

THE WATCHMAKER OF CRONK

The Isle of Man may be a long way from the Swiss Jura mountains, but, as Ian Buxton reports, here a British watchmaker is quietly crafting some of the most artisanal watches in the world.



ROGER W. SMITH 40MM
SERIES 2 IN WHITE GOLD

A modest collection of cottages in the wonderfully-named hamlet of Cronk on the Isle of Man.

It's not where you might expect to find Britain's greatest living watchmaker, recipient of the 2015 Walpole Award for Best British Luxury Craftsmanship. And it seems an improbable location for the home of some of the finest handcrafted watches in the world, with an international clientele prepared to wait a year or more and to pay upwards of £100,000 (and often a great deal more) for one of the very few exquisitely detailed timepieces that leave the workshop each year.

However, unlikely as it may seem, this is the home of Roger W Smith, watch maker extraordinary, one-time pupil and now successor to the legendary Dr. George Daniels. Starting in the late 1960s, Daniels singlehandedly re-invented British watchmaking, yet famously worked alone, painstakingly building his watches entirely by hand and going on to perfect his co-axial escapement. Adopted by Omega, this revolutionised the accuracy of mechanical timekeeping and today Daniels is regarded as having created the most significant and finest body of horological work ever to originate from the hand of a single individual.

It is a remarkable achievement yet one that would have died with him had it not been for the dogged persistence of Roger Smith. In 1990, aged just twenty he determined to devote the next seven years of his life to hand making two pocket watches using 'The Daniels Method' – designing and making each and every part of the watches by hand.

Having presented these to Daniels for inspection, a most individual working relationship of mutual respect and arms-length friendship then began, culminating with the notoriously perfectionist and demanding

Daniels eventually considering Smith a worthy recipient of his hard-earned knowledge and skills to in order that his life's work might continue. And along with this expertise came some of the highly-specialised tools and machinery that Daniels had either collected or personally designed during his distinguished career.

Yet Smith has taken his renowned mentor's legacy and not simply continued it, but built on it and even taken it to new heights of excellence with the announcement of a new range of watches which was launched in November at the prestigious Salon QP 2015 in London's Saatchi Gallery.

"It is almost the fifteenth anniversary of the first production wrist watches issued by the Roger W. Smith Studio in 2001; namely the Series 1. Since then, having first developed and then stayed true to our ethos of hand-crafting all components within our studio, we have produced just 80 pieces", explains Roger Smith. "For me, it has been a wonderful fifteen years of incremental development and exploration of my design philosophy. Each piece has been a unique and important step on that journey."

Some of those key steps have included Roger's landmark development, in 2010, of a single-wheel version of George Daniels' co-axial escapement. This improvement enabled more



TINKERING WITH A MOVEMENT

“It has been a wonderful fifteen years of incremental development and exploration of my design philosophy. Each piece has been a unique and important step on that journey.” - Roger Smith

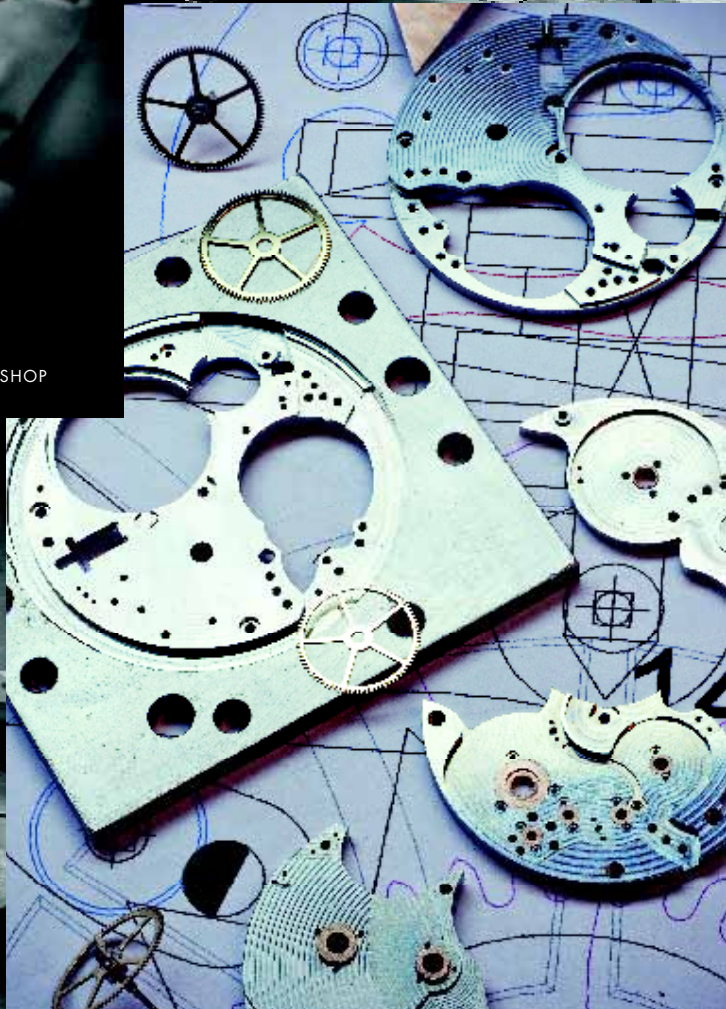
OPEN DIAL
BATONS



PRECISION IS EVERYTHING



EACH AND EVERY COMPONENT OF THE WATCHES ARE PRODUCED HERE IN THE COMPANY'S ISLE OF MAN WORKSHOP



“This is the first range of watches to be entirely produced in the British Isles and is all the more notable for coming from such a tiny watchmaking company based on the Isle of Man”

accurate escapements leading to slight but perceptible improvements in actual timekeeping.

In 2012, a new milestone was achieved with Roger Smith's radical lightening of the escape wheel resulting in further gains in timekeeping, due to the faster acceleration and less abrupt deceleration of the escape wheel.

This iteration of Roger Smith's new escapement was showcased in 2013's GREAT Britain watch which has been travelling the world over the last 18 months as part of the UK Government's GREAT Britain campaign to help celebrate the best of British innovation and craftsmanship.

Roger continues: “Looking for further technical improvements, and encouraged by new machining processes which we developed for the escape wheel of the GREAT Britain, I decided to scale down the escapement by as much as a third in order to explore any further benefits to timekeeping.”

However, the new escapement would not fit into Smith's existing Series 2 movement so, after

much thought, it was decided to design a completely new mechanism to house the latest improved escapement. And from this grew a complete revision of the Series 1 and 2 wristwatches, and the creation by Roger's of his first new Series for a decade: the 3, with a calendar movement and the 4 (also a calendar watch but with additional complications), which will complete the range.

Perhaps most importantly, however, it represents another significant step in the resurgence of Great Britain as a centre of excellence for watchmaking, for this is the first range of watches to be entirely produced in the British Isles and is all the more notable for coming from such a tiny watchmaking company based in the Isle of Man.

But beyond the 'production' series, Smith also offers to his discerning existing clients the opportunity to commission a Bespoke version of the Series or, for the ultimate in exclusivity, a Unique Commission. However, if you are interested, expect a long wait: there is a minimum eight year waiting list for Unique Commissions and, as for the price, well if you have to ask...

These are perhaps the ultimate collector's watches: understated, supremely elegant and of unparalleled craftsmanship. Any collection would be graced by such a timepiece and every serious collector should aspire to own one as the pinnacle of their collection. ■

www.rwsmithwatches.com

