

# 1926-2011 GEORGE DANIELS

**00/24 WatchWorld pays tribute to Dr George Daniels, the British watchmaker reckoned to be among the finest to have lived, who passed away in October.**

If the contribution Dr George Daniels made to watchmaking was merely the invention of the co-axial escapement, it would alone have marked him out as a hugely significant figure. The mechanism, an advancement in the imparting of energy through to the balance without the need for lubrication, has been described as the most important development in horology for 250 years. But his contribution was much greater than that. As Roger Smith, Daniels' one-time protégé and inheritor of his legacy, says, he opened the door for independent watchmakers and breathed new life into the art of watchmaking.

## HAND-MADE

After an early career spent restoring watches and researching vintage and antique timepieces, he became the first person to master the complete range of skills required to conceive, design and build a watch from scratch, single-handedly. His masterful pocket watches quickly became highly sought-after collectors' items. Starting in the late 1960s, he made just 37 in total but showed the way forward for watchmaking of the highest quality. "In the late Sixties and early Seventies the Swiss watch industry was going through turmoil with the advent of quartz, and they were throwing out all this knowledge. He was saying there is a future to this," says Smith. "He proved that the only way to make a great watch is to make it by hand." According to Smith, Daniels was responsible for creating an environment in which the likes of Philippe Dufour, Peter Speake-Marin, François-Paul Journe and numerous other independent master watchmakers, could operate.

## GREAT WATCHMAKERS

It is the aforementioned co-axial escapement with which Daniels will forever be most closely associated. Having first announced his invention in 1976, it took him several years to convince anyone in the Swiss watch industry that this was a worthwhile improvement on Breguet's lever



escapement system. Eventually, it was Swatch Group chairman Nicholas Hayek who showed some faith – since 1999 the co-axial concept has been exclusively used by Omega. "When Daniels was a young boy he'd read books about great watchmakers like Tompion and Mudge who'd all made breakthroughs in horology, and king among these breakthroughs were those around the escapement," says Smith.

## CO-AXIAL ESCAPEMENT

He continues: "In restoring antique watches, he'd seen all the escapements go through his hands.

He knew that the lever escapement is inherently wrong, because of its need to rely on lubrication. He invented the co-axial escapement, he told the world it was the best escapement to put into your watches, and there's no doubt technically it's far superior to the lever escapement." Daniels himself was every bit as forthright in stating the excellence of his invention. "The watch industry is by nature very conservative and slow to adopt new things. But basically, every maker who continues with other escapements will ultimately be trampled by the co-axial for the very simple reason that it is better." ■

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