QP - DEVOTED TO FINE WATCHES

Issue Forty Five 2010

qp

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£6.50, USA $12.95

ISSN 1479-4837

9 771479 483014 11

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Fine & Rare

Dr George Daniels CBE MBE and Roger Smith unveiled a new limited edition watch celebrating the 35th anniversary of the invention of the Co-axial Escapement at SalonQP. But the new watch represents far more than the marking of that admittedly important date. *QP* looks deeper.

James Gurney

English watchmakers are such a rare breed that it seems almost compulsory to account for their existence – all the more so as both Daniels and Smith enjoy the highest possible reputations and have a global following.

The watchmaking industry, it has to be admitted, enjoys its hyperbole, throwing out superlatives at the least provocation. This all adds to the enjoyment of the watches which are, at almost every level, more truthfully luxuries rather than necessities and is generally quite harmless. The only problem with such a liberal approach is that all these superlatives become quite unusable when something happens that is genuinely exceptional and remarkable beyond the realms of the normal experience.

That collectors from around the globe are travelling to London to see a new watch from two English makers in the 21st century is genuinely quite astounding given the history of watchmaking in Britain during the past century. Having spawned a watch- and clock-making industry that was the standard by which other countries were measured and that produced legions of talented and inventive makers, Britain seemed quite content by the 1920s to leave the industry to be taken over by others, principally the Swiss. Hans Wilsdorf famously relocated the fledgling Rolex Watch Co to Geneva in the face of a punitive tax regime.

The decline was neither dramatic not total, nevertheless anyone looking into the future as Smiths finally ceased watch production in the early 1980s would have found the idea that, 30 years into the future, you would find two English makers being feted by a worldwide audience barely credible.

The exquisite, hand-made Co-axial Anniversary watch will be made in a limited edition of 35 pieces. An additional 16 watches, in four sets, comprising four watches each in yellow, red and white gold and platinum with a separate numbering will also be created as a special request item.

The great escapement

But even as Smiths was about to close, George Daniels was working on the Co-axial escapement, an idea designed to give mechanical watchmaking a leap in efficiency and reliability, sufficient to allow competition with what then seemed the inevitable and inexorable advance of quartz technology. Daniels had already earned a reputation as the authority on Breguet having spent decades restoring watches and clocks and writing what is still the standard reference on Breguet in 1969.

Daniels knew that collectors were prepared to pay for the laboriously hand-built watches he was already making (which took up to 2,500 man hours a piece to complete) but believed that improving the basic concept of the lever escapement would be the means by which the craft traditions of mechanical watchmaking could be safe-guarded on a wider scale. The result of this approach was the Co-axial escapement, which radically reduced the requirement for the locking and impulse pallets to be lubricated by oils that would need replacing every few years - thus improving precision and reliability over the long term.

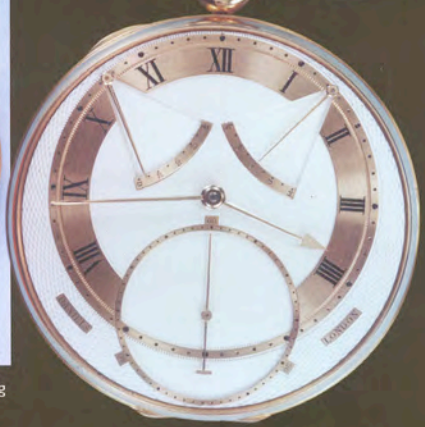
In the event it was 20 years before Omega eventually decided to adopt the Co-axial escapement and develop it for series production, by which time interest in mechanical watchmaking had already revived. Omega has, nevertheless, extended the use of the Co-axial escapement across its range of watches. As this was the first new escapement design to make it into industrial production, Daniels' reputation was sealed.

Any doubts as to Daniels' standing were removed in the most comprehensive way this summer at an extraordinary dinner given in London. The host was François-Paul Journe, widely regarded as Breguet's spiritual heir and an equally celebrated watchmaker. His guest of honour? None other than Dr Daniels. Journe wanted simply to honour the man who he regarded as his mentor both through example and encouragement. He presented a Chronomètre Souverain specially made for him and engraved on the movement bridge with the dedication "FP to George Daniels my Mentor 2010". I doubt any contemporary watchmaker has received quite such an accolade.

After impressing Dr Daniels with his second attempt at making a pocket watch, Roger Smith was asked by the maestro to move to the Isle of Man and assist in the making of a series of 50 Daniels Co-axial watches - their relationship continues to this day.

Above: Daniels Space Traveller Watch, displaying Sidereal Time with inset age and phase of the moon, mean solar time with inset date of the month, seconds below, equation of time sector above. Made to commemorate America's moon landing. Completed 1983.

Right: Daniels One-Minute Tourbillon with Co-axial escapement, minute repeating on two gongs, perpetual calendar with instantaneous change for all fucntions. Also inidicated are moonphases and temperature. Completed in 1987.



Above: Daniels Tourbillon with reversed detent escapement, equation of time and reverse of winding sectors on the dial. Completed in 1974.

Learning from the best

Roger Smith, meanwhile, had set out to transform himself from an ambitious watch repairer in Bolton (one who was already a Bronze Medallist of the British Horological Institute) to a craftsman able to equal and even surpass the standards of his heroes – England's finest Master Watchmakers such as Mudge, Arnold, Dent and, of course, Daniels. Smith has a refreshingly direct vision: "I want the name Roger W Smith to be associated with 'the revival of English watchmaking'. My aim is to produce hand-made, individual watches designed and made to the highest possible standards."

Smith's reputation is built on a rigorous adherence to this aim. He was recently quoted in the *Financial Times* as saying: "English horology was considered the high point of the art for hundreds of years. What we are trying to do is to reinterpret the past, while using modern horological developments – such as the co-axial escapement – to create exclusive and distinctly English wristwatches for the connoisseurs of today."

Having had the flaws in his first watch pointed out to him by Daniels in person, Smith went back to make a second watch. This was made with a dedication to improvement so extreme that he found himself

A Smith Series 2 commission variation with platinum case, silver hands, engraved floral dial, applied white gold Roman numerals and white gold minute, hour, seconds and up/down hands. Movement with floral hand engraving to the raised barrel bridge.

"I was always curious, even as a child. When I was about five-years-old I found a watch, I removed the back to see the workings and I thought it was amazing. A mechanical watch is technical, amusing, historic. It gives you something to shake or to put under your pillow and listen to the ticking. It's something that is never boring and very few things have that quality today."
George Daniels, 2010

Smith's Tourbillon Commission, No.1 cased in red gold, 42mm diameter. Silver engine turned and hand engraved dial displaying minutes, hours, seconds and a grand date display. The movement is fitted with a one minute, two armed, flying tourbillon, with the Daniels Co-axial escapement and a grand date calendar mechanism.

repeatedly remaking earlier parts as no longer being up to his current standards. This second watch found favour with Dr Daniels for making the hand of its maker invisible. Smith was shortly after invited to work with Daniels on the Millennium watch project, a three year period that was, at least in part, his apprenticeship.

Having settled on the Isle of Man, Roger Smith has gone on to pursue a carefully thought through plan of development that has seen two series of watches put into production, several commissions completed and a client base that has grown to embrace collectors across the globe. This has been achieved through a punishingly severe approach to chasing perfection.

By way of example, Smith recently spoke about his finishing techniques, "Frosting is usually created by microblasting with special sand under high pressure which achieves the effect simply and quickly. We, however, do it in the classical manner, using a fine metal brush turning on a spindle. Each tiny, fine steel thread of the brush actually microscopically beats the surface, creating the subtle frosting effect we want"

The collaboration

And what of the watch the pair will be unveiling at SalonQP? Its stated purpose is to celebrate the 35th anniversary of Daniels' invention of the Co-axial escapement, but it is also a celebration of English watchmaking. The watch naturally features the Co-axial escapement and is firmly in the English style as perceived by Daniels and Smith - flawlessly frosted plates contrasted with mirror polished components, hand-engraved silver dials, blued screws and a wealth of detail almost invisible through its perfection.

As for the movement, it would be surprising if the escapement had not been improved in the intervening years. Smith has indeed included a significant improvement to the Co-axial design. Essentially this is through combining the upper and lower wheels into one by adding raised teeth onto the lower wheel, meaning that the escape wheel can now be made in one single operation and removing a potential source of error. And there is apparently one further refinement to be unveiled with the piece. Watch this space.

Further information: www.danielslondon.com www.rwsmithwatches.com