

Daniels' apprentice carries on in finest English style

Profile Roger Smith

Simon de Burton talks to the man with a famous mentor

The death last year of George Daniels could have marked the end of the road for the truly handcrafted watch, made in the classic English style, were it not for the existence of his apprentice and protégé Roger Smith.

Mr Smith, 41, is working on a series of 35 watches designed in collaboration with Mr Daniels to mark the 35th anniversary of the perfection of the coaxial escapement.

He also has a growing order book for his own "R.W. Smith" models which emerge at the rate of about eight pieces a year from his workshop on the Isle of Man.

The pair met in 1987 when Mr Smith was a 17-year-old student at the Manchester School of Horology where Mr Daniels had been asked to give a lecture. "I had no idea who he was – but by the end of the day I knew I had met one of the greatest watchmakers who ever lived," recalls Mr Smith.

"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 – no one could believe it was possible to make such a thing entirely by hand. It really was an incredible moment, because it made me realise just how exciting the profession I had chosen to study could become."

It was to be some years, however, before Mr Smith could even begin to realise his dream.

"I went to work at TAG Heuer's service centre in Manchester where I spent most of my time replacing batteries and straps rather than working on mechani-

cal movements. It was all a bit soul-destroying, so I decided to write to George asking for an apprenticeship," says Mr Smith. "He wrote back with an outright refusal, but he did say he was willing to discuss my future and that I could fly across to his home on the Isle of Man for a meeting."

Mr Daniels collected Mr Smith from the airport in one of his Bentleys and spent the entire day showing him around his workshop before reconfirming that he could not employ him. "He did, however, give me an old mandrel lathe and a copy of his book, *Watch Making*, before telling me to go off and try to make a watch."

After 18 months, during which the two men had no further contact, Mr Smith called Mr Daniels to announce that he had completed a tourbillon pocket watch which he wanted him to see.

"He made no bones about the fact that he was very unhappy with it. He said it looked too handmade," says Mr Smith. "But he did acknowledge that I had at least made a watch that

worked and said, basically, that I should go away and start again."

Undaunted, Mr Smith did just that and five-and-a-half years later he was ready with his second attempt.

"I actually remade that watch four times because, as my techniques got better, I found myself going to back to improve what I had already done. It was well

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worth the effort because, when George saw it, he said 'Congratulations – you are now a watchmaker'. It was an extremely emotional moment."

At the time, Mr Smith was making a living carrying out trade repairs for local jewellers, but a few weeks after showing Mr Daniels his second watch, his life took a very different turn. "George contacted me

to say he would now give me an apprenticeship and that he wanted to make a series of watches based on the first co-axial movements to come off the production line following the adoption of the invention by Omega."

Mr Smith moved to the Isle of Man in order to take up the offer, which was based on an original plan to make just 10 of the so-called Millennium Watches. The series was ultimately extended to 50.

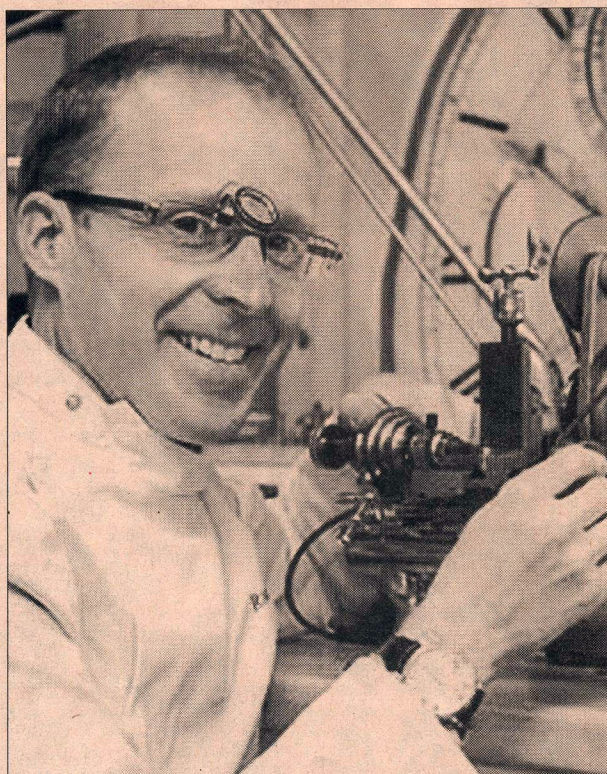
When the project came to an end in 2001, Mr Smith set up a small workshop in the spare bedroom of his home where he made two Daniels tourbillon wrist-watches to his mentor's design and started work on the first series of watches to bear the R.W. Smith name.

Now, after more than a decade of dedicated and painstaking work, Mr Smith has established an international reputation as the leading exponent of hand-made watches in the true English style with features such as frosted movement dials and jewels set in gold chatons rather than directly into the movement base-plate.

He employs five other watchmakers and the company is fulfilling orders stretching into 2015 for the £84,000 R.W. Smith "Series II" models and, next month, will deliver the first of the £172,000 35th Anniversary Daniels watches from the last project the two men collaborated on.

In order that the project could be completed, Mr Daniels bequeathed to Mr Smith all the equipment and machinery from his workshop.

"George left very big shoes to fill, but everything I learnt from him over the decades has given me confidence," says Mr Smith. "It is quite an honour to be able to continue his legacy and, most importantly, to be in a position to be able to maintain the body of work that he left behind which is, undoubtedly, the most important of its type in the world."



Roger Smith: initially, Daniels refused to give him a job