after a couple of years to work for myself, repairing watches during the day so I could make money to pay my parents some rent, and working on my own watch in the evenings. It was a twin-barrelled, tourbillon pocket watch with a detente escapement, and it took me around one-and-a-half years to finish. I made every part with the exception of the main and hair springs."

Naturally, the first person to show it to for approval was Daniels – who bluntly told Smith that it was not up to much. "On reflection, it wasn't the best of watches," concedes Smith. "George was completely open and honest about

it; he said it looked a bit home-made and that it was badly let down by the finish. He told me not to even consider improving it, but to start again from scratch and make an entirely new one."

Rather than bursting into tears as many lesser people might have done, Smith stoically returned to the drawing board where he planned another twin-barrelled tourbillon – this time with a 4-year perpetual calendar – in a gold case with a silvered dial.

"In reality, I think I made that watch about four times, as the more experience I gained the higher my standards became, so I found myself re-making the first parts to match the quality of the later ones."

It was a 5-year slog, but it was all worthwhile because when Smith took the finished product for Daniels's perusal – somewhat nervously, I imagine – the reaction was akin to that of the celebrated Man from Del Monte. He said: "Yes!"

Five years of careful construction resulted in Roger Smith's Number 2 pocket watch, a timepiece that met with approval from master watchmaker George Daniels and kick-started Smith's watch-making career.





Word of the Number 2 Smith pocket watch quickly spread among collectors, and soon he was commissioned by a British client to make Number 3, an English-finished, twin-barrelled pocket watch with Peto cross detent escapement, state-of-wind indicator and the added complication of a 15-second remontoire, an extra spring mechanism that ensures a high degree of accuracy regardless of whether or not the watch is fully or only partly wound. It was to take around 4,000 hours to complete.

### Golden opportunity

Then, in 1998, Smith was given his big and unexpected break when Daniels wrote to him asking whether he would move to the Isle of Man and help him create a series of 12 (later to become 50) Daniels Millennium wristwatches using the now celebrated Daniels Co-Axial Escapement.

"It was a tremendous opportunity to be asked to go and work for George – I think I was the first person he had employed since the mid-1970s. I had always slightly dreaded making a wristwatch, but I knew I was going to have to make the leap some time and this was the best chance I was ever going to get," says Smith. "It was rather daunting going to work for such an imposing character and someone so highly regarded, but

after 9 months or so – when he had cured me of all my bad habits and decided he could trust me – he allowed me to work on the series alone, although he always checked the quality and accuracy of everything I did."

The fact that the series of Millennium watches grew from 12 to 50 in number meant Smith was employed in the Daniels workshop until 2001, when, having become entirely settled on the island, he decided to base himself there for good and establish his own "RW Smith – Isle of Man" watch brand.

He is currently working on number nine of a series of 12 wristwatches of his own design, all of which have already been sold for £12,000 each. They are highly attractive, rectangular-cased, manual-winding pieces with a retrograde calendar mechanism and, although Smith buys in the train of wheels, winding work and escapement to keep the cost of the finished product realistic, the case, dial, hands, plates and calendar mechanism are all hand made and finished in his workshop.

Three buyers, unsurprisingly perhaps, live on the Isle of Man, but a number of the others are from the US, with the remainder scattered throughout Europe. It will take Smith

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until 2005 to complete number 12, but it is what will happen next which we should be really excited about, as we are about to see the emergence of what must be the first new, broad-market, English-made watch movement since the post-war demise of the coincidentally named Smiths brand.

Smith plans to make a series of watches using his own version of the Co-Axial Escapement, which will be housed in round or rectangular cases according to each customer's requirements. At least 90% of the components will be hand-made in his recently completed workshop, which is kitted out with some of the latest computer-controlled equipment. He is already being assisted by a watchmaker called Andrew Jones, and production of the new series will begin in the middle of next year, by which time the workshop should be fully equipped to cope with the increase in production.

For the time being, however, Smith is busy completing the last of his first series of wristwatches, and two hand-made wrist tourbillons with the Daniels Co-Axial Escapement, before he starts work on a series of three wristwatch tourbillons bearing the RW Smith name. After that, it is just a case of "watch this space" for more news on the revival of English watch-making, Manx style. ●



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