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A MARK OF TIME



Words | Emma Johnson

Bronze Medallist of the British Horological Institute, the subject of a Netflix film and honoured in 2018 with an OBE, no-one has done more for British watchmaking than Roger W Smith. Emma Johnson meets him →

Watchmaking itself is an ultimately British endeavour. Over 75 per cent of the mechanical innovations in any watch are British inventions by some of the great British watchmakers of the 17th and 18th centuries

JUST BEFORE CHRISTMAS last year, a quiet, unassuming man walked into Buckingham Palace and stood proudly in front of Prince Charles to receive an OBE for Services to British Watchmaking. Later that day, via social media, he told people that, rather than it being a culmination of a life's work, this great honour merely reminded him how much more there was to do.

"It's now 30 years since I first picked up a filing tool and embarked on making a handmade pocket watch," wrote Roger W Smith. "I had no idea that it would lead to so many other steps towards the rebirth of British watchmaking. However, my work is not done and there are many more goals for me to achieve. The honour of this OBE for Services to British Watchmaking is wonderful recognition of all that has been achieved to date – but your comments have reminded me just how important the appreciation and support of friends from all over the world is to me." This response is entirely typical of a man who has dedicated his life to perfecting and protecting the intricate craft of watchmaking, and in doing so, changed the face of the British horological landscape forever.

Roger W Smith entered the Manchester College of Horology aged just 16 years old. A year later, a visit from watchmaker George Daniels to show his iconic Space Traveller pocket-watch was to change everything. Daniels was a British horologist, based in the Isle of Man, whose watches took over 2,500 hours to make and sold for hundreds of thousands of pounds – he made just 37 watches in his entire lifetime.

Smith was so inspired by Daniels' visit that he made it his life's mission to study and replicate Daniels' work. "We measure time, but we're defined by its moments," says Smith. "A visit by George Daniels...was my moment. Suddenly, my life's purpose was crystal clear."

"I make no apology for being a purist. Ours is the purest of mechanical arts. Our design process is a continual quest for optimum performance"
Roger W Smith

Smith embarked on a seven-year journey to learn The Daniels Method of watchmaking, which included mastering 34 different, and incredibly complex, techniques and skills. After successfully making a watch to Daniels' exacting standards – a process which took nearly eight years – Smith was invited to move to the Isle of Man and work with George Daniels for a further three years, designing and creating watches with him, before establishing the Roger W Smith studio in 2001.

The work Daniels and Smith did together was to become so important to the history of British watchmaking that a documentary made on their relationship, entitled, *The Watchmaker's Apprentice*, gained the attention of Netflix, who bought the feature in 2015. The documentary, in which Smith shared some of his early experiences of working with Daniels, is still available to buy through Amazon.

Today, Smith's studio and home is still in the Isle of Man and he retains a deep connection with both the place and his time with Daniels. "The Isle of Man has given us a beautiful and life-affirming place to be horologists. This tranquil setting assures few distractions and complete focus. I am also proud to display the Isle of Man's unique 'triskelion' symbol on each of our watches as a way of identifying us with the Island. I gather this harks back to an ancient sun-symbol and so, in a way, it also reflects our earliest observations of the passing of time."

Working in his peaceful studio, Smith and his team create just ten watches a year – made to Smith's exacting designs. These series 1,2,3 and 4, are designed to reflect Smith's journey in watchmaking, as well as an open dial version, which puts the functional art of the watches front and centre, and several limited edition or anniversary designs, each with their own



PICTURE CREDITS: © SIMON PARK PHOTOGRAPHY

Pictured Left-Right:
Watchmaker Roger W Smith
in his studio, Isle of Man;
Watchmaker George Daniels;
The Watchmaker's Apprentice
Netflix documentary



distinct qualities, including the GREAT Britain watch, one of his most technically-advanced watches to date. All of his watches are still the only truly handmade British watches in production.

And, while the techniques used to make these watches are traditional at their core, the design and the functionality of the watches is anything but. Smith's ethos is all about pushing the performance boundaries of mechanical timekeeping. "When you talk about 'handmade' there is a tendency to think about watchmaking purely as craft," he says. "This couldn't be further from the reality of our pieces, and our design process is a continual quest for optimum performance." Working in this way has led to the development of the most advanced single-wheel co-axial escapement in modern horology. Smith takes great pride in the fact that his British-designed mechanisms now completely outperform any factory-made mechanical watch in everything from efficiency and longevity to service intervals and, most importantly, timekeeping.

For Smith, though - as he reflected on receiving his OBE - there is always more to do. Mechanical research and development, and the overall design of his range of watches

is ongoing; and with each watch taking nearly two years to create - due to the absolutely uncompromising approach he takes to the Daniels Method - there is always a level of striving for perfection. "I make no apology for being a purist. Ours is the purest of mechanical arts," he says.

And while, over time, Smith begins to share his considerable expertise with his small team of watchmakers, there is no denying that, due to his patient and skilled instruction, and the years of experience and technique he has acquired, each and every watch is still his own, making them a considerable, and very valuable, rarity. "For me, still being a watchmaker and being able to stick to my guns, thanks to support of our collectors, is ultimately what gives me greatest pride." ♦

BUY THE NETFLIX DOCUMENTARY

The Watchmaker's Apprentice: Collector's Edition, in which Smith shared some of his early experiences of working with Daniels (pictured above) is available on Amazon, priced around £19.[amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)