

£500,000 to spend? Don't mind waiting eight years? It's time to visit a great British eccentric

HE CAN spend a week producing a tiny cog that his rivals might churn out in a few seconds. Just one sneeze can make a month's work disappear into thin air (it happened once).

Everything about his production line is studiously low-key — the building, the people, even the name for that matter. You could drive past him without realising he was the Isle of Man every day for 20 years without ever realising it is a factory — let alone the home workshop of a world leader in his field who also happens to be Britain's latest trade ambassador.

At present, there are only 50 people on the island who can put together a Roger W. Smith watch. And they are always going to be a pretty exclusive club, as although Roger has sold on to a number of others, he is seldom described as prolific.

He currently manufactures ten watches each year, ranging from £85,000 to £300,000 each — and Roger is prepared to crank up production to wait for it... 12.

But that is exactly how he likes it. Indeed, he has no desire to be a mass producer, which would be anathema to any other boss: 'No one makes fewer.'

One of the last pieces to come crawling off the production line is a watch worth £180,000 and Roger hasn't received a penny for it. Coming from the Downing Street press office's 'GREAT Britain' overseas trade and tourism campaign, it will be unveiled in London next month. It will see the secretary of state, David Cameron, on trade missions overseas, in a special display case made by Viscount Linley, as an exemplar of 'British style and ingenuity'. But it is only one of a dozen pieces of art watches quite like Roger Smith.

The title of watchmaker is granted to anyone who can put together a watch. A watch. Bolton-born Roger, 43, is one of a tiny handful of people with the requisite skills and knowledge.

Of the 34 different skills required to create a mechanical watch, he performs 32 of them himself. Even the most exacting Swiss watchmakers don't do that. They will have a variety of people making all their components and others assembling the watch. Roger does all of his own hand-make every screw, dial and winder on his own machines, tools which date back to 1822. They then pass on to another person to assemble the parts themselves. The only parts they source elsewhere are two springs and the leather strap.

That is why collectors all over the world are prepared to pay up to £300,000 for a Roger W. Smith watch, and with 'RW Smith' on the face (his middle name is William). But they had better be strapped in else to their wrist, it is the most expensive. Because the waiting list can be as long as eight years.

THESE are watches that need winding up every couple of days. But they are as close to the cutting edge of watchmaking as any watch can be. For Roger is the appointed successor to the last great English masterwatchmaker of modern times.

Not bad for a chap who was once a reporter for *Radio Times*. Roger's career is a morality tale for modern youth. There is a touch of Aesop or Hans Christian Andersen about it. He did not excel at school (though his carers advised he might make a fortune as a quantity surveyor). But Roger loved making things. When his father, a doctor, enrolled him on a Manchester course in horology, Roger had found his calling. One day, Dr George Daniels came to deliver a guest lecture.

In horological (timekeeping) circles, the late Dr Daniels commands respect, with, say, Paul Lemon and McCarter. He was the man who overcame the centuries-old problem of friction with an invention called 'overbalance', which is now one of the most important horological development in 250 years.

Roger was so impressed by the lecture that he decided, there and then, to make his own watch. Nearly two years later, he took the result to Daniels's home on the Isle of Man. The great man was well-known for

The Ratners repairman who makes the world's most exclusive watches

HOW I SEE IT

by Robert Hardman

his forthright views. He took one look at Roger's watch and declared: 'Too handmade. Try again.'

At that point, most people might give up a bit. But Roger, who had got to know Daniels through his work as a trainee at Tag Heuer, had by now had secured a full-time job servicing Tag Heuer watches. He located a local watchmaker who was doing repairs for Ratners and spent the rest of his time at home building and repairing his own timepiece. His only guide was a book by Dr Daniels's industry bible, *Watchmaking*.

It was five years before Roger felt confident enough to show his next attempt to the time lord.

'I've never been so nervous,' I remember him saying. 'I had taken me seven years to get this far. What if it's no good?' I showed George my watch. He looked at it and said, "It's not bad." I said: "I did." "Who made that?" I said. Finally, he said: "Congratulations." Roger's wife, Jamie, was there. Daniels went on to give Roger the ultimate accolade — an apprenticeship.

He moved to the Isle of Man and worked in his mentor's workshop for three life-changing years before Daniels died in 2011, aged 85, his final project being a £10 million vintage car collection built between his ex-wife, his daughter and a substantial educational trust that will benefit the island for 200 years.

Roger's old cottage is now his factory. The lives elsewhere with Caroline and their baby

(daughter). In one room, ancient hand-powered lathes sit alongside the latest in computerised telemetry. He has a workshop in the garden and another room houses the desks where the hand-made components are assembled in a quiet atmosphere. It's a happy atmosphere.

The long-serving member of the team, Andy Jones, 38, was at college with Roger. Nicholas, his wife, and Jamie Wiseman, 28, were both working for big Swiss watchmakers but jumped at the chance to move across the water to George Daniels. Roger has recently taken on an apprentice, too, John Horton, 24, who patiently smacks 55 different metals together into a single cog. It might take all day. A big Swiss watch will stamp out the same part in a few seconds.

Our clients like to know that this is their son of craftsmanship that we're talking about. Roger says we don't use new materials. His basic ingredients are gold, silver, platinum, steel and nickel.

SITTING on Roger's desk at present are the finished innards of a very special commission, which will cost about £500,000. He opens a drawer and produces his latest timepiece, a pocket watch destined for a buyer in Hong Kong.

It's all wrapped in protective film and is designed to fit on his belt. A second weight balances a remote chunk. Roger points out some of the intricate details such as the English 'fob' — the front plate of the even the unique sculpted design of the tips of the hands.

He is a perfectionist so I can see the exquisite workings and a tiny silver triskelion in the three-quarter plate of the pocket watch.

What sort of a person buys a watch like this? Roger has made up over 60 sets so far, with buyers ranging from the Queen to a few collectors own more than one. And their priority is not split-second accuracy.

'If you want the precise time, then



Meticulously made: A Roger W. Smith original. Below: Roger Smith with his latest creation



Picture: JAMIE WISEMAN

a quartz' watch will do that,' he says, pointing out that a good battery-powered watch might have a margin of error of three seconds a day. 'A mechanical one might lose or gain five seconds a day. But that's not the point.' I ask something that's the point: 'Is there a reason that's to carry on working beautifully for 20 years,' he explains.

Indeed, he says, that most of his clients tend to produce things rather than just shuffle money around. 'I suppose people who create or manufacture things like the challenges of making something like this,' says Roger.

Indeed, he says, none of the bling or brand status that might appeal to a footballer or a City director. 'It's for the money for those hilariously snappy Patek Philippe ads with the banker Dad, the sports star son and the slogan: "You never actually own a Patek Philippe; you merely look after it for the next generation".'

He has a running list for the most basic £85,000 Roger W. Smith model, no one is ever going to buy one on impulse. Are they waterproof? Yes, down to 1,600ft.

But I don't encourage it. It's not good for the watch. I notice Roger is not wearing one himself. 'I can't afford to,' he laughs, gesturing to the second-hand Rolex on his wrist. 'I was given it from his wife. She was a bit of a hoarder.'

While Roger admires many of the big names, he points out that most of the great breakthroughs in timekeeping have been thanks to British inventors. John Harrison, whose sea clock solved the problem of longitude, to Thomas Mudge, who invented the first self-winding watch (he gave watches to this day), not to mention George Daniels. After all, the whole point of a watch is to tell Greenwich Mean Time.

'From the 1600s to the 1800s, we were the masters,' says Roger. 'Then it was the Americans who took over the Swiss. But we're still here.'

That's why he is delighted that the Royal Mint is due to be using his work to promote the best of British around the world.

He still has one major challenge.

Has he managed to sell one of his watches to Switzerland? 'No,' he says, adding quickly: 'Not yet.'