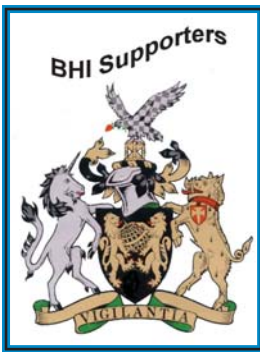


# *B H I* Horological *J Journal*



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*The new BHI Supporters scheme is a way of encouraging successful independent watchmakers from the United Kingdom to become more closely associated with the British Horological Institute. Links with these high profile watchmakers are seen as being a positive move, not only from the point of view of promoting high quality craftsmanship, but also from the inspiration they can bring to young aspiring watchmakers.*

*Over the last few months, Timothy Treffry HonFBHI, has interviewed some of the UK's finest watchmakers, giving an outline of their background, training, achievements and motivation, and showing their portfolio of watches and latest collections.*

*BHI Director, Mike Cardew, explained: 'The objective is to 'gather together' these top independent watchmakers to be firmly associated with the BHI, hopefully leading to the Institute acting as a forum for British and Irish watchmakers raising the profile of independent watchmaking.'*

From his workshop on the Isle of Man, Roger Smith and his small band of employees are 'dedicated to reviving and re-creating English watchmaking through the use of the hand-working techniques from the past, to re-establish the high values and qualities of the 'Golden Age'; the era of Tompion, Mudge, Earnshaw and Arnold'. The current R W Smith 'Series 2' exemplifies this aspiration. With the exception of the jewels, crystals, springs, some screws and the strap, this watch is made predominantly by hand and entirely 'in-house'.

## The Series 2 Watch

The most striking feature of the Series 2 watch is the dial. This is the most important part of a watch to get right; it opens a possible relationship with the customer and if he doesn't respond, it won't go any further. The Series 2 dial has seven solid-silver components. The three separate backgrounds are engraved with a traditional in-line engine dating from the



Roger Smith



*Original 38mm Series 2 with multi-component engine-turned dial in solid silver and individually crafted gold hands.*

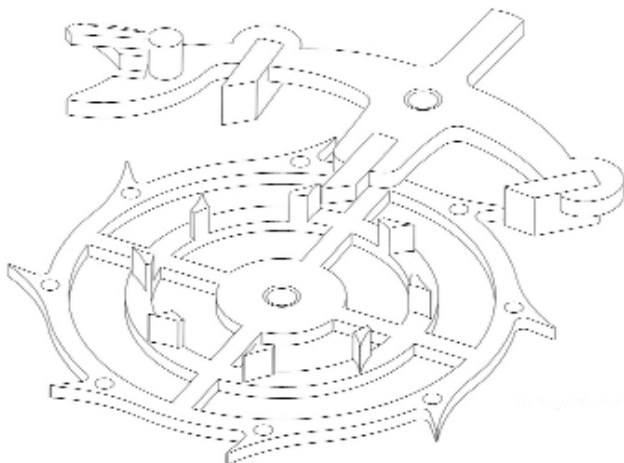
1820s. It takes years of practise to become skilled at using these hand-operated machines and great concentration. Each cut is made individually and the slightest error becomes magnified by its interaction with the rest of the pattern and is a 'start again' moment. The chapters and name plates are engraved by hand. The gold hands are roughed-out by machine but sculpted and finished by hand. The overall result moves a step forward along the noble lineage established by Breguet and revived by Daniels.

The 38mm case has the classic lines of a gentleman's watch and is again made and hand finished on the Isle of Man. The sapphire crystal on the rear reveals the hand wound movement. This further firmly establishes the Series 2 as a distinctive exemplar of the traditions of high-end English watchmaking. The fine satin finish of the  $\frac{3}{4}$  plate and bridges is produced by hand and is a considerable challenge to the watchmaker – and his successors!

It is very easily marked or damaged but has the virtue of being fully reproducible by skilled hands if necessary, making this an heirloom watch that is capable of being fully restored for future generations. Indeed, this principle of technical immortality is one of the attractions of the use of traditional materials and methods. Gilded in a buttery yellow gold, this finish enhances the rose-gold in the screwed chatons holding the jewels and the cocks for the 4th and escape wheels, which match the case. Naturally, the blued screws are heat-treated by hand. The steel components of the power reserve mechanism also have a satin finish. The free-sprung steel balance is regulated by D-shaped, inset, rose-gold weights of the Gyromax type. The components of the Daniels Co-axial Escapement, as modified by Roger, make full use of the precision available from a modern CNC machine: 0.005mm.



*After engine-turning the solid silver parts of the dial are assembled by hard soldering.*

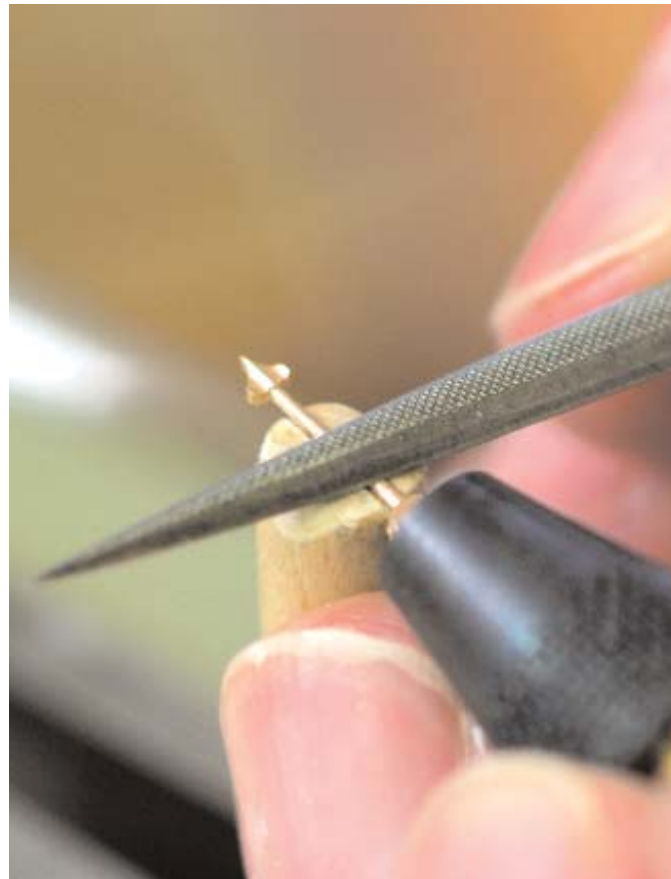


*The re-designed, single wheel, co-axial escapement. Made in one piece, this ensures concentricity of the inner and outer teeth along with their correct radial alignment. It also eliminates a complex part of the assembly process. The peripheral holes are there merely to reduce the inertia of the wheel.*

As the name indicates, Series 2, like its predecessor (no prize for guessing) is produced as a series, but the methods used mean that only around 10 watches can be made each year. They can't be bought 'off the shelf'; there is a two-year waiting list. Buyers are welcome to discuss additional features, but the basic model costs £74,000. Sadly, only wealthy people can aspire to own one, but if you do the sums, these highly desirable timepieces are extraordinarily good value; most of the money goes directly into the production of the watch. The original version of Series 2 is in a 38 mm case but as this *HJ* goes to press an alternative 'open dial', 40 mm version has been announced, and it is this that is depicted on the covers. Eliminating the dial enables the owner to appreciate the movement from both sides. Like the far side of the moon, the under-dial side of a watch movement is usually only viewed by a privileged few.

### **Twin Barrel Tourbillon**

Roger had a remarkably early start in horology. He was brought up in Bolton, South Manchester, where his father was a Consultant Rheumatologist with a serious interest in antique clocks. Indeed, it was when his father was looking for evening



*Shaping the gold hands.*

classes to pursue his hobby that young Roger, who had adopted his father's enthusiasm, discovered 'The Manchester School of Horology' at Openshaw College (as it then was). He started the course at the age of 16, graduated in 1989, and was awarded the BHI's Bronze Medal as top student nationally, together with the WCC Prize for practical work. By this time Roger was working part-time for Duval in Manchester doing after-sales servicing on the Tag Heuer, Maurice La Croix and Fortis watches which the company imported. He had also started doing repair and restoration work in a workshop set up in one corner of his bedroom.

But Roger had more ambitious plans. While he was in his second year at college there was a visit from George Daniels and Roger was able to see his famous 'Space Traveller' watch. He says: 'I was amazed; I just didn't know that it was possible for anyone to make a watch by hand, especially as I had spent the previous two weeks trying unsuccessfully to turn a decent balance staff'.

### **Watch No 2**

The idea was sown; Roger would make his own watch. Signed 'William Smith' (William is his second name) it was featured on the covers of the *HJ* for September 1992 when Roger was only 22 years old. The twin barrel tourbillon pocket watch with detent escapement was made as outlined in 'Watchmaking', and, apart from jewels, springs and crystals, Roger made the whole thing. It took over 3000 hours, some six weeks being spent on the detent alone. He had not achieved perfection, that was to follow, but it was a remarkable achievement. Moreover, he had established his credentials as a developing talent to be taken seriously, and received valuable critical appraisal, advice and practical assistance, not only from George Daniels but also from prominent members of the Trade. George's suggestion was to put the watch in a drawer and start on number two.

Watch No. 2 was completed within a year but looking at it with the self-critical eye that separates the top craftsman from the jobber, Roger realised that the components made first were not to the standard of those recently completed. They were remade. This cycle continued for five years during which most parts were made four times. Finally, the watch was taken to the Isle of Man where George Daniels took it into his workshop, examined it in silence for what seemed a very long time, and finally commented: 'Excellent, well done; you have done it. The finish is excellent, the watch works well, the styling is not yet quite there, but that will be picked up in time.' Greatly encouraged, Roger continued to support himself with trade work, but was now being sent more valuable pieces from leading dealers; building his exposure to the work of those 'Masters of the Golden Age'. He also received a commission for a pocket watch.

### Watch No 3

As the end of the millennium approached, there was a life-changing telephone call from George Daniels: as part of his deal with Omega commercialising the Co-Axial Escapement. He had obtained a number of co-axial movements and needed Roger's assistance to produce a limited series of Daniels co-axial wristwatches to provide a version for collectors and to mark the millennium. The decision didn't take long to make and Roger was soon looking for accommodation on the Isle of Man and getting used to George's workshop. Over the next three years, 50 watches were produced and in the latter stages Roger was doing all the work, but under eagle-eyed supervision. It provided the 'finishing school' he had always dreamed of, and in the evenings and at weekends he had that commission, Watch No. 3, to work on. It was to have an up-and-down mechanism, a fifteen second remontoire and be fitted with a Peto cross-detent escapement, a difficult system to get right.

By 2001 Roger was ready to establish his own independent workshop. He had developed an affection for the environment and way of life on the Isle of Man and decided to stay there. The success of the Daniels Millennium series convinced him of the demand for well-made wristwatches. He was determined to eschew a commercial base movement but, for a series of 10 watches, decided to buy in trains of wheels,



The R W Smith watch making team spends most of its time working by hand and eye.

[www.rwsmithwatches.com](http://www.rwsmithwatches.com)



Rear view of Series 2 with classic English layout, finish and detailing (see text). In this early version, the co-axial escapement has a wolf's tooth impulse wheel. (Can you see something odd about this image? Email: [jayne@bhi.co.uk](mailto:jayne@bhi.co.uk).)

escapements, and winding work and build the rest of the watch around them.

It was one thing for watches by George Daniels to sell readily, but who had heard of Roger Smith? Articles in the *HJ* and *International Wrist Watch* helped, but the breakthrough came, as other watchmakers have found, with publicity on the website, [www.thepurists.com](http://www.thepurists.com). This site is now mothballed but was carried forward as [www.watchprosite.com](http://www.watchprosite.com) (which is rather overwhelmed by the major brands; click on the 'AHCI Independents...' link).

'Series 1' sold quickly and it was time to expand and contemplate 'Series 2'. One by one a team of four additional watchmakers was recruited, with a significant addition in 2008 of a wife, Caroline. Caroline looks after the paperwork and the PR and, as an American customer said recently after attending a presentation in Los Angeles, '[Roger] and Caroline do seem to complement each other beautifully.'

The Isle of Man has an extraordinary record in the story of the wristwatch: John Harwood, maker of the first automatic; Dr George Daniels CBE, inventor of the Co-axial Escapement; and now Roger Smith, who is continuing the re-creation of the traditions of the Golden Age of English watchmaking in the middle of the Irish Sea.

Timothy Treffry HonFBHI

Next time we will look at the work of Stephen Forsey FBHI of Greubel Forsey.

