



Master watchmaker Roger Smith with one of his hand-crafted watches at his workshop on the Isle of Man.

BRITAIN'S FINEST WATCHMAKER

Producing just ten or so pieces annually, Roger W Smith OBE is Britain's horological grand master, committed to making the best watches in the world, one by one, at his workshop on the Isle of Man

By Jola Chudy

An apprentice of the great George Daniels who invented the coaxial escapement, Roger W Smith is Britain's greatest living watchmaker and the natural successor to the man who single-handedly brought British watchmaking back to life. In testament to his tenacity, the young Smith made a pocket watch, taking over a year to craft it, only to have it rejected by his future mentor. He went back to the drawing board and several painstaking years later, was accepted by Daniels as his sole student, a legacy that he now keeps alive, hand-making exceptional timepieces in his Isle of Man workshop. Producing around ten or so watches a year, with each one made by hand, a Roger Smith timepiece has a waiting list of several years. Each piece is finished to the highest standards of design and decoration. It is, says Smith, an expression of the best possible watch that human hands can make.

What motivated you to become a watchmaker and does the same thing still motivate you?

It was the technical challenge and it still motivates me. I have always enjoyed making things and when I first met George Daniels and understood that he made a watch from start to finish, I wanted to do the same one day. British watchmaking has always been about precision timekeeping and George Daniels with his coaxial escapement was about precision but also improving what is already there, the lever escapement was proven to be a very inefficient escapement and he looked at that and improved on it. He was my inspiration and mentor and as soon as I met him it was all I wanted to do. My pieces feature the Daniels coaxial escapement that we have developed and built upon.

What is special about a Roger Smith timepiece?

I am driven by the pursuit of making the best possible watch that I can. Our craftsmanship follows British traditions; dials are engine-turned and the jewels set in gold chatons; we have an unswerving ethos to only craft watches by hand to a high standard of excellence. Our clients need to wait a few years for a watch, and that's because each part is made by us and



The Roger Smith Series 3 timepiece.

finished by us to the highest standards. It is why we only make ten watches a year; each one is a work of mechanical art.

How hard is it for British talents to become established?

With the right amount of work and dedication, it is possible. Richard Stenning and Philip Whyte of Frodsham & Co. took 15 years to get to where they are and now have a world-class product that might wipe the floor with a lot of Swiss watches. And that's because it's technically interesting, and it is something real. My work involves creating very technically advanced mechanical wristwatches and I think it is possible for others to do it; I put the work in, a lot of work! I think British watchmaking is looking very positive. Today we can buy the same equipment as the Swiss and we are building the knowledge base here.

Do you think there is a bit of a revival in British watchmaking today?

Yes absolutely. At one point, George Daniels was the only person in Britain making wristwatches. Then I came along and now others are making watches. It's a lot of work and has consumed my life for 25 years.

How can British watchmaking stand up against the Swiss industry?

British watchmakers need to be honest about what they are doing; if they are buying Swiss movements they need to say so. There's room for everyone at all different levels, but we have to be the best at what we are doing. We have to create our own niche, and that means not copying the Swiss, but doing it our way. We could end up with a distinct industry. I don't think we are going to be mass manufacturers of watches in Britain – who knows, maybe in 100 years – but we need to build a core of knowledge as that has gone and needs to be replaced.

Where are your clients from and how do they connect with you?

It's split between the UK, United States and Asia and my customers reach me online; through Instagram or through our web site. I was quite frustrated a few years ago because I couldn't get my story out there so I started making

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videos about how I make my watches and that really helped. The company has grown to 11 people and we really do make all our watches ourselves. We have taken on four new people recently and it's great. It is exciting to see improvements in our workshop as skills are mastered and we use a mix of CNC technology and traditional skills.

Is 'Made in Britain' a help or hindrance and how does that idea of British craft reflect on what you produce?

It makes people interested, but the product has to stand up. There has to be honesty about it. We have five models in the series, although we still only make around ten highly bespoke watches a year, which is slowly increasing, but it will always be a small number of pieces. Ultimately, we are trying to improve the mechanical timekeeper and I have a goal of creating a body of work. We have done a lot of work with the coaxial and seen astonishing results with that, so we are pushing that forwards. It was interesting to come to the Dubai Watch Week Christie's Horology Forum on British watchmaking and hear what everyone thinks, even discuss the millennials!

Do you go to the Swiss watch fairs like Basel or SIHH?

I don't go to them; I don't find a fit because it's a different world to what I am trying to do. They are all about the mass market and they are doing very well, but my focus is on making one of the best and technically advanced watches in the world.

What kind of support do British watchmakers receive?

There is a British Horological Institute, but I think that it is the right time for change. We are ready and there are enough people doing world-class work. There is a willingness to make steps; Bremont is making its own cases, and that is all progress in the right direction. But it takes time and it takes over your whole life, because watchmaking requires you to be quite obsessed. It was an honour to become an ambassador for Britain and to raise awareness of British watchmaking. It is an exciting time for British watchmaking. ★



Left, top: Series 2 and below, Series 4; each Roger Smith timepiece is presented with its own box and certificate. Below: Inside Roger Smith's workshop, watches are made from start to finish, with each one requiring its future owner to wait upwards of a year.

