

BENTLEY

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ALEX DOAK:

Made in Manx

THERE IS NO ONE ELSE IN THE WORLD, LET ALONE BRITAIN, WHO MAKES WATCHES LIKE ROGER SMITH. ALEX DOAK VISITED HIS TINY ISLE OF MAN WORKSHOP, WHERE EVERYTHING FROM THE CASE TO THE COGS IS MADE EXQUISITELY BY HAND IN THE GREAT, LONG-LOST ENGLISH TRADITION

In October last year, the world of watchmaking lost a legend – a man universally recognised as the World’s Greatest Watchmaker. Not only had he mastered all 35 of the separate trades required to make a mechanical watch from bare metal, he had also invented the single most important technical advance in horology for a quarter of a millennium. His name was George Daniels. And in his lifetime, Daniels only ever entertained a sole student. His name is Roger Smith.

A clean-cut and genial fellow, stylishly attired with an easy repartee, Smith is far from the hunched, reclusive stereotype one calls to mind at the mention of ‘watchmaker’. He is also surprisingly young for someone so accomplished in his venerable craft, already employing five staff and with a British Horological Institute (BHI) Silver Medal recently to his name.

But then again, Smith has hardly coursed a typical trajectory for a watchmaker. And the mere handful of pieces his workshop turns out every year are about the furthest from your typical wristwatch as you could get. Their pricetag of £72,500 (excl. VAT) and waiting list of two years seem almost conservative when you step inside Smith’s remote Isle of Man cottage and witness the painstaking labour involved. Take a Roger Smith dial: just a single example of this multifaceted silver jigsaw takes two to three weeks of engine turning, engraving, machining, assembling, soldering, engraving again, graining, bleaching... It is diligence bordering on obsession.

“We work totally differently from anyone else,” says Smith as he walks us through his rustic-chic kitchen and straight into a crisply outfitted room of new workbenches. “We’re not churning them out like the Swiss, we’re trying to preserve traditional handcrafted techniques. I want to make wristwatches that are up to the standard of old 18th and 19th century English pocket watches.

“Ultimately, I suppose, I want to put some of the ‘making’ back into ‘watchmaking’.”

Handmaking wristwatches in a similar manner to pocket watches is no mean task, as the difference in scale demands tolerances of 3 to 4 thousandths of a millimetre, as opposed to 1 to 2 hundredths. Indeed, like the big Swiss factories, Smith now has a computer-controlled milling machine for roughing out some of the trickiest parts, prior to fine handfinishing. But when Smith graduated from the Manchester School of Horology in the late 80s, he could barely lathe a clock component, let alone the sort of microscopic pinions buried in his wristwatches. Which is where George Daniels comes in.

“I knew I wanted to be a watchmaker when George visited the college one evening and gave a talk. That really was ‘the moment’ for me,” Smith says, his eyes alight with the memory. “He talked about everything; making the screws, frosting the plates... How it had taken him 15 years to develop his revolutionary Co-Axial escapement, and how he had battled with the Swiss brands who couldn’t get it to work in their own watches. George was frustrated by what he called ‘these damned electricians’ telling him that battery-powered quartz was the future and the mechanical

watch was redundant. But he was astute enough to realise there was a market for his watches. After all, through his restoration work on Breguet clocks and watches he was surrounded by people with Bentleys and important collections of clocks and watches.

“This was a whole world no one really knew about – a world where it’s just one man making the whole watch. It just wasn’t the way things were done, or had ever been done.”

It was the end of this fateful lecture that sealed the deal for Smith, when he approached Daniels and asked what was attached to his chain. “He produced from his pocket the Space Traveller’s watch,” he recalls, “and I couldn’t believe what I was looking at. In my opinion, no other watch has been better made in at least 150 years, since Breguet’s fabled Marie-Antoinette. And it probably surpasses that too – it’s got a dial for a start.”

A chronograph made in 1982 with real and solar time, plus moonphase, the Space Traveller is expected to fetch between £400,000 and £600,000 at Sotheby’s sale of Daniels’ personal horological collection in November – an estimate many believe will be easily surpassed.

“It was just an incredible world and it gave me a sense of giddiness. The same sense you get when you hear an amazing musician. I realised I was dealing with someone special.”



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But Roger, despite winning the BHI's Bronze Medal for the highest marks in his academic year, had only been taught the basic principles of horology and how to repair and service cheap wristwatches. He didn't know how to 'make' watches. It was only when his father, a consultant rheumatologist, bought him Daniels' classic book *Watchmaking* that Smith began to think it was possible.

He wrote to Daniels in 1990 offering his services. To which replace he with Daniels replied, effectively saying 'thanks but no thanks', but inviting Smith to his workshop on the Isle of Man nonetheless, 'to know more about you'.

"There was a moment in our meeting when I thought he wasn't very impressed, but that probably had something to do with his gruff demeanour. George gave me an old hand-operated Mandrel lathe and told me to 'go away and make it.'" Quitting his job at TAG Heuer's service centre after just a year, Smith took on a part-time job at a trade repairers on Manchester's Market Street, spending evenings, weekends and Thursdays and Fridays squirrelled away in his childhood bedroom, working on his first pocket watch.

"No.1 took one and a half years. I took it to the Isle of Man and George simply told me to go away. He was furious – or, at best, very disappointed.

"The watch did work, but it was a bit of a mess; it looked very handmade. George said, 'Now you know you can make a watch that

works, go away and practise. The hand of the maker should be invisible – it should look begotten not made'."

Smith's No.2 pocket watch took him another five and a half years. "Well, the first No.2 was in fact made within a year, but once completed I looked at certain components I'd made at the beginning and they weren't as good as recent components. I had to go back and make them all again." Over those five and a half years, Smith reckons he re-made his second pocket watch four times before getting to a point where he couldn't improve on anything. So he went back to George.

"It was one of the most phenomenal meetings of my life. For the first five minutes, he just carried on with his paperwork, shuffling things around the kitchen table, while I stood in the corner, terrified, clutching this box I'd had specially made for the watch, thinking, 'This isn't good.'

"He eventually muttered, 'Well, have you got a watch?' You could cut the atmosphere with a knife. He was still furious about the first watch, asking why I'd wasted his time, whether I was trying to con him.

"He started turning the watch over and over in his hands and he didn't say a thing for what seemed like an eternity. Then he asked whether he could open the back. And he started to ask questions... 'Who made your tourbillon carriage?' 'I did,' I replied. 'Who made your detent?' 'Well, I did.' 'And your escape wheel?' 'Me.' 'So who's your casemaker?' 'I made the case myself,' I replied.

"Suddenly he snapped the case shut, and his face transformed – it lit up. With a huge grin he looked at me and said, 'Congratulations, you're a watchmaker!'"

For the next six months, Smith followed Daniels' only piece of advice, which was to develop his own cohesive style. He immersed himself in the history of English watchmaking, visiting museums, libraries and restoring old pocket watches. And then, in 1997, the phone rang.

Daniels' Co-Axial escapement – a very precise regulating mechanism that dispenses with oil, which tends to harden to an abrasive varnish – had finally been adopted by Omega, and to celebrate its industrialisation he had decided to make a series of 50 'Millennium' wristwatches using Omega's Co-Axial parts. Clearly such volumes were impossible for a 72-year-old (Daniels made only 37 other watches in his lifetime) and an extra pair of hands would be necessary. Smith was a shoe-in.

After three formative years working alongside the master, Smith stayed on the island – a suitably serene environment to rival the Swiss Jura – and commenced work on his rectangular Series 1 wristwatches, progressing swiftly to his current circular Series 2: a handsome piece distinguished by that deeply three-dimensional dial, intricately sculpted hands with Smith's signature heart-shaped scalloped tips (inspired by a 19th-century Benjamin Vulliamy piece) and a beguiling movement ticking away through the clear caseback.

What's currently sending collectors into a tizz, however,

is the new Daniels Anniversary watch, which debuted at November's SalonQP watch showcase in London. Celebrating 35 years of the Co-Axial, it is the absolute culmination of Daniels' life work and by assuming responsibility for its production, Smith has essentially assumed his rightful role as Daniels' heir.

"I'd work on the plans in AutoCAD, then take them down the road for comment or approval," explains Roger, now standing in his main workshop, where much of Daniels' workshop has ended up, including two spectacular 1820s engines. "When I showed him the first working prototype of the watch four weeks before he died, it was the first watch I'd ever shown him that he didn't criticise."

"I'm trying to leave a body of work behind that people will look at and think, 'He was trying to create something of worth.' My philosophy is to make watches that are strong, easily restorable and last for many lifetimes – I want them to be loved and treasured in generations to come, in the same way that Breguet's are in this one.

"If there's one thing watchmakers are very good at, it's criticising other watchmakers. And what I don't want is a watchmaker to say, 'Roger Smith was crap.'"

You have to admire the humility of the man. Especially one who appears to be filling the shoes of the World's Greatest Watchmaker more than adequately **③**

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