

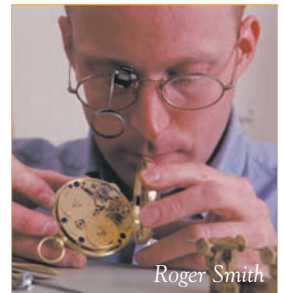
Perfect Timing

Roger Smith— One to “Watch”

Roger Smith's No. 2 Pocket Watch. One-minute tourbillon detent escapement, twin barrels, 4-year perpetual calendar, silver engine-turned dial, 18K gold hands, 18K gold case.

by Curtis D. Thomson

One of watchmaking's best kept secrets resides off the northwest coast of England in the Irish Sea. The Isle of Man has opened



Roger Smith

its shores to three English watchmakers of note over the past century: John Harwood of Bolton, England, the inventor of the first automatic winding wristwatch; George Daniels of London, England, who is the most influential and significant watchmaker of his age; and Roger Smith of Bolton, England.

Roger Smith, at 32 years of age, is quite possibly the finest young independent watchmaker in the world. His résumé speaks for itself: Bronze Medallist of the British Horological Institute, which is awarded to the most outstanding graduating student; made the first of two tourbillon pocket watches (three handmade pocket watches in total) at the age of 22; assisted George Daniels for three years; and is now finishing a project for Dr. Daniels and continuing to further his own watchmaking vision.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY ROGER SMITH.



No.2

Of his first watch, Roger reflects, “I don’t look back at the watch with any pride; it was really just a hurdle that had to be crossed. I suppose I proved to myself that I could make a pocket watch that worked, but at the same time I realized the enormity of the task that lay ahead. Really, I was just at the beginning.”

In 1992 Roger brought his recently finished pocket watch, No. 1, to George Daniels for his opinions. While impressed with his effort, Dr. Daniels noted the watch looked “too handmade. It should look as if has been created from thin air, i.e., there should not be telltale marks from the maker.” Dr. Daniels suggested that since Roger had proven he could make a properly functioning watch, he should start another and concentrate on all the aspects involved with making and finishing a watch.

With constructive criticism and encouragement from Daniels freshly in mind, Roger set out to make his second pocket watch. No. 2 was a journey of discovery, refinement, dedication and, finally, mastery of one’s craft, which began in 1992 and was not finished until 1997.

Not wanting to make a merely refined copy of his first watch, Roger decided No. 2 will have a twin barrel, four-year perpetual calendar, fitted with a one-minute tourbillon. The steel carriage will have two arms and carry a free-sprung Earnshaw detent escapement. The watch is key wound and key set, with a silver engine-turned dial, gold hands in a 66.5 mm diameter x 21.5 mm thick 18ct gold case. The movement has a traditional English gilded finish, as did No. 1 and as will all subsequent watches.

The making of this watch was a challenging endeavor, as it provided the young watchmaker plenty of components to saw, file and finish in addition to increasing complexity of design with No. 2, which was

his intention—to exceed even his previous standards of excellence.

Living in Bolton, Roger began in 1992 and had completed the movement by 1993. This is not surprising; No. 1 took 18 months to complete and one would expect a second effort to go much quicker, with the knowledge and confidence gained from his first experience. But this doesn’t account for the learning curve. It is quite an undertaking and achievement to make one’s first watch, and it is quite another accomplishment indeed to make a watch that is not “too handmade,” as George Daniels advised.

Roger, having a relentless work ethic, supported himself by doing “run of the mill” repair work during this time. This type of work was more constant and less time-consuming than complicated restorations for collectors, allowing more time for the making of his own watch. Since Roger has the ability to be critical of his own work and to accept and execute the guidance of respected opinions, what for others may have been a completed job became for Roger a prototype, a rough draft of sorts.

Upon inspection of the completed movement, he realized that the parts that were made in the early days did not meet the standards of the parts he had recently finished. The suspect components were made again over the course of a year. At the end of the year, *deja vu*, he again found the parts he had made earlier in the year were not of the same standards as those he had recently completed.

This pattern of self-evaluation and a desire to reach his greatest capabilities in the making of No. 2 continued until 1997. After five years, effectively making four movements, learning and mastering new techniques, Roger was finally satisfied with the quality of the movements’ components and that their finish was of the highest standards that he could achieve.

With No. 2 completed, Roger arranged another meeting with George Daniels on the Isle of Man to have



his work surveyed. Under the critical eye of the master, the inspection began. "Who made the escape wheel for you?" asked a skeptical Daniels. "I did," replied Roger. "Hmmm... ." He continued to examine the execution of construction and finish of the movement asking, "Who made the detent for you?" Again, Roger replied, "I did." "Hmmm... ." And on this went for the entirety of the inspection, with Dr. Daniels eventually offering his congratulations for the first-class work he had accomplished. Roger W. Smith had achieved the Created.

Isle of Man— The Millennium Watch

Six months after winning favor on the Isle of Man, Roger received a telephone call from Dr. Daniels. He was told that after 25 years the Daniels' co-axial escapement had been taken on board by Omega. As part of the contract, Omega would provide the Daniels' workshop with 50 co-axial movements from which he intended to fashion a series of watches to be sold under his name, Daniels London. Dr. Daniels asked Roger if he'd be willing to move to the Isle of Man and assist in the making of the series, to which he agreed.

Under the watchful eye of Dr. Daniels, Roger became acquainted with the work methods, equipment, surroundings and companionship of the formidable George Daniels. The arrangement called for three

*Millennium Watch: Limited edition of 50.
Note the finely engine-
turned, 18K
gold rotor.*



years of service to complete the series of 50 watches. The watch, known as the Millennium Watch, is based on Omega's caliber 2500, which is based on their caliber 1120, which, in turn, is based on ETA's 2892-A2.

The Millennium Watch is an automatic, center seconds movement finished in the English tradition, with gilded plates and blued screws. The engine turned rotor is 18ct gold, as is the case. Three different engine turned designs are demonstrated on the silver dial, with 18ct gold hand engraved, chapter rings for the time and calendar indications. The dial is signed Daniels-London. (It should be noted that the Millennium Watch shown here is Roger's personal watch. It is the only Millennium Watch with Daniels-London on the dial.) The hands are fashioned from 18ct gold, as well. The movement is visible through a sapphire display back.

After nine months of tutelage and work, Roger was off and running with the tasks at hand.

Indeed, years two and three found Roger in total charge of production.

The Millennium Watch has several modifications to the Omega ebauche, which were carried out in Daniels' workshop. The ebauche, received as unassembled movement components, does not have calendar work, dial or hands.

These items were made by Roger, as well as the automatic rotor, winding crown and case.

The movement is gilded and finds itself oriented with the winding crown at 7 o'clock to accommodate the calendar mechanism, with the standard nickel-plated screws replaced by heat-treated, blued screws.

Third watch made. Commission received a week before Daniels made his offer to work on the Isle of Man.



No.3

As if working alongside George Daniels and completing watches bearing his name wasn't enough,

Roger accepted his first commission during his first year with Dr. Daniels. This watch would take three years to complete, with the work being done in the evenings, weekends and any spare moments from his efforts on the Daniels' Millennium Watch.

As with all of his watches to date, No. 3 was created in the English tradition, with all components being made by Roger (save jewels, mainspring and hairspring). It is an 18ct. gold pocket watch that is key wound and key set. The dial is engine-turned silver with large hours chapter ring, off-set seconds and a sector for the state of wind. The hands, which have become a "signature" of sorts, are of 18ct. gold. The 32-jeweled, gilded movement is powered by two mainsprings, uses Peto's cross detent as its escapement and has been fitted with a 15 seconds remontoir.



Millennium Watch: Number 6 of 50 watches made. Featuring an 18K white gold case and blued steel hands, this is the only Millennium Watch to be engraved with R.W. Smith.



Wristwatch

Having finished his first commission and his work with Dr. Daniels, Roger, now making his permanent home on the Isle of Man, made what some feel is the natural professional and business move to making wristwatches. With a concept in mind and not wanting to encourage the inevitable comparisons with Dr. Daniels, Roger constructed a rectangular case and movement, something he had always liked and wanted to make; a shape not to be found in the Daniels' catalog of watches.

The wristwatch is of the same cut of cloth, the English tradition, and will be made in a series of twelve pieces. The manual wind, lever escapement, rectangular movement has 21 functional jewels in gold chatons, which are set in the gilded and hand-engraved plates. The silver engine-turned dial displays the hours with gold batons, off-set seconds and a retrograde calendar. The hour, minute and seconds hands are made of gold, with the retrograde calendar hand made of blued steel. The movement is encased in 18ct. gold, with a sapphire display case back fixed with four screws. The case measures 28 mm by 36 mm by 10 mm.

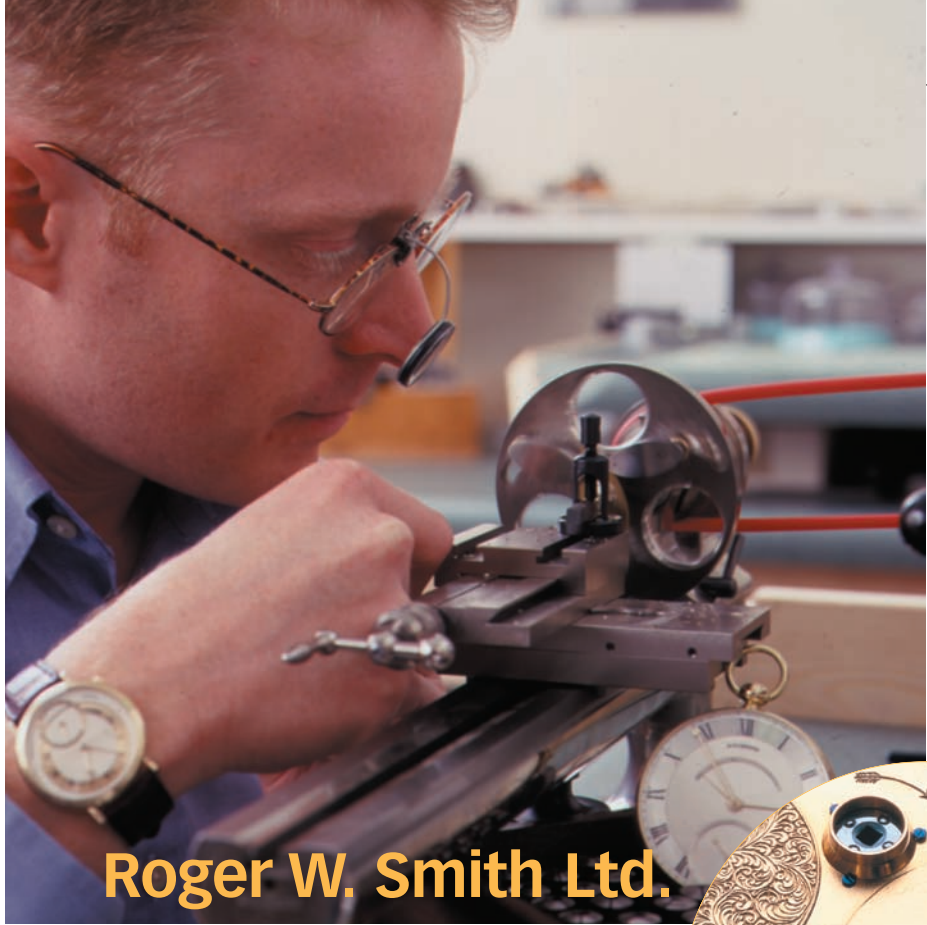
R.W. Smith wristwatch with 18K gold case, silver engine-turned dial, retrograde calendar and 21-jewel gilded movement.

A rectangular case has a higher degree of difficulty than the circular variety and is one which Roger has executed flawlessly. A single case requires two weeks' work and is not made from a solid billet of metal, but of an 18ct gold rectangular sectioned rod, which is filed to shape and then soldered together. Similarly, two weeks are necessary to engine-turn the dial, which is an exercise of concentration and patience. The work cannot be rushed and any mistake will spoil the dial, as errors cannot be rectified.

Roger's hands are of original design and can be found in pocket watches No's. 2 and 3, his wristwatch series and all subsequent works. "The hands were designed to be distinctive and also clear enough so that the time can be read in an instant," he informs me. It takes one week to make a single set of hands out of an 18ct. gold sheet, cut out with a piercing saw, filed to shape and then polished. The retrograde calendar work is of his own design as well, and it occupies three weeks of work to execute this complication.

Unlike his pocket watches, Roger does not make all of the components for his wristwatches. To create a product that is more price conscious, Roger realized some specialist firms would need to be employed. To this end, the going train, winding work, escape wheel and pallets are purchased from Switzerland. This allows Roger to sell his watches at the reasonable price of 12,000 GBP (apx. \$18,700). All parts, except where just noted, are made by Roger Smith in his workshop or George Daniels' workshop, where he is always welcome.

From start to finish it takes three months to make one rectangular wristwatch and, as a testament to Roger's great skill, only three wristwatches remain unaccounted for from the publishing date of this article.



Roger W. Smith Ltd.

"I want the name Roger W. Smith to be associated with the revival of English watchmaking. My aim is to make handmade, individual watches designed and made to the highest possible standards."

With 10 years' experience as an artist-craftsman, as someone who makes watches, Roger has developed a three-level plan for the business of Roger W. Smith Ltd., which will encompass the R.W. Smith philosophy at various price points.

Level One will be to produce one completely handmade pocket or wristwatch a year. This will be the heart of the business, with the greatest demand and cost for the purchaser. Level Two consists of the production of approximately twelve wristwatches in the fashion of the rectangular wristwatch described above. These watches will be made for those who appreciate the qualities exhibited in the handmade watches of Level One, but will find them at a more affordable price due to their method of construction. Levels One and Two have been achieved. Level Three has his workshop capabilities expanding to produce 50 to 100 watches a year, with the employment of a couple of watchmakers capable of watch assembly, finishing and servicing. These watches

would be produced using modern manufacturing techniques and would be held to the exacting standards required of a RW Smith watch. It is expected that within three to four years, Level Three will be achieved.

Philosophy

To design and execute watches of the highest mechanical and artistic standard, Roger incorporates an appreciation for quality of manufacture and artistry from watches made by such makers as Mudge, Arnold, Dent, Barrauds and, of course, Daniels. This appreciation is coupled with a pragmatism that is reflected in his foresight regarding the future care of his watches.

Having repaired many watches over the years, Roger realized that time and the elements take their toll on watches. Movements are scratched and decorative finishes begin to wear thin, enamel and printed dials chip and discolor, hands begin to corrode and show signs of wear from removal.

Roger made a conscious effort to address these issues during design and construction; therefore, his watches may be brought back to their original condition 50, 100, 200 years from now. Using only high-quality, time-proven materials, watchmakers will find gold hands that may be polished if marked and silver engine turned dials that can be rebleached and lacquered. If the movements' plates show scratches and/or excessive wear of finish, the chatons may be removed from the plates allowing refrosting and gilding. Roger adds, "I am using proven (traditional) techniques in the manufacture of my watches, which is sensible if the performance and, most important, the long-term appearance of the watch is to be maintained."





Conversation

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Well, it seems we have come full circle in the span of ten years. In 1992 Roger made a tourbillon pocket watch following Dr. Daniels’ classic book *Watchmaking*. He then traveled to the Isle of Man for the master’s advice and approval. Ten years later, on the Isle Of Man, Roger is again making a tourbillon for Dr. Daniels’ approval—the approval of a satisfied client. Roger Smith is making a co-axial tourbillon wristwatch for George Daniels. The watch is of Dr. Daniels’ design and will be signed Daniels-London.

Having five years experience with the Daniels’ co-axial escapement, Roger may be more familiar with this escapement and its workings than anyone living, next to George Daniels and Derek Pratt. With this in mind, I asked Roger for his opinions on the past problems Omega has had with some of their co-axial watches, he replies:

“My views as to the problems that have arisen with the co-axial escapement have been caused by the inability to fully understand the correct functioning of the escapement. Prior to working with George, I had only had experience with the lever escapement. Adjusting to the co-axial and understanding its operation well enough to be able to diagnose faults has taken a considerable amount of time. This is

not a criticism of the technicians, but I know from experience for anyone to catch up with a person who has spent twenty-five years of his life devoted to an escapement, as George Daniels has, takes some doing. As we know, the Swiss are master microengineers and any problems will be overcome.” After being asked if he would be developing his own escapement, his response demonstrated his full support and confidence in the co-axial. Roger continues: “I think that unless the co-axial can be bettered there would be little point in developing another. But who knows, maybe one day a weakness will appear. I think it unlikely, providing the escapement is fitted into a movement that has been designed around it, the escapement will perform extraordinarily well.”

In addition to making the Daniels-London co-axial tourbillon wristwatch, Roger is finishing his series of twelve rectangular R.W. Smith wristwatches and, in what can only be seen as a great honor, Roger’s No. 2 pocket watch will be on exhibit in the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers Museum at London’s Guildhall library in January 2003. No. 2 has not been sold, since he hasn’t the need, nor intent, to sell it. Although, that is not to say No. 2 couldn’t change hands if the right purchaser were to present himself.

With the singular drive to succeed in his chosen profession to the full, Roger W. Smith is currently developing future projects that will solidify his place in the “Revival of English Watchmaking.”

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