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# The British Are Back on the Watchmaking Scene

By FELICIA CRADDOCK

LONDON — For about 200 years, from the mid-17th century onward, responding to the navigational needs and the opportunities of Britain’s global maritime expansion, English clock and chronometer makers ruled the horologic world — until, oddly, they were replaced by the inward-looking, landlocked Swiss.

Only true aficionados remember the great names of that golden era of English watchmaking: Thomas Tompion; John Harrison; Thomas Mudge; George Graham; Thomas Earnshaw and John Arnold.

But a small band of English watchmakers is staging a comeback for the tradition of British horology.

At the more visible end of this resurgence are a few brands gaining a foothold on the international stage, including Bremont, I.W.I. and the recently revived Royal watchmaker, Dent.

But at the heart of the revival is a coterie of small independent workshops making tens, rather than hundreds, of watches each year.

Several owe their inspiration to George Daniels, creator of the coaxial escapement and, for many, one of the greatest horologists of his time, who died last year. Among them is Roger Smith, Mr. Daniels’s pupil, whose seven-person workshop on the Isle of Man produces barely 10 watches a year.

Each is of a technical precision and elegance that few in the mechanical watchmaking industry can match — a feat that ensures his client waiting list is two years long, despite prices that are often in six figures.

Minus the straps and the odd screw, spring or jewel bearing, R.W. Smith watches are entirely made and finished in house, employing the painstaking methods pioneered by Mr. Daniels.

Permitted margins of error are microscopic. The construction of one dial alone, Mr. Smith said during a phone interview from his workshop, takes two weeks of work that can be wiped out in a second if, at the final assembly stage, the solder is heated a fraction too high.

It is this obsession with detail that makes his watches different, he said.

“Ultimately these are my watches,” Mr. Smith said. “I’ve got to make sure that the quality flows through all of these watches. Even down to an insignificant screw or a spring.”

Mr. Smith himself personally completes all the case, dial, hand and final assembly work, and he wears each

watch on his own wrist for two weeks to ensure that it is in perfect working order before it is handed over to its buyer.

A similar attention to detail marks the current work of a company that traces its pedigree to the 19th century: Charles Frodsham & Co.

Now due for release in 2013, the company's long-awaited all-British wristwatch will be handmade, in house; and promises a horologic first in the form of a miniaturized George Daniels double-impulse chronometer escapement.

The escapement — the mechanism that releases energy in pulses to power the timepiece — was originally designed by Mr. Daniels to fit a pocket watch. Richard Stenning, co-director of Frodsham, acknowledged during a recent phone interview that it had been “technically challenging” to accommodate it in the smaller space of a wristwatch.

Still, the time and money involved were secondary considerations, he added. “We're eight years into a five-year project,” Mr. Stenning said: “We're not in a rush. It's more important to get it right.”

“It's a most exciting time” he added. “The English are back on the scene.”

The quest to build an all-British watch has also been a major drive for Robert Loomes, scion of a watchmaking family that traces its roots to the 17th century.

“It's partly a childish enthusiasm of mine,” said Mr. Loomes, in an interview at his workshop in Stamford, in the English Midlands, describing his motivation for creating his company's limited-edition Robin watch.

“When customers said they liked the idea I thought, ‘Well, right, let's make every single bit in this country.’ I know it's possible. And it's possible to do it for a reasonable amount of money rather than ludicrously large sums.”

With design and assembly all done in house, Mr. Loomes chose not to buy the expensive machinery that makes the components for his watch; instead, he searched for engineering companies that might already have suitable machines and could make the parts that he needed.

He discovered that some of the businesses he approached were in fact using machines that had been sold off by dying watch companies and re-purposed after the quartz crisis — the revolution in the 1970s that involved the widespread replacement of mechanical watches with cheaper, electronic timepieces, destroying much of the industry in Britain.

“That just really made me smile,” Mr. Loomes said, “that these things were now going to be used for the job that they were originally built for 65 years ago.”

Mr. Loomes has now made 30 of his planned 100 Robin watches, completing and selling the first in December last year.

He takes a personal interest in where his watches go. “Occasionally, somebody will buy a watch and they’ve never met me,” Mr. Loomes said. “ I ring him up and say thank you, just so they’ve spoken to the man who made their watch.

“People love that. You couldn’t do that on a vast scale, and a lot of the British watchmaking firms are very much like that: it’s linked to characters and individuals.”