

Manxlife

Setting the *standard...*

Simon Richardson discovers why 10 Downing Street looked to the Isle of Man to find a special product that put the GREAT in Britain...

Old Time, that greatest and longest established spinner of all!... his factory is a secret place, his work is noiseless, and his hands are mutes.

Charles Dickens



A call from 10 Downing Street to the World's most accomplished watchmaker at the beginning of last year, was the start of a process to create a horological masterpiece that would show the world the creativity, innovation and technology which make Britain great.

The watchmaker was Roger W. Smith and the workshop in which the timepiece would be created was in his modest cottage in Ballaugh, Isle of Man.

The Great Britain watch was designed and built by Roger over a ten-month period and is one of the finest and most complex examples ever to have been designed and made by hand.

Roger Smith's obsession with horology dates back to his teenage years and began in earnest when he enrolled at Manchester's School of Horology, aged 16. A visit to the school by the legendary watchmaker, George Daniels, would be the catalyst for a lifetime devoted to creating the perfect timepiece.

After leaving college, where he was the star student, he took a job in a watch repair business in Manchester: 'My heart wasn't really in it and I didn't enjoy the work,' explained Roger. His sights were set on much greater things, so he wrote to George Daniels in the Isle of Man and asked the master if he would consider taking him on as an apprentice.

The response wasn't altogether positive, but Daniels suggested Roger should go away and make a watch.

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Two years later, and following an almost forensic examination of Daniels' book 'Watchmaking', Roger completed his first Tourbillon pocketwatch and duly presented it to Daniels: "He looked at it and told me to go back and try again, because the watch looked too home-made," said Roger.

Undeterred he went back to the drawing board, and five years later returned to Daniels' workshop with his creation. The rest, as they say, is history. Roger became George Daniels' apprentice and moved to the Isle of Man, where for three years he worked with the master to create the acclaimed Millennium series, which showcased the unique Daniels





Co-axial escapement mechanism – the first to never require lubrication.

But what was it like to work so closely with a man whose skills had earned him almost God like status in his field? “George had a bit of a reputation for being a bit fearsome when you first met him, but he was actually an incredible character and a brilliant teacher,” recalled Roger.

When George Daniels’ died in October 2011, the skills required to create a precision timepiece entirely by hand would have died with him, had it not been for Roger Smith. Daniels also bequeathed his priceless collection of precision machinery, some of which dates back to 1820, to his protégé.

From his workshop in Ballaugh Roger has kept the tradition alive, and has even revised and improved Daniels’ legendary co-axial escapement mechanism. Alongside Daniels’ pristine Schaublin Lathes and Hauser Jig Borer is the latest high precision computerised cutting equipment, capable of producing components barely the thickness of human hair.

Roger is the first to admit it hasn’t all been plain sailing: “When I started my own business in 2001 I was the only person in world doing what I was doing,” he explained. With each timepiece taking over a year to produce cash flow was always going to be an issue: “It was very difficult, I nearly went bust on several occasions.”

From humble beginnings – working alone in a single room in the cottage – Roger has converted the whole house to the cause, and he and his wife Caroline and 20 month-old daughter Miriam, have moved to another property.

Caroline runs the administrative side of what is now a global business, and looks after the marketing function. Working alongside Roger is a team of three watchmakers, an apprentice and a skilled engineer: “We have outgrown our home and I am looking to

move into larger premises in the near future,” said Roger.

It’s also likely that expansion will provide a small number of lucky Island residents with an opportunity to work with the world’s leading horologist at a global centre of excellence.

Away from his workshop Roger relaxes by playing hockey, gardening and walking. 19 month-old Miriam is another wonderful distraction from the intensity of his profession.

His unique skills set suggest a man with remarkable reserves of patience – but is that how he sees himself? “I have to be patient, but it is a skill I have learned rather than one I was necessarily born with.”

For the Isle of Man having such a world leading horologist in our midst is something to celebrate. Roger’s hand-crafted timepieces are in demand all over the world, and generate considerable media interest.



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The illimitable, silent, never-resting thing called Time, rolling, rushing on, swift, silent, like an all-embracing ocean-tide, on which we and all the universe swim like exhalations, like apparitions which are, and then are not . . .

Thomas Carlyle