

PAUL ROUTLEDGE MEETS

It takes Roger as long as a year to hand-make one watch and his rich clients will pay up to £500,000... but he'd prefer it if they told no one they were wearing it

British craftsmanship is not dead. It's alive and ticking on a remote corner of the Isle of Man. Literally, for this is the workshop of Roger Smith – the nation's foremost watchmaker and last to keep alive the art of building timepieces from scratch.

The boy from Bolton, who tinkered with Meccano and Airfix kits rather than do his lessons, is saving a great tradition of horology from disappearing into the mists of history.

In his tiny studio below the slopes of Snaefell, he makes 10 watches a year by hand. There are not just timepieces, though. He makes pocket watches, too.

Prices start at £80,000 and rise to many times more than that for the most intricate bespoke pieces.

They can take up to a year to make, and there is a waiting list of wealthy people in Hong Kong, the US and in the UK who want to be the proud owner of a unique RW Smith watch.

Strangely, mega-rich Arab oil

princes are not beating a path to his door. They prefer a flashy Rolex because of the brand. But Roger hates the very idea of "branding". His art is a discreet way of life.

All started in the 80s, when the teenager was hopeless at school. "I was hopeless at school," he says. "I was interested in making things, and taking them to bits to see how they worked."

Like my first watch, a Timex, and my mother's sewing machine," he tells me. "I was interested in making things, and taking them to bits to see how they worked. Like my first watch, a Timex, and my mother's sewing machine."

His father, a consultant geologist who collected clocks, was not a practical man but he recognised his son's potential genius.

Hearing about a course at the now-defunct Manchester Institute of Horology, he enrolled Roger, who says: "The first day was brilliant. I enjoyed it so much I have

never looked back. Being able to sit down and tinker with lathes and make things was amazing. I couldn't believe you were allowed to do that."

He came top of his class and won the British Horological Institute's broadsword for the best apprentice of the year. And while studying at university, he attended a lecture by the legendary

watchmaker Dr George Daniels. He was the last in a centuries-long line of English horologists stretching back before John Harrison of Waterford, who invented the revolutionary sea travel by chronometer in 1761.

Daniels, a bit of a loner who had moved his workshop from London to the Isle of Man, inspired him to build a watch by the Daniels Method from scratch. Using Daniels' classic manual, Watchmaking, his first pocket watch

took two years to make. Daniels rejected it as "hand-made" and not "created".

Undaunted, Roger set up repairing watches for local jewellers in Bolton to earn some money, and set about making his second watch.

This took five years, and required him to learn all 32 skills needed to manufacture a timepiece from bits of metal to the finished article.

His efforts won the master's approval. So much so that Daniels invited him to become his apprentice on the Isle of Man. He packed his bags and went.

The boy became the go-to man for quiet prominence in the world of watchmaking today.

After three years' work on the "Daniels' Millennium" series, Roger set up his own studio, working first in the spare bedroom of his low whitewashed cottage. It has since consumed the living room and the garage, and Roger, wife Caroline and baby Miriam have moved into a

rented house. When Daniels died in 2011, he left his entire workshop to Roger – including 19th century lathes he found rusting in a Clerkenwell cellar.

They still work, and RW Smith employs four people, working away happily to the monotonous ticking of a wall clock that would not be out of place at Bolton station. Roger and his fellow craftsmen stand over shoulder-height

desks, peering through magnifying lenses at the tiny pieces of tempered steel, gold and silver they must shape into the components of a watch.

They look like scientists in a lab, or worshippers in chapel and the comparison is apt – they really are dedicated to the goal of perfection.

"Ultimate watch," Roger explains. "I'm constantly striving for perfection and improvement."

In his mind's eye is the New York client who goes to a black-tie dinner, wearing his watch, incognito, thinking to himself: "I'm the only one in the room knowing I have an RW Smith watch on my wrist. Nobody else will know I wear it. That's why. That will make my evening."

I got to strap a watch worth half a million quid to my wrist. It is worth more than gold bullion, ounce for ounce, and it's beautiful to look at. Perhaps the mystique of these unique products derives from Roger's personality. Roger, a slightly-built man, aged 43, is not the sort of bloke you'd expect to find in a workshop. He expresses his personality through his watches. "For me the important thing is watchmaking. I really love it. What I enjoy doing is making watches. Different watches. Unusual watches."

But he is not sentimental about his mechanical babies. He explains: "When a watch is finished I'm keen to move on to the next one. I don't regret selling it."

"It's this obsessional approach to perfection. It's going the extra mile, sitting down for three weeks just to make a watch, to get it right, pushing the skill of the craftsman."

Strangely, he does not own or wear an RW Smith. "I couldn't afford one," he says. "On average it takes eight months to make one of my watches, and I could not take eight months out to make one for myself. These are not atomic clocks, precise to a millisecond every century. And they do not tell better time than your average quartz model."

"No mechanical watch will keep perfect time," admits Roger. "It will never compete with a battery-powered or quartz watch."

"It's not better. It's different. Different because of the way it's made."

Roger meets his customers, occasionally flying out to hand over the finished article. But it is essentially a low-key business. I only found out he existed after a Mirror reader complained there were no more British-made watches.

It was almost right. There are no more produced Timexes or Ingersolls. But as Roger proves, dear reader, that a great tradition is still ticking on. It's just that you and I can't afford one.

I can't afford a RW Smith, I couldn't take eight months out to make it

ROGER SMITH ON HIS EXPENSIVE WATCHES

BRITAIN'S TOP WATCH



WORK OF ART A completed RW Smith wristwatch



INSPIRATION Roger with his mentor, the great watchmaker George Daniels



HANDS ON
Paul Fries on a £500k watch

Flashy number cost £3m

THE world's most expensive watch is believed to have cost £3million. Made by Swiss firm Hublot, it consists of white gold and 1,282 diamonds.

Hublot sourced stones from around the world, each one individually selected for quality and colour, then re-sized, one by one, to make them a perfect fit for the stylish timepiece.

Based on a Hublot Big Bang, it took 14 months to make, including seven months' work for 12 gem cutters. It is believed Beyoncé, right, bought it for her husband Jay Z's 43rd birthday in December 2012.



CLOCK WORK
Roger with masterpiece in progress

PICTURES: ANDREW STEPHENS

features@mirror.co.uk