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Roger Smith's GREAT watch for Britain

by Justin Koullapis

GREAT Britain is an ambitious international marketing campaign on behalf of British industry. Greater in scope and investment than any this country has ever enjoyed, it aims to demonstrate the very best that Britain has to offer in the fields of (but not limited to) heritage, culture, innovation, business, sport, technology, creativity, knowledge, and education. With this campaign, the world is being encouraged to visit, study, invest, and do business with the United Kingdom.

The campaign has scores of partners, one of whom is the Lancashire-born watchmaker, Roger Smith, whose Isle of Man watchmaking studio is the only place in the British Isles where one can currently find watches being made entirely by hand (at a pace of no more than about ten a year), according to what is now known as the 'Daniels' Method'.

In support of the campaign, Roger has created a unique piece, based on the design of his *Series 2* watches.

Roger's credentials as master of his craft need no burnishing among the horological fraternity, but some background to the *GREAT Britain* campaign will help put his work into context: launched internationally in February 2012, the campaign is active in over 134 countries. The public face of the campaign is a striking series of advertising, each highlighting something that makes Britain great. Advertising for the campaign within the UK is limited, its target of course being overseas visitors and investors. Key foreign markets (China, India, USA and Brazil) are demonstrating exceptional response, with further GREAT activity across western Europe, the Gulf, and planned expansion into Russia, South Korea, Mexico, Turkey etc.

If the public face is a strong series of adverts, the networking and business creation behind the scenes is phenomenal. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office, UK Trade & Investment, British Council, VisitBritain, indeed even 10 Downing Street, are all directly and collaboratively involved in promoting inward investment into the UK under the aegis of the *GREAT Britain* campaign. Government spending on the project has been in excess of 30 million pounds, scaled up from an initial eight million, one of the few areas of the national budget to have been given greater and greater investment rather than being austere trimmed.

Strong partnership from the private sector is a signature attribute of the campaign, where over 12 million pounds' value has been contributed. Some of Roger Smith's 'colleagues' on



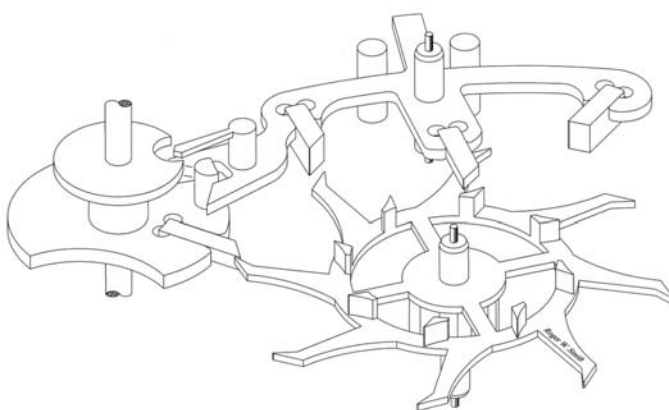
this private sector platform are Bentley Motors, Professor Peter Higgs, Sir Richard Branson, Sir Jony Ive, Lord's Cricket Ground, The Arctic Monkeys, Bombardier Aerospace and even Stilton cheese! The current value of the GREAT brand is estimated to be 100 million pounds, increasing to over a billion within the next few years.

In terms of return, for example, VisitBritain and VisitEngland's arms of the campaign have resulted in 500 million pounds of expenditure into the UK economy. These data demonstrate that *GREAT Britain* is of genuine value to the British economy and contributes to our fortunately enviable economic position in spite of the difficulties recently.

With so many millions bandied about, it's important to point out that Roger Smith has not been paid to create his GREAT watch, and it has not been bought nor paid for by the campaign; Roger has specially created the watch, and donated it on loan to *GREAT Britain*. This is a watch which would otherwise command £180,000.

In conversation with Roger, he admitted that the reason he doesn't wear one of his own watches is because he couldn't afford to! The donation of so valuable a hand-made instrument demonstrates his commitment to *Great Britain* and the culture, heritage and style that can be found only here.

One of the most striking features of the *GREAT Britain* watch is the complexity of the dial, an off-centred partial Union Flag, composed of thirty-four segments. The different parts of the flag are made of separate sections of hand engine-turned sterling silver, subtly mixing basket-weave, wave, and barleycorn effects. Also inlaid into the surface are silver minute and seconds chapters, and escutcheons with the maker's name and *GREAT Britain*. The hours are hand-made flame-blued steel Roman numerals.



The revised geometry, construction methods, and use of materials has allowed Roger Smith's variation of the Daniels Co-axial to be 23% lighter than before.



Roger Smith presents the *GREAT Britain* watch to Conrad Bird, the head of Public Diplomacy and Strategic Campaigns at FCO.



The high-grade setting lever spring, like all other flat steel work in the GREAT Watch, is at least 0.5mm thick, and is black polished & bevelled.

from their parent blocks, then milled and hand-fitted together in a diabolical geometrical tangram. There is no overall substrate or base — the apparently contiguous rear surface of the dial is actually a web of dozens of nearly invisible joints where the various segments are silver-soldered together.

Of course, the silver soldering and finishing of the dial was a nightmarish process when one considers that the melting point of some grades of solder is not far from that of the dial itself! Not a single droplet of flux could be risked anywhere near the front surface for fear of drawing molten metal to the visible side, and only the merest whispers of solder could anyway be applied in case of an over-run. Also consider the process of bringing the finished dial to that beautiful pure powdery white: the whole thing had to be repeatedly made red hot and acid-pickled. In a true test of the craftsman's patience and skill, every stage of each process represented a risk of the whole dial collapsing into a tangle of pieces.

When viewed in reality, the dial's effect is subtle, the white surface and fine engine-turning apparently quite uniform. The flag becomes apparent as the watch is moved in the light, the whole thing being an exercise in British understatement. To feel the mass of the watch, however, in its solid platinum case, one immediately understands the gravity of holding and wearing such an important piece.

Roger is also proud of the solidity of his movements. They are a lesson in good sturdy old-fashioned British work. As he pointed out, today you can go to Sotheby's and buy, for two or three thousand pounds, a two-hundred year old British watch, and expect it to perform just as well as the day it was made, thanks in part to the sturdy and unsparing use of metal. Quite objectively, he expects his watches to last at least as long for the same reasons, although one supposes the value in a few centuries would be rather higher!

'Strength and rigidity are little-used words in watch making', says Roger, 'and yet are essential for good, reliable timekeeping and indeed for the long term future of the piece.'

An added advantage of the depth in his movements is the distinctive three-dimensional appearance they present. Parts that in most modern production watches are stamped out of

The dial's segments were prepared with silver blanks being hand-cut on the original George Daniels straight-line engine. In a process that took more than three months, the segments were carefully separated



An underdial view of the GREAT Britain watch.

material that is sometimes little more than foil, appear almost cliff-like in a Roger Smith watch. All the flat steel he uses is at least 0.5mm thick, and is finished with a superb black polish. His cocks and chatons are also in black-polished solid gold, a notoriously difficult feat.

The thickness of the raised barrel bridge affords the space for a complex panel of foliate hand-engraving; both are features of classic high-grade British-made watches.

Not satisfied with using the Daniels Co-Axial as-designed, Roger has improved the escapement in phased stages throughout the past few years. Its current refinement finds the upper set of teeth formed integral with the main wheel, rather than as a pair of co-mounted wheels as Daniels had it. Further lightness of the escape wheel has been secured by the use of an unusual alloy. This, and a radical re-thinking of the layout of metal between the active faces has resulted in an escapement that is 23% lighter than before, with consequent improvements in unlocking & impulse acceleration, less jarring at locking, and the ability to use a longer and weaker mainspring, giving the watch less wear and an even longer life.

When not on tour with the GREAT Britain campaign, the watch will be curated in London, with one of the UK's pre-eminent wristwatch specialists, about which more will be announced in due course.

Concluding with the words of the Prime Minister when he launched GREAT Britain in New York: 'Britain today is a great place to visit, study and work...to invest and do business. We want to invite everyone to take a fresh look at everything we have to offer'. Certainly Roger Smith's methods and his watches do exactly that.



Sterling silver blanks destined to become the watch dial, during their three-month journey of engine-turning, cutting, and soldering.



The box for the GREAT Watch, hand-made in English oak by Linley.



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