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Magician's APPRENTICE

Roger Smith reveals how he learned from the master

Edition One

Meet the Magician's Apprentice

When the iconic watchmaker, George Daniels, spoke at the Manchester School of Horology in the late 1980s, he struck a chord with one particular student. A few years later, that student – **Roger Smith** – began the long and trying process of impressing his idol with his own handcrafted timepieces. Persistence paid off and, nearly three decades on, Roger has followed in George's footsteps to become one of Britain's most renowned and innovative watchmakers. We meet the intriguing fellow who is making the heirlooms of the future

Ironically enough, 'patience' is an important word in the world of horology. If you're a craftsman, you need plenty of it in order to create a beautiful, absorbing timepiece that will thrill collectors and outlive you across the centuries. If you're a watch enthusiast and you want a bespoke piece from the esteemed British maker, Roger Smith, you'll need to wait eight years before he'll even find the time to start on it. Patience, then, is a virtue.

For the non-academic lad from Manchester who struggled at school and applied for a place on an horology course simply because he wanted a practical job, it seemed unlikely that he would ever have the patience required to excel in his field. At 16, a year feels like a lifetime and Roger Smith concedes that those early days were a lesson in humility; a sharp introduction to the art of playing the long game.

"That was the hardest bit," he says, from his small, unassuming workshop on the Isle of Man. "I didn't start making watches until I was 19 or 20, when I was inspired by George Daniels, and that was one of the earliest battles. When I started



making my first pocket watch, it was all about the lack of patience. It took many years for me to calm down and learn to make something that's very high quality, to stop worrying about getting the part made and into the watch. I don't know whether age overtook my impatience, but it was a struggle at first."

Having been inspired by a very special visiting speaker, Dr George Daniels – widely considered to be the greatest horologist of his time – Roger set about creating his first pocket watch. At the age of 22 he took the watch to Dr Daniels, full of anticipation, only to be told that the watch was not up to scratch. Not until five years later did he venture back to Dr Daniels' workshop with his second attempt.

"George Daniels was not the sort of person I would have dared go back to with my second watch until I knew it was right," Roger says. "He didn't suffer fools gladly and I was aware of that, so I would really have shot myself in the foot if I'd gone back too soon."

Remarkably, Roger's latest creation passed muster and Dr Daniels was so impressed, he invited the young pretender to move to the Isle of Man and

work with him on the now legendary Daniels Millennium series. As the creator of the co-axial escapement – which takes away the need to oil the escapement and has been hailed as the most significant advance in horology in 250 years – Dr Daniels made an exciting collaborator and it was the beginning of a long friendship. Their final collaboration was in 2010, creating a series of 35 wristwatches to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Dr Daniels' invention, for which he was awarded a CBE for services to horology. When the master passed away two years ago, Roger was left contemplating how he would keep the legacy alive.

"It was only really after George had died that I realised what a huge impact he had on my life," Roger says. "Everything I've ever done, or wanted to do since, was down to him, as is everything I do today."

Dr Daniels bequeathed his entire workshop to Roger and the presence of his machines in Roger's studio is a physical manifestation of the ethos that runs through everything Roger does. Launched in 2006, Roger's Series 2 is a stunning example of an entirely handmade timepiece. The workshop produces 10 of these pieces per year, each priced at around £90,000 to £100,000, and each one takes two years to make.

"The watches we make are based around George's approach to watchmaking, which we call the Daniels Method, where one guy learns to make a watch from start to finish," Roger says. "Until watches started to be mass-produced, 32 trades were involved in the making of one pocket watch and that's what I had to learn. It's a very

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unique approach; it makes you look at watches in a very unique and obsessive way. You look at every detail."

Still happily settled on the Isle of Man with his wife, young daughter, dogs and world famous workshop, Roger is clearly committed to carrying on the great tradition advocated by Dr Daniels. But he's also looking to the future of horology.

"We're using George's great invention, the co-axial escapement, but we're always looking for ways to modify and improve, so in our own way we're at the cutting edge of timekeeping. George taught me that it's not just about making watches, but also about making a difference."

Perhaps surprisingly, Roger

admits that he doesn't have a vast collection of watches himself, just four or five examples of high quality engineering from the 1950s and 60s. One timepiece, however, is on his ultimate wishlist...

"George Daniels' Space Traveller pocket watch," he says without a moment's hesitation. "It sold recently for £1.3million, so that will never be in my collection. But I'm servicing it soon and I'm looking forward to seeing it. To me, that watch is just sensational and it condenses all his ideas and his approach into one piece. It shows how incredible he really was."

Although Roger is not convinced by recent suggestions that the British watchmaking industry is giving Switzerland a run for its money just yet, he is happy to be at the forefront of an

ever-growing, ever-evolving charge.

"George Daniels used to say that the great thing about watches is, they have amusing, useful, intellectual, aesthetic and collectible qualities. You create this tiny thing that comes to life and can live for 200 years if you look after it. Find me another item that has those qualities."

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