

Rule Britannia!

Roger Smith, English watchmaking and the Series 2

BY THEODORE DIEHL



Roger Smith working on a pocket watch

Several years ago the Japanese government created the institution of a “living legend” program, the purpose of which was to protect ancient traditions as well as educate the public. Swordmakers and pottery masters are typical examples of legendary trades that have been raised to art forms and even become culturally integral to Japanese society. The English, however, despite their love of aristocracy and the pomp and circumstance from times of yore have no such tradition in place, except perhaps orders such as knighthoods. These are perfectly suited to public acknowledgement of a job well done, but far too general as to be helpful in preserving real traditions.

The time has come for that to change, however, if it were only for the sake of English horology. Yes, you heard me right: English horology. Long before “made in Switzerland” had any meaning, English horology was the high point of the art for hundreds of years, when Swiss watchmaking was considered crude and second rate, and it had not yet achieved its current





status. In the period spanned by people such as Hooke, Tompion, Harrison, Mudge, Graham, Earnshaw, Arnold and Kendall, English clocks, and later pocket watches, had the unimaginable status perhaps only reserved today for the newest supercomputer or robot.

The realization of an accurate timekeeper was considered something quite extraordinary and almost bordering on alchemy in the eyes of those people ill at ease in the company of mathematics and science.

Presently the British Isles has two people who might be granted a title of “living legend.” Driven by their passion and knowledge they are literally keeping a 400-year-old tradition of English horology alive and well and, however small, even prospering within the world of watch collectors today. These gentlemen, George Daniels and his former apprentice Roger Smith, both work on the Isle of Man. As the legendary Daniels has decided to take more time to enjoy the fruits of his labor, he has handed the torch over to his



Calendar view of No. 2 pocket watch

former apprentice, who can clearly now also be called a true master watchmaker. What these gentlemen have done is resurrect the art of handmade watchmaking, accomplishing this with only the most basic machines and hand tools avail-

able, just as their counterparts did hundreds of years ago. They make up only a handful of people in the world working this way. That’s how difficult it is.

At present, Roger Smith is working on the prototypes for his



new Series 2 wristwatch that will become an ongoing series, embodying many typically English attributes—a good reason to discuss English watchmaking from the past, as well as its future.

In His Own Words

“One of the typical aspects of early English watchmaking is the great attention to problems of friction. Many people don’t realize today the absolute necessity of good oils

required to keep a watch running properly. Without this, it’s impossible to make a watch at all!” explains Roger Smith.

“Today we have a large number of synthetic oils available, but in the period of Harrison and Mudge, only animal oils were available, and these were highly unstable, as you can well imagine. This attempt to avoid friction in the movement as much as possible meant less oil was required, but it gave birth to some interesting and unusual movement constructions. Harrison was so fixated on this problem that he even designed some clocks with wooden pallets made from *lignum vitae*. The friction was so low that wood alone was sufficiently tough (whereas present-day designs require synthetic ruby) and since the *lignum vitae* itself contained natural waxy oils in its structure, it was self-lubricating as well. Thus he avoided having to resort to animal oils in those difficult areas such as the escapement.”

The escapement and oil do not go well together, even in present-day watches, so an “oil-less” escapement has taken on the character of the search for the philosopher’s stone, but it is interesting to note that the Daniels coaxial escapement was also designed to function without oil, which could perhaps be seen as a thread to these very English concepts from the past.

“For the series 2, I shall be using the first version of the Daniels coaxial escapement,” says Smith. “The version as developed for use by Omega is the extra-slim version, since the Swiss always go for as thin a movement as possible. In that

version, some parts share specific roles, which keeps the part count, and consequently height, down. For me, this is less of a problem. And this also means I can have separate functions for the impulse and locking of the escapement wheel, as well as an additional pinion, which I prefer.”

Inspiration

“One of my greatest sources of inspiration for my work, including the Series 2,” Smith continues, “is the work of Thomas Mudge, in particular a group of chronometers that were known as the Pennington clocks. These were originally designed by Mudge but never realized during his lifetime. His son felt that this design was the finest of his father’s work, so after his father’s death he approached Howells and Pennington and had them built. These were based upon the so-called blue and green Mudge chronometers that were originally submitted to the Board of Longitude. These clocks are works of art, the layout of the movement design is just magnificent, just as the workmanship. Both have a verge escapement as a basis, as well as a remontoire and are not only technical wonders, they are beautiful to look at. This is something I want to convey within the Series 2,” Smith imparts.

“From contemporary times, the Omega 30mm calibers are, in my opinion, one of the best designed movements ever made, and it has appeared in many different forms and types through the years. In horology, one always starts a new idea by taking the best from the past, and then you reinvent it.

“This Omega caliber has been

a source of ideas and inspiration that has influenced my approach to the design of the Series 2 movement. In any case, in terms of basics, the sense of proportion in the movement layout is particularly noteworthy and they do share the same diameter of 30mm, which is a perfect size for my watch, since the case diameter will be 37.6mm.”

It’s clear from this statement that Smith will not be partaking in the craze for oversized wristwatches that hit the watch market during the past years.

Pocket Watch Versus Wristwatch

One of the greatest differences between a pocket watch and a wristwatch is simply the size of the beast. For the construction of a pocket watch movement, the only really specific tools you need are a depth-gauge, a couple of lathes and a drill. The parts are larger, easier to work by hand, easier just to hold in your fingers.

“Making a wristwatch is much more work than a pocket watch. Some additional tools are required, but it is mainly a different job dealing with such small parts. It takes more

time and is more finicky. I would love it if the pocket watch made a comeback—maybe it will become the next rage in the watch market.

“In any case, there is a lot of pocket watch aesthetics in the Series 2, which is a deliberate choice I made,” Smith states. “The dials are massive silver or gold, with a healthy thickness that allows for a ‘richer’ turning work. This effect is clearly visible. The movement design must also be a pleasure to view, not just for its finish but also the layout of the parts, the structural design. In a handmade watch of this type, the workmanship must be perfect, of course. But the goal is not to duplicate a machine finish; it must still look like it is a product of the human hand, yet possess a neat regularity. This is a technical issue,



No.2 pocket watch



but it is also a visual and aesthetics issue. This aspect is a very thin line to walk along, and the effect can be ruined quite easily if you go too far one way or the other.”

The Future

“You know, there are no schools in the world where you can learn the kinds of things I am doing here. Under Daniels, I first had to go off on my own and gather up all the basics myself, before he would even take my work seriously. He told me literally that I would have to learn it all myself, and I paid the price with long hours of study and making my own mistakes.

“At the moment there is one person here who I’m training for this kind of work. But it would be fantastic to have a few more really talented people here in the shop, also to educate them in what this tradition means and its goals. The WOSTEP

schools are certainly of a very high level, yet virtually nothing we do here is taught there. A WOSTEP student would have to spend several years after leaving school in order to learn the different specialties required to make a watch working mainly with hand tools. But it would help ensure the future of this type of traditional watchmaking in England, and there are clients who want to purchase watches like this too, so it is not idle tomfoolery to pursue it,” Roger Smith concludes.

It all sounds idyllic, but the

training required is immense, and corresponding qualities such as patience are also needed in large doses, so we can only guess if there are others who, like Roger Smith, are able and willing to take up the challenge. Many people will never be able to afford the watches he produces, as they are among the most expensive of their kind in the world. But I for one am happy that people like him are out there, preserving valuable traditions of horology for the future in a quiet and reserved yet legendary way. ☺