

Tributes pour in for a master craftsman

Obituary George Daniels

Simon de Burton on a unique man who mastered all 34 skills

Tributes have been pouring in from around the globe following the death three weeks ago of George Daniels, the leading English horologist, at the age of 85.

Mr Daniels, who had lived on the Isle of Man since 1982, was widely regarded as the world's greatest living watchmaker and was thought to have been the only person to have fully mastered the 34 individual crafts necessary to hand-build a watch from scratch.

Perhaps his greatest achievement, however, was the invention of the Coaxial escapement he began developing in the 1970s. Designed to run unaffected by the deterioration of its lubricant and to keep accurate time for years without requiring attention, it represented the most significant step forward in mechanical watchmaking in more than 200 years.

Mr Daniels battled for a decade to have the benefits of the invention recognised, and it was eventually introduced to the public in an Omega wristwatch at the Basel Fair in 1999. The Coaxial is now accepted as probably the most accurate and consistent mechanical watch movement on the market.

George Daniels was born one of 11 children in 1926, in Edgware, Middlesex. His father, a carpenter, was a violent heavy drinker and the family existed in near poverty. George was just five when he found an inexpensive pocket watch lying around at home – he opened the back and became besotted by what he found inside.

With his mind set on becoming a watchmaker, he left school at 14 and went to work in a mattress factory in order to boost his father's meagre income. He left after a week to become a grocer's errand boy, then found employment in a garage specialising in re-treading car tyres.

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But it was not until after the second world war and national service that he landed his first job with a watchmaker.

He enrolled for horological classes at Northampton Institute – later City University, London – at a cost of almost £2 a year for a three-year course he attended three nights a week after work. He passed his final exams in 1953, marking the end of his only spell of formal training.

Three years later, he started his own watch repair business and, after being introduced to

antique watches by collector Sam Clutton, who also shared Mr Daniels's passion for vintage cars, he established a thriving business mending and restoring early pieces, often making new components to replace missing or worn-out originals.

Repairing a valuable Breguet watch for Mr Clutton led Mr Daniels to visit Maison Breguet in Paris and "...with the introduction to his work, my interest in antiquarian horology was suddenly and obsessively focused upon Abraham Louis Breguet, the most celebrated and admired of watchmakers".

It was an obsession that opened the doors to some of the greatest and wealthiest collectors in the world and encouraged Mr Daniels to begin making his own watches from scratch, always working alone and invariably creating design drawings only after a piece was finished.

Between 1969 and the mid 1990s, he produced more than 20 exquisite pocket watches, each one taking more than a year to construct entirely by hand. They included several grand complication models, including a tourbillon minute repeater with perpetual calendar, equation of time, phases of the moon, thermometer and power reserve display. Of the few Danjels watches that have appeared on the open market, one fetched more than £206,000 in 2002.

Mr Daniels also made two examples of his so-called Space Traveller's watch, the most remarkable of which featured a chronograph, mean solar and sidereal time, age and phase of



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the moon and equation of time indications.

Tina Millar, who established the watch and clock department at Sotheby's in 1970 and employed Mr Daniels as a consultant, remained his close friend for more than 40 years.

"He was an absolutely amazing man and it is difficult to comprehend quite how talented he really was. He personally restored his vintage cars, played the harmonica and illustrated his books."

Another longstanding friend

is Isle of Man watchmaker Roger Smith, who became a protégé of Mr Daniels after first encountering him in 1988 when he visited the Manchester School of Horology where Mr Smith was studying.

"We were all totally mesmerised by what he had to say to us, and when someone asked him what was on the end of his watch chain and he pulled out the Space Traveller's watch we were simply speechless," he says. "No one could believe that it was possible to make such a

thing entirely by hand." Mr Smith became Mr Daniels' apprentice in 1988, working with him for three-and-a-half years and collaborating on the production of 50 Coaxial Daniels wristwatches designed to mark the new millennium.

When Mr Smith left to establish his own business, Mr Daniels gave him his first two commissions and, most recently, the two men worked on designing a series of 35 wristwatches to mark the 35th anniversary of the perfection of the Coaxial

movement. Mr Daniels saw the first completed prototype shortly before he died.

Paying tribute to his mentor, Mr Smith says: "Without him, I don't believe any of today's independent makers would be around. The real art of watchmaking had been lost to mass production, but George turned round and proved that there is still a place for truly hand-crafted pieces by becoming the first watchmaker in history to sit down and make every part of a watch from scratch."