

Firm where watches are Manx-made work of art



MINUTE DETAIL: A view inside the Roger W Smith Ltd workshop, with watchmaker Roger Smith himself at work in the foreground

By RICHARD ALLEN

WE live in an age when products are manufactured to a degree where it is often cheaper to buy a new gadget than to get the old one repaired.

Everything is mass-produced and the days of skilled artisans running a business by making things by hand seem long gone.

But not quite – Roger Smith, of Roger W Smith Ltd watch, clock and chronometer makers, runs a unique business in Ballaugh producing handmade timepieces.

The watches produced are true works of art and continue a long tradition of English horology.

It was while studying at the Manchester School of Horology that Roger first met George Daniels, a watchmaker widely regarded as the greatest horologist of modern times.

Mr Smith was inspired by a lecture given by Mr Daniels and spent the next seven years perfecting the 30 or so different disciplines involved in creating a truly handmade pocket watch.

While George Daniels acknowledged that Mr Smith's first watch was a valiant effort, it wasn't until he completed his second that he finally won the approval of his mentor.

An invitation followed to work with him in the Isle of Man on the now legendary Daniels Millennium series of 50 watches. The experience was priceless and Mr Smith describes his time with Mr Daniels as 'the finest finishing school any aspiring watchmaker could wish for'.

Ultimately this led to Roger setting up his own company and Roger W Smith watches now sell for anything up to £51,000 each.

In these tough economic times you might think there would be a falling market for such luxury goods but business is good.



TIMELESS CLASSIC: An elegant Roger W Smith Series 2 watch

'There was definitely a bit of a lull but now that confidence is returning we have been getting more inquiries again,' said Mr Smith. 'We're advertising to take on another member of staff, so things are looking up.'

There is still a market for such desirable products among those who can afford such luxury and the unique nature of Roger W Smith watches is a strong selling point.

'The watches are unique, there's no other workshop in the world doing what we are doing,' he says.

'The thing that makes the watches so unique is that the whole movement in them is made in the Isle of Man.'

'Ninety-nine per cent of the watch is made here in one workshop. Compared to other watchmakers around the world this approach is completely unique.'

'Most of the other manufacturers will outsource various components.'

Mr Smith's company makes timepieces that are the watchmaking equivalent of an Aston Martin or Bentley. So what sort of customer buys a Roger W Smith watch?

You might expect Premiership footballers and film stars to be on his list of clients, just as they are for luxury supercars. But the truth may come as a surprise. 'Our customers tend to be self-made business people,' he said.

'They tend to be people who are enthusiastic about their own work and, when they reach a certain level in life, they often buy one of our watches almost as a treat to themselves – a kind of pat on the back.'

'We don't get the footballers or pop stars – they tend to be quite private people.'

Maybe the self-made business types who buy Roger W Smith watches recognise something of themselves and their own values of hard work and attention to detail in the philosophy of the Isle of Man watchmaker and his classic timepieces?

It's a suggestion that Mr Smith says may well have a kernel of truth in it. He says that most of his customers buy the watches as personal gifts or as a reward to themselves with the intention of keeping them for years.

But over time there is the likelihood that such exquisite craftsmanship, which is becoming a rarity these days, will have a value that makes Roger W Smith watches a good investment in the same way that antique watches are valuable to collectors now.

So are Roger W Smith watches an investment? Certainly those customers that have bought watches from the company want to keep them.

It's too early to say whether our watches are an investment,' says Mr Smith modestly. 'Certainly if you had bought George Daniels watches 20 or 30 years ago they would have gone up hugely in value.'

At the moment there is an 18-month waiting list for a Roger W Smith Series 2 watch and if you want a completely unique, one-off, custom-made commission design, there is a waiting list of four years.

That may sound like a long time but the company's customers appear to believe that it is worth waiting to receive a timepiece unique to them and something that is not just a wristwatch but a work of art too.

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MICRO MACHINE: Some of the tiny parts that make up a handmade Roger W Smith watch



MASTER CRAFTSMAN: Watchmaker Roger Smith

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