

A WORD FROM THE WISE

If you told 85 year-old George Daniels he was the world's greatest horologist he would, most likely, agree. Henry Sands pays homage to the watch world's Almighty.

Shortly before meeting George Daniels, I asked my friend Nick Foulkes – regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on high-end watches and author of several books on the subject – how he was regarded. He replied: 'George is the watchmaker's watchmaker. A hugely respected expert author and historian, was recently awarded with a CBE, and owns a tremendously impressive vintage Bentley (the Birkin single-seat Bentley 4.5 litre Supercharged racer). Basically, he is regarded as God.'

Right. As I darted through the rain, pouring down in an almost biblical manner over Pall Mall, there seemed something quite apt about having breakfast with God. But by the time I sat down at the breakfast table, ten minutes early for our scheduled appointment, George had already finished his breakfast. 'Let's go to the drawing room. It's quieter there' he said, ignoring my hopeful looks towards the eggs benedict, or even his discarded toast. George is not one to hang about; after all, time is of the essence. George's Bentley was on display in the rotunda when we met. Walking past it, I mentioned that I could not remember seeing so many

admiring glances from members. 'I have that effect', he replied with a cheeky grin. Although George was over 40 when he made his first watch, his love affair with time started when he was a five-year-old child after finding a cheap wristwatch on the street. 'I managed to open the back and was intrigued by the workings inside. It was like seeing the centre of the universe. I knew then that I wanted to spend the rest of my life working with watches.' Apart from a period in the army, where he was posted to the Middle East with the 2nd Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment and where he learnt to swim in the Suez Canal, his professional career has been devoted to time. 'Even during my time in the army I spent much of it repairing my fellow soldier's watches,' a hobby that proved lucrative enough for him not to have to draw any pay for two-and-a-half years. But George's greatest accomplishment, and what he is best known for, is the creation of the co-axel escapement – a system whereby radial friction is used instead of sliding friction in the watch mechanism. To you and me, that means you get longer service intervals and greater accuracy over time. Indeed, George takes so much care of his

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timepieces that each one takes over year to make. They sell for £142,000.

Is he worried about advancements in electronic watches affecting the future of the traditional timepiece? 'Of course there will be huge advancements made with electrical watches probably offering more weird gadgets and accessories, but while that all might be attractive to a younger generation, as they mature they develop taste, and hopefully appreciate the quality of high-end timepieces.'

Staring out of the drawing room window and into the rain, George then looked almost melancholic for the first time, as if the word 'quality' had flicked a switch in him. In lowered voice, almost oblivious to my presence, he stammered: 'But watchmakers, like many other craftsmen nowadays, are different from when I started. They have no interest in applying strict measures, they are only focused on profit and refuse to believe that it takes hours upon hours to truly master a skill. Unless people are prepared to really dedicate those hours, there will be no success or improvement any more.' before seemingly becoming aware of my existence again.

'Young people these days are just not prepared to put risk into enterprise. There is a reluctance to expose themselves, when actually, if you really put the effort in, success is simple,' George said, leaning in and looking me deep in the eye. And it is not just in the world of horology in which George has had significant success. It is his second hobby that brings him together with the club, vintage car racing. After buying his first vintage car at the age of 21, he has since restored and owned eight other cars. Having won over 40 trophies for his racing efforts, the most recent of which coming last year aged 84, he has always gained more satisfaction from winning a car race than completing a watch. With his grin back on his face he reminiscently said: 'There is no feeling quite like winning a big car race; the

camaraderie - nothing beats it'.

George has been a member of the club for over 30 years, and considers the environment a 'bastion-of-civility' set in a fast changing world: 'Other than those wretched air conditioning systems that have been installed, I don't think the club has changed at all since I first joined. I like that.' To commemorate the 35th anniversary of his co-axial invention, George is, with his 40-year-old protégé Roger Smith and the help of seven craftsmen, hoping to complete eight new watches in 2011. Beyond that George does not envisage further developments to his style, nor any need for such: 'I will be remembered as the man who revolutionised the wristwatch. My mechanism is still so far beyond the rest of the industry that there seems little need to try to improve it further now.' With that, he pulls from his pocket an intriguing blue box holding what is by far the most impressive looking pocket watch I have ever seen. 'You can't beat that', he beams.

Does he have any regrets? Of course he doesn't: 'I have absolutely none whatsoever. In fact I think I have lived the perfect existence, and not many people would say that.' No, I do not suppose they would. 'Some people have said I am too self-centred, but I would not say I was arrogant. Egocentric perhaps, but I just know that if things are done my way, they are bound to succeed.'

Noticing the rain had stopped and the interview was drawing to a close, George looked around the room: 'Now, where is my chap? We're supposed to be going for a quick shopping trip to Jermyn Street before heading home to the Isle of Man.'

As I left George and headed back down Pall Mall, with my now broken umbrella from the earlier gale and a wet sock from a hole in the sole of my left shoe, I was certainly feeling altogether more mortal than I had done an hour earlier. But then I suppose that is okay if you compare yourself to God, I reassured myself.

