

Business diary

Roger Smith Roger W. Smith

After falling in love with watches following a lecture at the Manchester School of Horology, Roger Smith eventually went on to set up Britain's only fully handmade watch business. His luxury timepieces are exported around the world from the Isle of Man.



I start my day at 7.30am, which isn't that difficult because our office and watch workshops are attached to my house, so I pretty much just go downstairs. We are the only company that makes every single part of a watch ourselves, by hand, in Britain. I feel we're part of an important tradition; Britain used to lead the world in watchmakers.

I first came to the Isle of Man to learn from George Daniels, who created the co-axial escapement, which was a huge leap forward because it enabled a watch to function perfectly, even as the lubricant deteriorated. Being this far from the centre of the industry in Switzerland allows you more creative freedom.

My wife Caroline joined the business a year ago as a general business manager – we don't have formal titles, because there aren't many of us. We have a quick catch-up to discuss expenses, client relations and so on, before the rest of the boys arrive. We always do it in the office, not over breakfast, as we realise we need to draw some boundaries.

Then the rest of the seven watchmakers arrive and we all discuss where we are with the watches. Because everything is planned very far ahead, we run down a checklist for each piece, and then everyone starts work; at this stage, because the business has grown, we kind of spread out through the offices and my house.

At the moment, we are creating a "Series 2" timepiece. We make 10 watches a year – each has about 220 parts and takes five months to make, and they cost between £72,000 and £120,000. Although they are all gold or silver or platinum, 90 per cent of that cost is the labour.

When a client orders a piece, usually online, they specify the material and we take a deposit to buy the metal. We have not been affected too much by the recent changes in commodity prices, since we lock that cost in at the beginning. We have a two-year waiting list.

Because there are so many parts in each watch, and we make all of them, a huge amount of my daily job is scheduling and co-ordination: every piece is numbered, sequenced, hand-engraved.

Today, I've done some serious thinking about a "Series 3" watch. The idea is to start work on the aesthetics this time next year, with a view towards getting it out two years after that.

The most valuable commodity in my business is probably the people, because the combination of being highly skilled and willing to live far from the centre of the watch industry is not that common. I invest a lot in my staff: there is a guy here who just got out of college and he will not be able to work without supervision for a year. Also, you want every employee to be proficient in all the specialities – dial making, for example, or polishing – because if one leaves it can throw your production out for a year.

I just had a meeting with an estate agent because we need bigger offices. We need a space that reflects the products we make, which are real luxuries; I'm thinking about a country house or a former inn. Clients come to us usually only once in the process, either to discuss the design of their watch or to pick it up, and what they see needs to represent us. About 40 per cent come from the US, 40 per cent from Britain, and 20 per cent from Asia.

I could never have started a luxury business in such a remote place until about 15 years ago. I would have had to have a Bond Street address. But the internet changed the watch world completely by opening up the global market.

In the mid-1990s watch forums started springing up online where collectors would talk to each other. When I made my first watch, I posted a picture in one forum and, bingo, I had an international clientele.

As told to
Vanessa Friedman