

Obituaries

George Daniels

Horologist who revolutionised mechanical watch design and became a connoisseurs' favourite

GEORGE DANIELS, who has died aged 85, was considered by some to be the greatest watchmaker since Abraham Louis Breguet (1747-1823), and was credited with preventing a battery-powered quartz takeover by showing that a mechanical watch can perform as well as an electronic one.

His greatest contribution was to develop a watch mechanism, known as the coaxial escapement, which has helped to revolutionise the performance of high-end mechanical watches and has been described as the most important horological development for 250 years.

When Daniels first started making watches he was aware that the traditional lever escapement (the part of a watch that regulates its timekeeping) suffered from a fundamental design flaw. The problem, which had perplexed watchmakers for centuries, was its need for lubrication to facilitate the sliding of the pallet stones over the teeth of the escape wheel. This resulted in a change in performance over time as the oil degraded – the effect being, in Daniels's words, "a bit like driving uphill with the handbrake on".

Daniels's coaxial escapement, a deceptively simple-looking arrangement of cogs and levers, virtually eliminated the need for lubrication by significantly reducing sliding friction, thus ensuring greater accuracy over time and reducing the need for servicing.

Yet when he first unveiled the concept in 1976, he faced scepticism from the industry, before the Swatch Group's chairman Nicolas Hayek adopted the idea in the 1980s. Hayek took on the project for Swatch's Omega brand, and in 1990 the company unveiled its first mechanical watch featuring Daniels's coaxial design at the Basel Watch and Jewellery Fair. The event was hailed as heralding a new era in mechanical watchmaking.

In a biography of Arts and Sciences published in 1819, Abraham Rees claimed that it took 24 people to make a watch and observed that they must all be highly skilled and have served lengthy apprenticeships. Daniels, however, mastered the work of so many of these crafts that he was able to create every part of his watches himself, except for the springs and the glass.

From 1968, when he began to build his first timepiece – a gold and silver one-minute portable chronometer tourbillon (watched recently at an auction in the United States for \$285,000) – he specialised in making watches for collectors and connoisseurs, featuring cases, dials and movements which were instantly recognisable as his designs, and



Daniels: each watch typically involved 2,500 hours of work, and he refused to sell watches to people he did not like

incorporated unusual features to appeal to collectors. Before long, eager buyers were clamouring for Daniels's timepieces, which became much-sought-after collector's items, fetching prices in excess of £100,000.

In 2006, to celebrate his work and his 80th birthday, Sotheby's and Bonhams (the antique watch dealer) held a retrospective exhibition of his work, featuring every watch Daniels had made, save one which is held by the British Museum.

One of 11 children, George Daniels was born in Edgware, north London, on August 19 1926 and had a difficult upbringing. His father, a carpenter, was a violent

drunk and the family struggled for money. When George asked his parents about his birth, he was met with abuse, later learning, on applying for a passport, that not only was he illegitimate, he had no birth certificate.

He became fascinated by watches as a child, when, aged five, he found a cheap wristwatch in the street. "I marveled to get it open and I was intrigued with the workings," he recalled. "It was like seeing the centre of the universe. I knew that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to spend the rest of my time with watches."

Forced to seek work at the age of 14, Daniels began working in a mattress factory, reading everything he could about watches

in his spare time. He soon turned this knowledge into cash by repairing clocks, seeking orders by going from door-to-door.

During the Second World War he served in the Army, and in 1945 was posted to the 2nd Battalion the West Yorkshire Regiment in the Middle East. There he earned enough money mending fellow soldiers' watches not to have to draw any pay.

Back in England, Daniels started working with a watchmaker in Edgware, attending evening classes in horology at Northampton Polytechnic (now City University, London). He then set up on his own as a watch-cleaner and repairer.

Initially he repaired watches in

order to finance his love of vintage cars. However a chance meeting in 1960 with Sam Clutton, a founder member of the Antiquarian Horological Society and the Vintage Sports Car Club in Britain, introduced him to upstart and untrike horology. Clutton collaborated on Daniels's first book, *Watches* (1965), and introduced him to the work of Breguet. Daniels became such an expert on the French horologist that he subsequently restored many Breguet watches, and in 1967 was invited to take over the Breguet company; he declined the offer, reasoning that "Daniels, London" sounded better to him than "Breguet, Paris". His book *The Art of Breguet* was published in 1975.

In 1969 Daniels had produced his first mechanical watch. He sold the piece to Clutton, who showed it to other collectors, and Daniels embarked on his career as a specialist watchmaker. Each watch typically involved 2,500 hours of work over a year or more, and he refused to take orders, being particular about his customers: "I was very selective." Daniels recalled, "I never made watches for people if I didn't care for them."

Daniels claimed that there was little money to be made in watchmaking, but his lifestyle suggested otherwise. In 1982 he moved, for tax reasons, to the Isle of Man, where he bought a substantial Georgian house complete with tradesmen's entrance and sweeping drive. There he established a collection of vintage motorcycles and cars, including a 1907 Daimler built for the Earl of Craven. For many years he took part in vintage car races until being "warned off" by the FIA on grounds of age.

George Daniels was awarded the Gold Medal of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers; the Gold Medal of the British Horological Institute; the Gold Medal of the City of London; and the Kullberg Medal of the Stockholm Watchmakers' Guild.

His other books include *English and American Watches* (1967); *The Practical Watch Enthusiast* (1996, second edition 1997), a guide to the various types of watch mechanism featuring pocket watches; *Watchmaking* (1981, second edition 1985); and a autobiography, *All is Good Time - Reflections of a Watchmaker*, published in 2009.

George Daniels, who became horological consultant to Sotheby's in 1976, was appointed MBE in 1981 and CBE in 2010.

He married, in 1964, Juliet Maryatt, with whom he had a daughter, but the marriage was later dissolved, and he admitted in his autobiography that he had not been a good husband or a good father.

George Daniels, born August 19 1926, died October 21 2011