

< exhibition >

The Genius of George Daniels



Roger W. Smith looks at the thirty-six pieces from the Daniels workshop as seen during an exhibit celebrating six decades of work by the modern era's most celebrated watchmaker and designer of the co-axial escapement

BY ROGER W. SMITH





Above left: The first Daniels watch constructed with his co-axial escapement design.

Above right: Close-up view of the one-minute pivoted-detente chronometer tourbillon, the very first watch made by George Daniels.



The George Daniels Retrospective Exhibition was recently held in London to celebrate the achievements of a man who in his eightieth year must be regarded as the greatest living horologist of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This unusual event, organized by Sotheby's and Bobinet, was to be one of those rare occasions in life that watchmakers and horologists from all over the world will be talking about for many years to come.

Here, in a single room, were assembled a lifetime's worth of horological creations by Dr. George Daniels M.B.E. Involving more than a year's effort to plan and organize, all but one of the pieces were on display thanks to the generosity of their owners.

I was fortunate to have been invited to join the opening evening event this past July 17th at Sotheby's in London. With the watches magnificently displayed in glass cabinets surrounding the exhibition room, invited guests, among them many clients, friends and associates of Daniels's, drank champagne, ate canapés, mingled and busily chatted.

Later in the evening the exhibition was formally opened by Jonathan Darracott of Sotheby's, after which George Daniels spoke briefly about his horological beginnings as well as

his experiences from later years.

Now held in high regard as a watchmaker, George recalled a conversation from a time when he was less renowned. It concerned a Swiss technical engineer who was involved in the early development of the quartz wristwatch. The man proudly announced that mechanical watches were to be relegated to posterity now that quartz accuracy had been achieved. To which George replied, "except for the fact that quartz watches are finished as soon as the battery commits suicide, and where are you then?"

George quickly realized he had to produce a mechanical watch that could compete with the new quartz timekeepers and not give out at the least-expected moment. As you

may know, this ultimately led to the development of the Daniels co-axial escapement and its eventual acceptance by Omega.

The Daniels watches

The thirty-six watches were displayed in chronological order of manufacture. Watches one to eight were the one-minute detent chronometer tourbillons with retrograde hour display; watch nine was the magnificent spring detent chronometer tourbillon with fifteen-second remontoire and equation of time. Watches ten to fourteen contained the Daniels independent double wheel escapements, as did watch fifteen, the first space traveller, which led to the famous chronograph version sixteen made to commemorate



Gold, double-dial, one-minute tourbillon calendar watch with Daniels's slim co-axial escapement. It utilizes a special differential gearing for the sub-dial indication of the day of the week and date.

Dial side of the first Daniels watch



This pocket chronometer features Daniels's slim co-axial escapement and jumping seconds. At right is Daniels at his bench.



man's landing on the moon. This particular watch, number sixteen, held personal memories for me. I had first seen it as an eighteen-year-old student at the Manchester School of Horology when George visited there. When I asked if I could see the watch at the end of the chain in his pocket, out it came. I would never have believed that it was possible to make such a watch by hand. Unbeknownst to me at the time, the encounter was to change my life, eventually leading to my studying watchmaking under George's tutelage some years afterwards.

Probably the most important was watch seventeen, which contained the first Daniels co-axial escapement. Watches eighteen and nineteen were single-barrelled, one-minute tourbillons with the Daniels co-axial escapements. Their beautiful engine-turned dials are set with gold chapters.

Watches twenty and twenty-one are both chronometers fitted with the Daniels slim co-axial escapement and dead seconds. Watch twenty-two is the Grand Complication, and watch twenty-three, the last pocket watch, is a four-minute tourbillon with the laterally positioned Daniels compact chronograph mechanism.

The remaining thirteen pieces were wristwatches that included

watch twenty-nine, a four-minute tourbillon fitted with the Daniels slim co-axial escapement, and a Daniels compact chronograph mechanism. Number thirty was a gold double-dialled, one-minute tourbillon calendar wristwatch with Daniels slim co-axial escapement.

The remaining pieces were a selection of Swiss production watches that George used as test pieces for his escapements. The final pieces were a selection of the Millennium wristwatches made to celebrate the eventual acceptance of the co-axial escapement by the Swiss watch industry.

Life's work

In a short overview such as this it is difficult to summarize the life's work of this great man. I believe the watches should speak for themselves. For many of us who have spent hours pouring over the mouth-watering images found in George's watchmaking manual, aptly titled "Watchmaking," the exhibition was a golden, though short-lived, opportunity to get a little closer to the product of his genius. (The exhibit closed only a week later.)

Viewing the timepieces in these three main series: the hour retrogrades, the Daniels independent double wheel and the co-axial

escapements, it is clear that each is a masterpiece in its own right, with the mysterious trail of the watchmaker's mind detectable through the subtle changes to the styling and layout of each creation. These timepieces, never overly embellished, have an elegance that can only be achieved through supreme mastery and complete confidence in one's own art. ☺

Roger W. Smith is a noted watchmaker who creates handcrafted watches at his workshop, Roger W. Smith Ltd, on the Isle of Man in England, not far from the workshop of George Daniels.

