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# BECAUSE IT'S WORTH IT



Friday 6th May 2011, 12:08am

You may pay a lot for a fine watch, but every one is a feat of remarkable technical skill

Alex Doak

IF YOU ever hear anyone discussing whether expensive watches are really worth the money that's charged for them, try this true story on them. While snorkeling off the Great Barrier Reef some years ago, a chap wearing a Rolex inadvertently knocked it against an outcrop. Torn from his wrist, the watch tumbled into the depths, lost forever. Or so he thought.

Eight years later it was discovered, almost fully swallowed up in the coral, by another diver. It was chipped out, reunited with its owner via the case reference number, and you know what? It still functioned perfectly. Its case hadn't leaked a drop of seawater and with a quick shake, the winding rotor inside spun with a muffled whirr, injecting life into the movement once again, the seconds hand instantly resuming its steady sweep of the dial.

Rolex may be name-checked by rappers alongside Courvoisier and Cadillacs, but the kind of technology that survives under water for years is about a lot more than mere bling. Incredible effort and skill is involved in precision-machining, polishing, assembling, testing, disassembling, adjusting and finally re-assembling the hundreds of components inside a mechanical watch. And then there's the small matter of engineering that watertight case to within micrometre tolerances. And what about the dial decoration, or the stitching on that alligator strap?

## INTRICATE SKILL

James Gurney, editor of specialist watch magazine QP, summed it up at last year's SalonQP showcase in Marylebone. "From astrology to physics on the nano-scale, from prototypes printed in 3D to enamels applied with the finest brushes imaginable, watchmaking brings together professions and technologies in a way that no other endeavour quite matches."

Such intricate skill and craft endows watch movements with their own thrilling beauty – when the alternative is a bit of cheap quartz circuitry, no wonder people want to view the inner workings of their watches and marvel. Hence the modern trend to clear crystal casebacks – take the watch off your wrist, and look at the value inside. But it's what you can't see that's just as important, says Gurney. "Even if your watch has an exhibition caseback, don't assume you can see everything that went into its making. Less obvious is the work that goes into the development of a watch."

Take, for instance, the niche British aviation brand Bremont, an operation with miniscule resources compared to the industry's big players. Like the vast majority of mechanical-movement watch brands, Bremont uses rock-solid movements supplied by Swiss company ETA, which it then modifies and improves.

Peter Roberts, Bremont's technical director (who also happens to teach watch making for Rolex), says that developing an in-house Bremont movement will take around £4m of investment. And while we can probably look forward to a 100-percent-British, in-house Roberts movement in the near future, it's the tirelessly prototyped minutiae that you pay for with a Bremont watch – even beyond their famously robust case, which is treated in the same Cambridgeshire facility that hardens Rolls-Royce's turbine blades.

"The bezel is a unique feature," points out Roberts. "It uses ball bearings that click on a minute-by-minute index. I wanted it to feel just like an old Leica iris aperture – and it took years to develop at tremendous cost."

### MORE TRANSPARENT VALUES

Nevertheless, with the luxury market's post-recession demand for more transparent and honest values, it is increasingly argued that much of the cost in certain prestige watches goes towards marketing and a simple projection of brand position, rather than actual production costs. Especially given certain companies like Nomos Glashütte, which somehow turns out Bauhaus beauties with properly in-house movements for less than £900.

One brand that certainly doesn't stint on its marketing is Omega, still considered one of the best-value Swiss names out there. Keen observers will indeed have noticed prices edging northwards of late, but this isn't to cover the cost of a new Nicole Kidman ad campaign or even the Olympic countdown clock – it is in fact because Omega is quietly revolutionising the standard "Swiss Lever" escapement with their

proprietary "Co-Axial" – the greatest advance in mechanical watchmaking for hundreds of years, practically doing away with the need for lubrication and saving customers from a costly service every three years to replace the old oils.

That's actually giving more bang for your buck than ever before, as Omega's President Stephen Urquhart attests: "It took about five years to develop our in-house Co-Axial calibre... [It] requires particularly skilled watchmakers, who are doing things that have never been done before."

### INDEPENDENT

Which brings us back to British shores – or rather those of the Isle of Man. For the only other watchmaker allowed to use Omega's Co-Axial system is Roger W. Smith, the sole apprentice of the Co-Axial's inventor, George Daniels. One of the world's handful of independent watchmakers keeping the tradition of the truly handmade watch alive, and the only surviving outpost of 19th-century English watchmaking, Smith's workshop of four is currently occupied producing 51 Daniels Co-Axial Anniversary watches to celebrate the mechanism's 35 years – a task that will take over a decade.

At £142,000 a piece, it puts a £3,500 Omega in the shade. But then again, there are few other watchmakers where all 25 handcrafts are executed by a single hand – a hand you can physically shake when you visit the workshop to see your watch in progress.

"I guess the price comes down to pure and practical bean counting," explains Smith. "For some wristwatches sold with lots of accompanying PR and such, price becomes totally relative to fame of the brand. For me though, working this way, it is truly the wages, materials and related costs with a normal profit margin calculated in... Believe me, no watchmaker working like I do will ever be riding around in a

Rolls-Royce, despite the price of each watch.”

Clearly, commissioning and wearing a watch by Roger Smith makes you a patron of English heritage and the arts. But as with every high-end watch with a delicate movement ticking away inside – whether it cost you £500 or £500,000 – it also marks you out as an aesthete; someone who cares about the good things in life; and someone who wishes to remember these good things every time you glance at the time.

#### LEARN THE ART –EXCLUSIVE OFFER

For anyone interested in learning more about the internal workings of fine watches, luxury Swiss brand Jaeger-LeCoultre is offering City A.M. readers a very limited number of free watchmaking classes at its New Bond Street boutique. One of the only shops in London with its own highly-trained, in-house master watchmaker, the boutique will host three-hour classes on Friday afternoons between now and the end of May. To express an interest in attending, email [harriet.grundy@richemont.com](mailto:harriet.grundy@richemont.com), and quote City A.M On Time.



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