

George Daniels

Horologist who revolutionised mechanical watch design and became a connoisseurs' favourite

GEORGE DANIELS, who has died aged 85, was considered by some to be the greatest watchmaker since Abraham Louis Breguet (1747–1823), and was credited with presenting a battery-powered quartz calendar by showing that a mechanical watch could perform as well as an electronic one.

His greatest contribution was to develop a watch mechanism, known as the tourbillon, which, which has helped to revolutionise the performance of high-end mechanical watches and has been described as the most important horological development for 250 years.

When Daniels first started making watches he was aware that the tourbillon, a key component (the part of a watch that regulates its timekeeping) suffered from a fundamental design flaw. The problem, which had perplexed watchmakers for centuries, was its need for lubrication to facilitate the sliding of the pallet stones over the teeth of the escape wheel. This resulted in a gradual loss of performance over time as the oil degraded – the effect being, in Daniels's words, "a bit like driving uphill with the handbrake on".

Daniels's solution was a compact, a deceptively simple-looking arrangement of cogs and levers, virtually eliminated the need for lubrication, and, by reducing slippage friction, thus ensuring greater accuracy over time and reducing the need for servicing.

When he first unveiled the concept in 1976, he faced scepticism from the industry, before the Swiss watch group's chairman, Norbert Rees, adopted the idea in the 1980s. Hayek took on the project for Swatch's Omega brand, and in 1999 the company unveiled its first mechanical watch featuring Daniels's original design at the Basel Watch and Jewellery Fair. The event was heralded as heralding a new era in mechanical watchmaking.

In an encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences published in 1819, Abraham Rees claimed that it took 40 people to make a watch, and that those that did were highly skilled and had served lengthy apprenticeships. Daniels, however, mastered the work of so many trades that he was able to create every part of his watches himself, except for the springs and the glass.

From 1960, when he began his first business – a gold and silver one-minute pivoted-dentimeter tourbillon (which sold recently at an auction in the US for \$200,000) to his specialism in making watches for connoisseurs and collectors, featuring cases, dials and movements which were instantly recognisable as his designs, and



Daniels: each watch typically involved 2,500 hours of work, and he refused to sell watches to people he did not like

incorporated unusual features to appeal to collectors. The little-known buyers clamoured for Daniels's timepieces, which became much-sought-after collector items, with prices in excess of £100,000.

In 2006, to celebrate his work and his 80th birthday, Sotheby's and Bacs & Russo (two antique watch dealers) held a major international exhibition of his work, featuring every watch Daniels had made, save one which is held by the British Museum.

One of 11 children, George Daniels was born in Edgware, north London, on August 19 1926 and had a difficult upbringing. His father, a carpenter, was a violent

drunk and the family struggled for money. When George entered his parents' home for the first time after birth, he was met with abuse, later learning, on applying for a passport, that not only was he illegitimate, he had no birth certificate.

He became fascinated by watches as a child, when, aged five, he found a cheap wristwatch in the street. "I managed to get it open and I would sit there and work on it," he recalled. "It was like seeing the centre of the universe. I knew that's what I wanted to do; I wanted to spend the rest of my time with watches."

Forced to seek work at the age of 14, Daniels began working in a mattress factory, reading everything he could about watches

in his spare time. He soon turned this knowledge into cash by repairing clocks and orders by going from door-to-door.

During the Second World War he served in the Army, and in 1945 was posted to the 2nd Battalion the Royal Fusiliers in the Middle East. There he earned enough money mending fellow soldiers' watches not to have to draw paycheques.

Back in England, Daniels started work with a watchmaker in Edgware, attending evening classes in engineering at Northolt Polytechnic (now City University, London). He then set up on his own as a watch-cleaner and repairer.

Initially he repaired watches in

order to finance his love of vintage cars. However a chance meeting in 1960 with Sam Clutton, a founder member of the Antiquarian Horological Society and the Vintage Sports Car Club in Britain, introduced him to upmarket and antique horology. Clutton sold him on his first book, *Watches* (1965), and introduced him to the work of Breguet. Daniels became such an expert on the French horologist that he was invited to accompany Breguet watches, and in 1967 was invited to take over the Breguet company; he declined the offer, "because I thought that 'Daniels, London' sounded better than 'Breguet, Paris'. His book *The Art of Breguet* was published in 1975.

In 1969 Daniels had purchased a small mechanical watch. He sold it to Clutton, who showed it to other collectors, and Daniels embarked on his career as a specialist watchmaker. Each watch took him between 18 months and three years of work over a year or more, and he refused to take orders being particular about his customers: "I am very selective," Daniels recalls. "I never sell watches for people if I didn't care for them."

Daniels claimed that there was little money to be made in antique horology, as he suggested otherwise. In 1982 he moved, for tax reasons, to the Isle of Man, where he bought a substantial Georgian house complete with a woman's entrance and sweeping drive. There he established a collection of vintage motorcycles and cars, including a 1930s Bugatti for the Earl of Craven. For many years he took part in vintage car races until being "warned off" by the AAC on grounds of age.

George Daniels was awarded the Gold Medal of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers; the Gold Medal of the British Horological Institute; the Gold Medal of the City of London; and the Kullberg Medal of the Stockholm Watchmakers' Guild.

His other books include *Fathoms and Fathoms* (1967); *The Practical Watch Escapement* (1995, second edition 1997); a guide to the various types of watch escapements; *Watchmaking* (1981, second edition 1985); and an autobiography, *All in Good Time – Reflections of a Watchmaker*.

George Daniels, who became horological consultant to Sotheby's in 1970, was appointed MBE in 1981 and CBE in 2000.

He married in 1964, Juliet Marryat, with whom he had a daughter. The marriage was later dissolved, and he admitted in an autobiography that he had been a good husband or a good father.

George Daniels, born August 19 1926, died October 21 2011