

# Great British revival

Some of the finest watch brands in the world are of British origin, and many are at SalonQP. By **Robin Swithinbank**

Although the Swiss are in the vanguard of fine watchmaking, Britain has a rich history in the field and is still producing master watchmakers, including Roger Smith. His workshop on the Isle of Man is one of the last bastions of 18th-century English watchmaking.

Three hundred years ago, horology was a very British affair, advanced by the likes of John Harrison, who solved the problem of establishing longitude while at sea with his marine chronometer, and George Graham, the "father of the chronograph". The Graham name lives on in a contemporary collection of watches – although Swiss Made, the brand heritage is proudly British.

Today, Smith and his elite team of craftsmen keep the history alive, producing one-of-a-kind pieces for private clients. His exquisite handmade designs, which carry the Smith name on their dials, use fêted inventions such as the highly accurate co-axial escapement, created by the late, great George Daniels, Smith's mentor and the only watchmaker ever to be awarded the CBE for services to horology.

Closer to the mainstream is Bremont, a British watch brand that has enjoyed a meteoric rise since it was established less than a decade ago by brothers Nick and Giles English. Patriotic to the core, the pair have established a network of British suppliers. The metal used to make Bremont cases is hardened in the same Cambridgeshire facility as the blades for Rolls-Royce turbines.

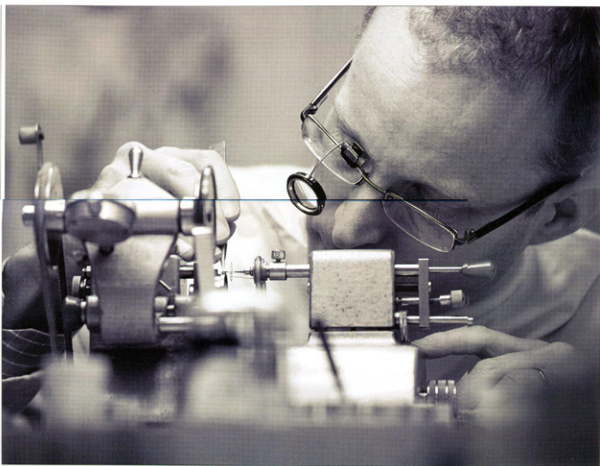
Movements, although supplied initially by Swiss company ETA, are modified to Bremont's own standards under the astute guidance of the brand's technical director Peter Roberts, the first Englishman to graduate from the WOSTEP watchmaking school in Switzerland.

...is his **Robust expertise** that enabled Bremont to dazzle visitors to last year's SalonQP with the Marine Clock, made entirely in England, and boasting numerous innovations applied to a centuries-old discipline.

It tells the time at home, at the destination, the hours at sea and provides a range of data of use on a sea voyage. One has recently been decorated by artist and Peeling Stone Rommie Wood (see opposite), a unique piece that is also at the event.

The English brothers aim one day to produce a watch made entirely in Britain – an ambition borne not just of a love for Queen and country, but also of necessity. "The Swiss watch industry is pumping out millions of watches, many of which head to China and the Far East as their insatiable appetite for luxury continues to absorb all that Switzerland can offer," says Nick English.

"Clearly, many components will, for the foreseeable future, have to come from our European friends, but manufacturing in



**Handmade in Britain** top, Roger Smith at work; above, components of the watchmaker's craft

the UK does become a very practical and rewarding option," he concludes.

Being British is a boon the world over. "We trade on our Britishness and are proud to do so," says Vartkes Knudjian, the British-educated CEO of luxury watchmaker Bacles & Strauss. Founded in London in 1789, Bacles & Strauss is famous as the world's oldest diamond company. Its watches may now be pieced together in Geneva at Franck Muller Watchland, but they carry names like The Regent and The Piccadilly. "We're fortunate that buyers around the world think Britishness means quality," says Knudjian.

© British watch brands at SalonQP: Arnold, Bacles & Strauss, Bremont, Daniels, Elliott, Graham, R W Smith, Schofield