

Roger Smith at the bench



BY CURTIS THOMSON

Island of Time

Off the coast of Great Britain, on the Isle of Man, Roger W. Smith makes handcrafted timepieces—with a little the help from his friend Kern

Roger Smith is a throwback to a time when the great watchmakers weren't simply watchmakers; they were horologists. The making of watches, clocks and chronometers was not seen as an independently exclusive enterprise, it was all considered part and parcel to the work of the most elite watchmakers.

It is for this reason, among others, that I was excited to visit the R.W. Smith workshop located near Great Britain on the Isle of Man.

As with many independents, Smith's workshop is at his home—currently in his modified garage—but a move to a larger building is planned for the not-too-distant future as the company continues to grow. At one time

he was a one-man show, making his watches by himself, making one-off pocket watches, commissioned wristwatches and his first series of wristwatches, the Series 1. But, while making his Series 1

watches it became clear that the interest in his work was growing to the point that help was needed. Smith then began to hire a team.

Andy Jones joined Smith in September 2003. An old college



Looking over Roger Smith's shoulder as he examines the prototype movement for his Series 2 wristwatch.



classmate, friend and talented watchmaker, he was the perfect choice to share the workshop of a solitary watchmaker. After finishing his training in England, Jones went on to work briefly for TAG Heuer.

Looking for more challenging work he joined famed jeweler Asprey in London in its service and restoration departments. Through this position he entered the Watches of Switzerland

Training and Education Program (WOSTEP) six-month refresher course in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, during 1991. Two years later he returned to WOSTEP to its Complicated course, which is dedicated to restoration practices on, you guessed it, complicated watches. His natural talent and trained hands lead to his restoring many important watches and clocks for private clients at Asprey.

In 2000 Asprey stopped its

restoration services, which lead to a short period of work at William & Son.

Andy's vast knowledge of high grade and complicated watches, coupled with his ability to make anything, makes him a valuable asset, says Smith. Since starting halfway through the making of the Series 1 production, he has worked on two tourbillon wristwatches commissioned by famed watchmaker George Daniels and

Andy Dallison operates the “Kern” – R. W. Smith’s CNC machine.



another private commission, a wall regulator clock, with gravity escapement and perpetual calendar (still in the works). He also has been involved in the construction and prototyping of the current Roger W. Smith Series 2 wristwatch.

Francis Rossignol, a young French watchmaker, joined the team in 2005 after spending four years working with brilliant watchmaker Vianney Halter in Saint Croix, Switzerland.

Rossignol, while young at 26 years of age, has been involved with watchmaking since he was fifteen. Two years of basic watchmaking education, two years of

restoration and complications training was followed by two more years learning production techniques, CAD, and constructing. He also made his own tourbillon wristwatch, which I can report is quite nice, especially when one considers he was 21 years old when he built it.

The Kern

To the uninitiated, hearing Smith speak about the “Kern” might lead you to believe it is a person. It is not. It is a German-made CNC machine that helps watchmakers remain independent. It enables the quick and efficient realization of compo-

nents that would have either taken numerous man-hours to make or required the help of outside suppliers.

Upon receiving the Kern in 2004, Roger and Andy began learning the expensive lessons of what the machine was and wasn't capable of doing and at what speeds. They learned expensive lessons about how the cutters used by the machines can easily break. But, with training and time, both Roger and Andy are now proficient at the Kern—but it soon became clear that a trained engineer/CNC operator was needed to reach the workshop's maximum efficiency.

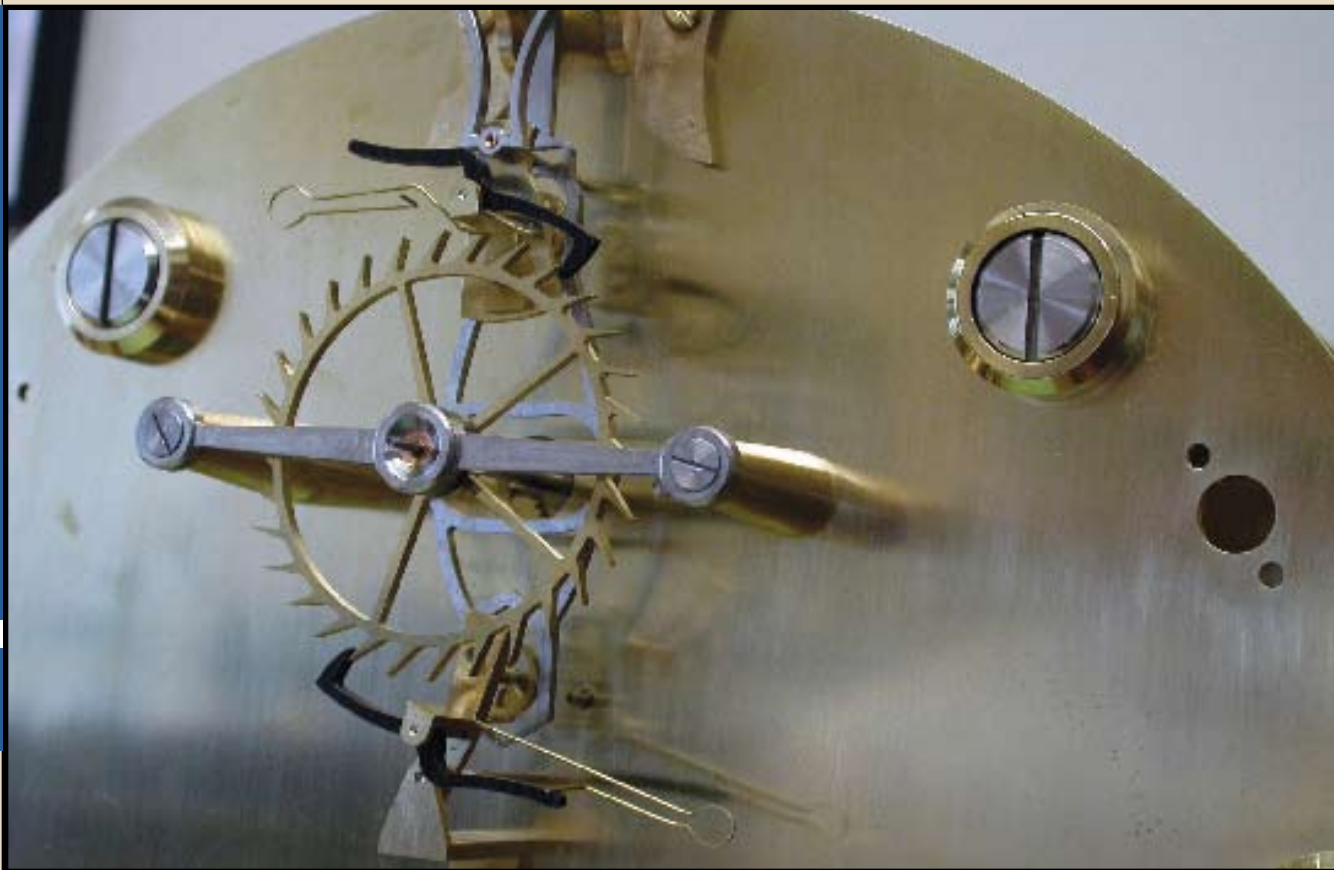


Kern milling the baseplate for the Series 2 wristwatch.
Below: Francis Rossignol tweaks a commissioned wristwatch tourbillon.

Enter Andy Dallison. With a five years apprenticeship and 25 years of engineering experience at Rolls Royce/Boeing as an air and space engineer, Dallison was hired last year to operate and maintain the Kern and perform general machining tasks. These tasks are integral when creating a watch from Smith's designs. →



Close-up of the Grasshopper escapement variation, in its early testing stages, for a commissioned wall regulator fitted with sun and planet maintaining power and with a perpetual calendar.



For example, after receiving a design from Smith (using CAD—computer aided design), Dallison modifies the original design into the necessary operational steps. Once the modifications are made, the information is moved to the CAM (computer aided manufacturing) software and the cutting tools and dimensions are all defined and numbered. Up to twenty-four tools may be loaded into the Kern.

Each sequence is then checked and verified in the CAM software and also verified on the Kern. Once all is correct, the CAM information is translated into an understandable process for the Kern.

As an example, the Series 2 mainplate uses twenty tools and has 133 machining sequences to manufacture. The Kern is capable of milling one mainplate at a time and holding tolerances to .01 mm.

Once the parts are finished, Dallison checks them to make sure the desired results and tolerances are maintained. While many may think CNC work is “set it and forget it” the truth is without a skilled operator, first-class work is not achievable. Dallison has made it possible for Smith to utilize the full array of possibilities offered by the Kern.

Smith and Daniels

Most of those reading this will be acquainted with Smith from past articles. He is a gifted watchmaker who has been making “bespoke” watches since his early twenties and spent three years working for the legendary George Daniels on the Isle of Man.

Spending three days with Roger and his team, I was able to witness Rossignol fine-tune the No. 3 wristwatch tourbillon and Jones making components for the regulator clock. I saw Dallison make small adjustments to the Series 2 mainplate in efforts to enter full production. (The Series 2 wristwatch is in its final stages

Andy Jones explains the construction of the clock movement and its functions.

of development, with production and deliveries due within the final months of this year).

And I watched as Smith steered the ship, offering council where needed on the various goings on, and demonstrating how he makes his Series 2 hands, assembles its dial, finishes steel and create the “turtle back” glass (domed glass on all radius’) for





Two commissioned wristwatch tourbillons—one with calendar, one with specially calculated lunar train.

watches like the No. 3 wristwatch tourbillon.

The Roger.W. Smith workshop is a small manufacture: a combination of modern technology, hand skills and old school know-how, culminating in horologically interesting pieces, from one-off commissions to small series', all following classic English tradition.

And regardless of who directs the proceedings and whose name is on the firm, the team here is every bit as important as the name on the dial—and Smith himself is happy to have that known. C

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