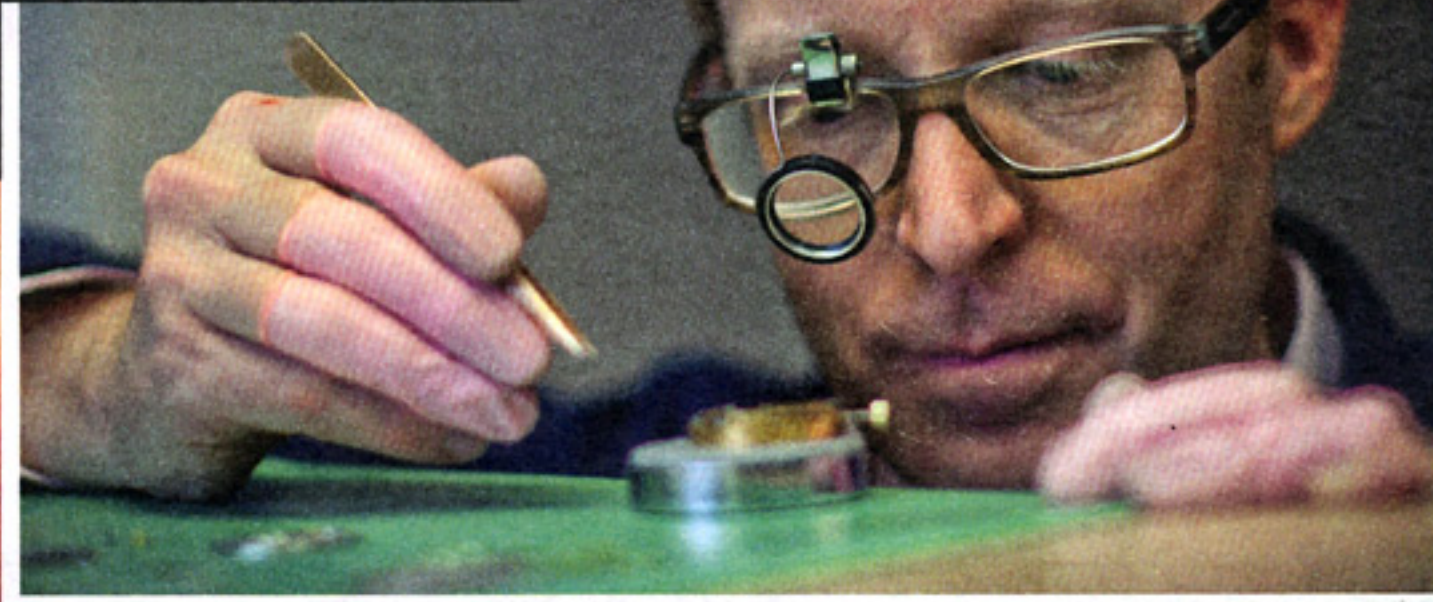




Clockwise from main picture: a yellow-gold RW Smith Series 2; watchmakers at work; the company's unassuming premises; Roger Smith



THE BRIT TEACHING THE SWISS SOME OLD TRICKS

In a workshop on the Isle of Man, Roger Smith painstakingly produces timepieces that cost a minimum of £86,000 each. No wonder he only makes ten a year

From the outside, there's not a lot to distinguish the headquarters of RW Smith Watches. It's a medium-sized semi-detached house with cream walls and an untended front garden at the end of a road, near Ramsey, on the Isle of Man. There isn't so much as a sign. But inside, where the neighbours have sofas, TVs and dishwashers, Roger Smith has machinery and workbenches. Upon entering, visitors are greeted by a floor-to-ceiling hand-operated drilling machine. Lots of people have a little workshop in their garage; perhaps a hobby that spills over into the rest of the house. But not one that produces £1 million worth of luxury watches every year.

Just over ten million watches are sold each year in the UK. Of these, Roger Smith makes just ten, maybe 12.

No two are alike, and each one is made almost entirely by hand. Smith is one of a very select group of men worldwide who know how to do this, and has dedicated his life to pursuing a level of craftsmanship that makes the average Swiss watch 'manufacture' look like a Taiwanese toy factory.

Aged 16, Smith enrolled at the Manchester School of Horology, at his father's suggestion. He was instantly hooked, and decided to make his own watch after a guest lecture from George Daniels, one of the most respected watchmakers of the last century.

'I made my first watch, a pocket watch, when I was 19 at home. That took 18 months, and all along you have no idea whether it's really going to work – it only starts ticking at the end. Luckily it did, and I presented it to George, who simply said, "It looks too home-made. ►

REPORT BY **CHRIS HALL** PICTURES BY **MARK BRAMLEY**



► Go back and try again." So I started on my second pocket watch. This took five years, making everything by hand, and making a lot of mistakes as I went.'

Daniels approved of this second effort, and invited Smith to move to the Isle of Man to work with him. The two collaborated on Daniels's series of 'Millennium' watches, before Smith set up his own workshop on the island. Daniels, who died last October, made fewer than 40 watches by himself, and was best known for inventing the 'coaxial escapement' – a mechanism for controlling the release of a watch's energy that's frequently described as the most important horological innovation in 250 years. Omega adopted it in 1999.

As you may have gathered by now, one doesn't just turn up and buy a Roger Smith watch. For starters, they aren't available in any shops. A first-time 'client' will visit the workshop and talk through the various options available on the Series 2, Smith's current signature model. Then Smith and his team of five watchmakers (including two young local apprentices) embark on a production cycle lasting for years, transforming steel, jewels and precious metals into a watch costing more than an Aston Martin V8 Vantage.

'We thought we could sell the watches for £15,000 originally,' says Smith. 'Halfway through the first ones we realised that wasn't going to work out. We were scraping through. I knew how to make a watch by hand and how to cost my time, but I had no idea how to make ten a year. We made a high number of development mistakes. We did come frighteningly close to running out of money.'

A 'standard' Series 2 costs £86,400, or £100,800 with a yellow-gold case. A hand-engraved dial adds £3,000.

'I've been told – and I'm pretty sure – that I could charge £200,000 for them, but that puts me into a world that I don't know and don't understand,' he says.

Somewhat surprisingly, Smith doesn't regard his watches as belonging to the world of the super-rich. In a way, you can see why – there's no showiness, no diamond-encrusted cases and no Bond Street boutique for oligarchs and WAGs to parade around. And while you might need a footballer's salary to afford one, the timescale of his work deters those more used to instant gratification. It takes at least two years to make a Series 2; Smith does accept commissions for one-off bespoke pieces, but the waiting list for him to even start work on one of these is eight years.

Nearly 50 of the Series 2 watches have been sold since 2006, and Smith knows all of the buyers personally. 'George used to have to like someone before he would

Smith in his workshop with some of George Daniels's machines. Left: a bespoke hand-engraved dial. Below: an open-dial Series 2



'IT TAKES ME TWO WEEKS TO MAKE A DIAL BUT I KNOW THAT IN 500 YEARS IT WILL BE OK'

sell them a watch, and while I'm not exactly like that, I would say that of the 50 people who have bought one, there are only one or two who I don't get along with.'

So why are they so expensive? Appropriately, time. Designing a watch takes weeks, or months, and Smith's watchmakers spend a long, long time ensuring every single piece is finished to the highest possible standard. When *Live* visits, Scott Weaver, 27, who also trained in Manchester, is finishing a small spring arm. He's been at it an hour, and to the untrained eye it already looks flawless. About three-quarters of an inch in length, it tapers to a point about a third of a millimetre wide. Holding it with tweezers and with a loupe clamped to his eye, he's 'graining' the part – applying exactly the right sort of textured finish to the sides. He'll then bevel the edges at a level imperceptible to the naked eye, before giving it a black polish; a super-reflective shine that makes the metal look bluey-black. The whole process takes a day-and-a-half, and for each watch there are 224 other parts receiving the same level of attention.

Nobody will see this spring – it's set to join dozens of other similarly pampered components in the movement. When I ask Weaver why they go to all this trouble when no one will ever know, his colleague Andrew Jones, somewhat pained, interrupts: 'But we'd know.'

'The idea is just to make the best possible watch that can be made, so you want to do your best on every piece,' adds Weaver with a shrug. 'Of course, if I make a mistake I'll have to go back and repolish it, and that's another two or three hours in itself.'

They're all immensely proud of their craft – and rightly so. 'You won't see the skills we have here in Switzerland,' says Smith, demonstrating a 'rose engine', an 1820s lathe that George Daniels restored and is still used to decorate the dials. 'You don't see engine turning like this elsewhere in the industry. It might take me two

weeks to make a dial but I know that in 100, 200, even 500 years this dial will be OK.'

Some of the screws are so tiny it's a wonder they can be picked up at all, let alone worked on. One of the trickiest jobs is 'bluing' the screws. Holding one with a pair of fine-nosed tweezers, Smith passes it over a small blowtorch. The steel changes colour in the heat, from silver to black – you have to catch it at just the right shade of deep, rich blue. Too purple and it'll need to be polished out and blued again. The steel changes colour in no more than a second. 'You treat these parts like your babies, and believe me, if you drop one on the floor, you don't do anything else until you've found it,' says Andy Dallison, another member of the team.

Once assembled, the watches are tested for waterproofing. 'We don't tell people they're waterproof,' says Smith, 'because the last thing you'd want to do with one of these is get it anywhere near water – especially with a leather strap – but they are tested to 2.2 bar. If they ask, we tell them, but I can't see anyone keeping it on in the shower or anything like that. I wear each watch for about two weeks to check that it's keeping good time.'

Only when the watches have passed this final test is Smith prepared to send them out into the world. Amazingly, he says he's happy to just put them in the post. 'They're insured, of course, and sometimes we do have couriers that we use, but most of the time Royal Mail is fine.' Some clients get better treatment than others, however. An open-dial Series 2 has been bought by a collector in Florida, a repeat customer, and Smith will fly out to deliver it to him in about a fortnight.

Asked why people buy his watches, Smith replies, 'A £2 watch from the garage will keep better time, but this is about making everything to the highest standard. You get a very different feel from one of these watches.'

They've got character and charm, and there'll be small flaws – maybe on this one the numerals aren't all straight.' Hopefully his buyer in Florida won't have a microscope to hand... ■

