

No more heroes

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'English horology was considered the high point of the art for hundreds of years'

Above an RW Smith Series 2 during manufacture in the Roger W Smith workshop on the Isle of Man, **right**, and completed, **below**



Local time

English watchmakers have often been overshadowed by the Swiss, but they are at last resuming their rightful place as world leaders in the industry. By **Simon de Burton**

George Daniels, who died last year at the age of 85, was regarded by many as the greatest watchmaker since Abraham-Louis Breguet. Not only did he master 32 of the 34 skills needed to make a watch from scratch (he even ground his own glass), Daniels also invented the co-axial escapement now used by Omega, and wrote *Watch Making*, the art's seminal modern tome. But perhaps most importantly he was English and he dedicated his life to reviving the art of the handmade English watch. This matters because while the Swiss guard their horological achievements with an almost xenophobic zeal, a trip to the Clockmakers' Museum in the Guildhall, London,

proves that it was in fact the English who came up with all the important ideas.

Robert Hooke invented the balance spring (c1660); George Graham introduced the sweep seconds hand (1700s); Thomas Mudge created the lever escapement (1765); and John Harwood patented the first self-winding wristwatch movement (1924), which Rolex 'developed and perfected'. Even the revered tourbillon complication, widely attributed to Breguet, was conceived by his close friend John Arnold, a Cornishman who died in 1799 without bringing the idea to fruition. Out of respect Breguet fitted his first fully operational tourbillon into an Arnold pocket chronometer, in

1808, and gave it to Arnold's son. It is now in the British Museum.

English watchmaking began to peter out at the start of the 20th century, but a few dial names, such as Smiths and Westclox, continued to make inexpensive wristwatches in this country until as recently as 1980 (although both ran their operations in partnership with larger, American firms). What Daniels did, however, was show the world there was still a market for superb quality watches with components made entirely by hand and finished in the traditional English way, with features such as frosted movement plates, silver engine-turned dials, and jewels set in gold chatons rather than directly into the movement



baseplate. He inspired a generation of independent makers – many of them Swiss – to establish niche businesses creating avant-garde timepieces.

Daniels appears to have achieved his goal of returning English watchmaking to the fore. The most notable exponent of the art is Bolton-born Roger Smith, who was apprenticed to Daniels, became his prodigy and has now assumed the mantle of England's finest watchmaker. Based on the Isle of Man – where Daniels also lived – Smith is working on the second series of £87,000 RW Smith watches using tools bequeathed by his mentor. He also recently completed the first of a proposed edition of 35 £172,000 watches designed two years ago in conjunction with Daniels to mark the perfecting of the co-axial escapement in 1975. 'Watchmaking today is closely identified in our consciousness with Switzerland, yet English horology was considered the high point of the art for hundreds of years,' Smith says. 'This forms the basis of our philosophy. What we are trying to do is reinterpret the past while using modern horological developments to create

exclusive and distinctly English wristwatches for the connoisseurs of today. Instead of simply punching dials from non-precious metals and giving them a chemical finish, for example, we make ours from several separate parts of silver or gold that are meticulously soldered together.'

Those keen to own an English watch but without the means to indulge in one of Smith's creations, fear not – the number of other makers offering more affordable pieces is mushrooming. Robert Loomes, who runs a long-established clock and watch restoration business in Stamford, Lincolnshire, is currently making his own model of wristwatch called the Robin, powered by a 1950s English-made Smiths movement, heavily reworked and elaborately engraved before being fitted into a 39mm case specially made in Sheffield. The hands of the £5,580 watch come from Cambridgeshire, the dials from Bedfordshire, and the crystal glasses from a Hertfordshire optical supplier. Loomes will also launch a 30mm women's version, the Robina.

Norfolk-based Meridian is about to unveil a

£5,000, 46mm, pilot-style wristwatch with a Swiss movement hand-decorated in the English style and with the majority of its key components made in Britain. Likewise, IWI – run from the Lancashire town of Darwen by Ian Walsh, a time-served watchmaker – offers a range of distinctive models incorporating Swiss parts into locally made cases (from £2,500), and Schofield, from West Sussex, has developed the Signalman (£3,342) along similar lines.

Perhaps the most successful brand to have melded Swiss mechanisms with English tradition is Bremont, founded by the brothers Nick and Giles English in 2002. As keen aviators, they entered the highly competitive pilot watch sector long dominated by brands such as Breitling and IWC – and have surprised industry pundits by making Bremont internationally recognised in relatively little time. Based in Henley-on-Thames, Bremont uses Swiss movements but is gradually expanding the level of in-house product. In December it will open a brand new facility on the outskirts of the town, where more than a dozen watchmakers will assemble the brand's range, annual



Above, from left Schofield Signalman, DLC GMT PR; Bremont Victory; Robert Loomes Robin

'We Brits have always been fairly poor at self-promotion, but the knowhow is still there'

production of which has grown from about 1,000 units in 2007 to 5,000 today. 'We are already making some cases here in the UK and are starting to press our own dials,' Nick English says, 'but opening the new facility is the really exciting development. It will probably be the largest centre for English watch production since the days of Smiths Industries. I think we Brits have always been fairly poor at self-promotion and shouting about our history – but the know-how is still there, especially in horology. Thanks to people such as George Daniels and Roger Smith reminding people about it, I think we can fairly say that watchmaking is, finally, coming home.'

All of these English watchmakers will be part of the SalonQP watch exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery, London, November 8-10 (salonqp.com)