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WATCHES
ROGER SMITH

ALEX DOAK

Omega's co-axial
escapement invented
by George Daniels

A lesson in time

'Handcrafted' is an overused term in the hyperbolic world of watchmaking, but at Roger Smith's tiny atelier on the Isle of Man, every single component really is painstakingly, exquisitely finished. Alex Doak paid a visit



In October last year, the world of watchmaking lost the man universally recognised as the 'world's greatest watchmaker'. Not only had he mastered all 35 of the separate trades required to make a watch from bare metal, he had also invented the single most important technical advance in horology for over 200 years – Omega's co-axial escapement. His name was George Daniels. And in his lifetime, Daniels only ever entertained a sole student. His name is Roger Smith.

A clean-cut and genial fellow, Smith is far from the reclusive stereotype one calls to mind at the mention of "watchmaker". He is also surprisingly young (43) for someone so accomplished in his venerable craft, already employing five staff and with a British Horological Institute (BHI) silver medal recently to his name.

But then again, Smith has hardly coursed a typical trajectory for a watchmaker. And the mere handful of pieces his workshop turns out every year are about the furthest from your typical wristwatch as you could get. Their price tag starting at £72,500 (excluding VAT) and waiting list of two years seem almost conservative when you step inside Smith's remote Isle of Man cottage and witness the painstaking labour involved. Take a Roger Smith dial: just a single example of this silver jigsaw takes up to three weeks



"Ultimately, I suppose I want to put some of the 'making' back into 'watchmaking'"

Roger Smith



A Roger Smith dial takes up to three weeks to make, with only a handful of pieces turned out every year



◀ of engine turning, engraving, machining, assembling, soldering, engraving again, graining, bleaching. It is diligence bordering on obsession.

"We work totally differently from anyone else," says Smith as he walks us through his rustic-chic kitchen and straight into a crisply outfitted room of new workbenches. "We're not churning them out like the Swiss, we're trying to preserve traditional handcrafted techniques. I want to make wristwatches that are up to the standard of old 18th and 19th century English pocket watches – that are strong, easily restorable and will last for generations to come.

"Ultimately, I suppose I want to put some of the 'making' back into 'watchmaking,'" he says.

Learning the ropes

But when Smith graduated from the Manchester School of Horology in the late 1980s, he could barely lathe a clock component, let alone the sort of microscopic pinions buried in his wristwatches. Which is where George Daniels comes in.

"I knew I wanted to be a watchmaker when George visited the college one evening and gave a talk about his work. That really was the moment for me," Smith says. "It gave me a sense of giddiness. The same sense you get when you hear an amazing musician."

Smith wrote to Daniels in 1990 offering his services. To which Daniels effectively replied: "Thanks but no thanks," but invited Smith to his workshop on the Isle of Man nonetheless, giving him an old mandrel lathe and telling him to, "go away and make it".

Quitting his job at TAG Heuer's service centre after just a year, Smith took on a part-time job at a trade repairers on Manchester's Market Street, repairing watches for Ratner's from Monday to Wednesday. He then spent every evening, weekend, Thursday and Friday squirrelling away in his childhood bedroom, working on his first pocket watch, a copy of Daniels's classic book *Watchmaking* his sole reference.

"No.1 took one and a half years. I took it to the Isle of Man, and George simply told me to go away. The watch did work, but it was a bit of a mess. George said, 'Now you know you can make a watch that works, go away and practise. The hand of the maker should be invisible – it should look begotten not made.'"

Smith's No.2 pocket watch took him another five and a half years. He says:



Smith aims to produce watches that are up to the standard of old 18th and 19th century pocket watches



"Well, the first No.2 was in fact made within a year, but once completed I looked at certain components I'd made at the beginning and they weren't as good as recent components. I had to go back and make them all again."

Over those five and a half years, Smith reckons he re-made his second pocket watch four times, before getting to a point where he couldn't improve on anything. So he went back to Daniels.

"It was one of the most phenomenal meetings of my life. For the first five minutes, he carried on with his paperwork, shuffling things around the kitchen table, while I stood in the corner terrified, clutching the box I'd had specially made for the watch, thinking, 'This isn't good'. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife.

"The hand of the maker should be invisible – it should look begotten not made"

George Daniels
Master horologist

He then examined the watch for what seemed like an eternity, before starting to ask questions, 'Who made your tourbillon carriage?' 'I did,' I replied. 'And your escape wheel?' 'Me.' 'So who's your casemaker?' 'I am,' I said."

"Suddenly, he snapped the case shut, and his face transformed – it lit up. With a huge grin he said, 'Congratulations, you're a watchmaker.'"

Master class

From 1997, Smith spent three formative years working alongside the master on his series of 50 Millennium wristwatches. After which Smith decided to stay on the island – a suitably serene environment to rival the Swiss Jura – and commence work on his own Series 1 wristwatches, ▶



**Letter inviting Smith
to Daniel's workshop
on the Isle of Man**

progressing swiftly to his circular Series 2: a handsome piece distinguished by a deep 3D dial, intricately sculpted hands with Smith's signature heart-shaped scalloped tips (inspired by a 19th-century Benjamin Vulliamy piece) and a beguiling movement ticking away through the clear case back.

The marking of time

However, what's currently sending collectors into a tizz is the new Daniels Co-Axial Anniversary watch, which, like the Millennium pieces, celebrates Daniels's co-axial, but using entirely in-house assemblies rather than those supplied by Omega. It is the culmination of Daniels's life work and, by assuming responsibility for its production, Smith has essentially assumed his rightful role as Daniels's heir.

"I'd work on the plans in AutoCAD, then take them down the road for comment," explains Smith, standing in his main workshop where much of Daniels's own workshop has ended up, including two spectacular 1820s engines. "When I showed him the first working prototype of the watch four weeks before he died, it was the first watch I'd ever shown him that he didn't criticise."

No.1 of 35 has now been delivered, and despite a hefty price tag of £142,000 (excluding VAT), all but a few are pre-sold. With 34 more to go, and Series 3 already on the horizon, Smith and his team clearly have their work cut out. ●

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rogerwsmith.co.uk; danielslondon.com



**Smith set up shop
on the island**

"When I showed him the first working prototype... it was the first watch I'd ever shown him that he didn't criticise"

Roger Smith