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## George Daniels: An opportunity to buy a truly Man-made timepiece

By Simon de Burton

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Given that the Isle of Man measures just 30 miles by 15, its significance to the history of modern watchmaking is disproportionately large – and it is about the only place in the world where it is possible to find a wristwatch that is genuinely “hand made” in the great English tradition.

The island, perhaps best known for its tail-less cats, motorcycle road racing and sympathetic tax regime, was once the home of a watchmaker called John Harwood, who moved there shortly after the second world war and set about designing the world's first automatic wristwatch.

But its most famous horological resident is undoubtedly George Daniels, who has lived on the island since 1982 and has come to be regarded by many as the world's greatest living watchmaker during a career that began more than 60 years ago.

Last month, he travelled to Buckingham Palace to receive a CBE from the Prince of Wales for services to horology, to go alongside the MBE he received from the Queen for the same reason in 1981.

His greatest claim to fame is the invention of the co-axial escapement that is unaffected by changes in the viscosity of its lubricant and which makes for the most accurate mechanical watch mechanisms in production.

Mr Daniels perfected his escapement in 1975, only to spend more than 20 years trying to persuade the Swiss of its merits, before it was eventually adopted by Omega in 1999. Co-axial movements are now used in all the brand's best models.

More instantly tangible proof of his brilliance, however, can be seen in the entirely hand-made timepieces that he began to create in 1969 – there have been more than 23 pocket watches, each of which took about 2,500 hours to complete from components that Mr Daniels, now 84, created from scratch.

One of the few that have appeared at auction fetched £205,770 (\$300,080) at Sotheby's New York in 2002, but is now likely to be worth at least twice as much.

To mark the new millennium he and Roger Smith, his then apprentice, created a series of 50 wristwatches containing co-axial escapements which quickly sold out at prices of between £20,000 and £30,000 – again, those that appear at auction now fetch up to £80,000.

In the interim, Mr Smith has established his own workshop on the Isle of Man, creating hand-made wristwatches at the rate of about 10 a year and with a starting price of £72,000.

Now, he and his mentor are to collaborate again on a series of 35 “anniversary” wristwatches that Mr Daniels will design and which Mr Smith and his small team of engineers will produce.

The watches, which are being created to mark the 35th anniversary of the invention of the co-axial escapement, will, of course, contain the magic mechanism – but with an important modification that, for the time being at least, the pair are keeping to themselves.

Mr Daniels says: “As well as marking the anniversary of the co-axial

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escapement, I would like these watches really to do something to put the Isle of Man on the map as the place to go if you want to buy a completely hand-made watch in the English style."

"We really are the only people in the entire world who do this."

Typical features of the "English style" are frosted movement plates, silver, engine-turned dials and jewels set in gold chatons rather than directly into the movement baseplate.

Mr Smith comments: "Today, watchmaking is closely identified in our consciousness with Switzerland, yet English horology was considered the high point of the art for hundreds of years."

"This forms the basis of our philosophy towards watchmaking. What we are trying to do is to reinterpret the past, while using modern horological developments – such as the co-axial escapement – to create exclusive and distinctly English wristwatches for the connoisseurs of today," he says.

"Instead of simply punching or stamping dials from non-precious metals and giving them a chemical finish, for example, we make ours from several separate parts of silver or gold that are hand made and meticulously soldered together.

"Likewise, frosting [the delicate, egg-shell like finish used by a handful of modern watchmakers today for movement baseplates] is usually created by micro-blasting with special sand under high pressure which achieves the effect simply and quickly.

"We, however, do it in the classical manner, using a fine metal brush turning on a spindle. Each tiny, fine steel thread of the brush actually microscopically beats the surface, creating the subtle frosting effect."

Such working methods add considerably to the time it takes to create each watch and are partly responsible for the fact that the Daniels Anniversary models are set to cost £142,000 each.

Yet one cannot help but think that such an investment in a timepiece created by the world's greatest living watchmaker and his protégé can only prove to be a good one – especially since it will be truly "Man-made".

To learn more about Roger Smith watches and the Daniels Anniversary models, see: [www.rwsmithwatches.com](http://www.rwsmithwatches.com)

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