

The TIME IS NOW

The ancient art of watchmaking - intricate and highly specialised - has been a feature of British craftsmanship for centuries, but staying truly British is becoming increasingly rare. **Emma Johnson** meets some of the brands, new and old, intent on honing their name and technique.



ENTIRELY WIPED OUT by the quartz crisis - a term used in the watchmaking industry to refer to the economic upheaval caused by the advent of quartz watches in the 70s and 80s, which largely replaced mechanical watches and caused considerable decline of the Swiss watchmaking industry - British watchmaking today is in its second reimagining, but one which is both burgeoning and exciting, if not without its own challenges.

Small but mighty

One key distinction to make straight away, as a consumer, is how to interpret the concept of a British brand, or, more specifically, a British watchmaker. The issue, it seems, is related to both the craftsmanship and machinery required to fully make a watch in-house, both of which, if done in Britain, add a considerable price tag and takes an enormous amount of time. The greatest watchmaker of the 20th Century, George Daniels, was a British horologist whose watches took over 2,500 hours to make and sold for hundreds of thousands of pounds - he made

just 37 watches in his entire lifetime. Even today, Roger Smith, who took over Daniels' workshop on the Isle of Man, produces, along with a small team, just ten handmade watches a year. These are still the only truly handmade British watches in production.

Clearly, while impressive in scope and intricacy, this is not sustainable for the industry at large. When pitted against bigger brands, who are ostensibly British but have sourced some components abroad, the comparisons seem unevenly weighted. "How can a brand which is building watches in-house by hand justify their prices to the average consumer when mass produced watches are being touted as made in Britain and sold at a tenth of the price?" asks David Brailsford, CEO at Garrick and founder of The Watchmakers Club, a collective of independent brands from around the world. "A true British watchmaker is a brand that engineers their own parts and builds their own watches in-house, employing a qualified watchmaker to do so," he adds. But, in a small industry, with niche brands that simply don't have the might of the Swiss watch collective behind them, it is hard for companies to compete.

"Connecting the customer to the watchmaker is really something we believe in; the craftsmanship involved in designing and engineering a fine timepiece can be brought direct to the customer via the internet, and at a price that's also great value" Mike France, Christopher Ward

Change afoot

But change is in the offing, in part spearheaded by one of the most well-known and respected British watch brands, Bremont. Since 2002 the brand has been progressively introducing and moving over the necessary horological skillset and machinery to its two facilities in the UK, in order to produce British watches on a much larger scale. This year, Bremont will manufacture around 11,000 watches - the first time for several decades that watchmaking on this scale has been realised in Britain. "We are passionate about reinvigorating our nation's horological past and have invested a lot of money in making this possible," explains CEO and co-founder Giles English. From training up and hiring competent watchmakers and assemblers, to manufacturing its own watch parts, as well as committing huge investments into new machinery, and running apprenticeships, Bremont is ensuring that huge strides are being made for the entire industry. "There is much more to be achieved, but it is certainly a development and direction that can only be seen as a positive one for the future of watch making in the UK," says English. ▷



Giles Ellis, owner and designer of Schofield Watch Company agrees: “These days, the British watchmaking industry is typified only by entrepreneurship and endeavour,” he says. Perhaps one of the most modern British watch brands, Schofield, was started by Ellis in 2011 after failing to find a watch that met his exacting standards. Based in a small coastal village in Sussex and known for its innovation with materials, Schofield features watches with a detailed narrative. Designed by Ellis – a designer by trade – signature pieces include the Signalman Bare Bones, which features a striking clean face, with sleek hands and strong, neutral colours and the Bronze Beater with a classic, maritime feel.

With some parts manufactured in Germany and some in the UK, coupled with Ellis’ passion for the industry, Schofield is another brand that has become a sort of flag bearer for modern British watchmaking. “Considering this new era of watchmaking, there has been a desire for watch companies to manufacture more components within the UK, which is inline with the Made in Britain trend,” says Ellis. “Personally, we would just like to see more transparency in the industry as a whole,” he adds. It is this commitment to improving the industry as a whole that is typical of British watchmakers, who work together in a competition-free environment, passionate about promoting, furthering and protecting their industry. “Britain has some great watch brands,” continues David Brailsford. “And in my opinion, it doesn’t really matter to most people whether a brand builds its own watches or not – even I buy a watch simply because I like it. And there are a small number of great independent brands, such as Pinion, Schofield and Fears, who assemble watches in the UK using parts sourced elsewhere (both in the UK and Switzerland) and this is perfectly acceptable, considering that a watchmaker is still assembling these watches in good old blighty, and is honest about their origins.”

Skill & Time

For the consumer, then, it really is about what matters most to you – heritage, design, origin or craftsmanship. When buying a watch and looking at brands or watchmakers these are things you will have to consider. “Even brands such as Garrick can’t build every component in-house yet, but we try to do as much as possible,” says Brailsford. Garrick makes its own dials and watch hands in-house, on some models, employing qualified watchmakers and using traditional watchmaking techniques. All watches are built in limited numbers which means they will always remain exclusive. “We like to build unique pieces with distinct features,” says Brailsford. “For instance, our Norfolk model was based on the old enamel dial instruments found in the boiler rooms of old ships. Our unique maritime-themed hands (made by hand) have now become a signature of the brand and make our watches instantly recognisable amongst collectors.”

One brand that has experience of being both old and new, and celebrating British-made but also sourcing its parts from Switzerland, is Fears. One of Britain’s oldest family-run companies, it was established in Bristol in 1846, closing briefly after the Second World War, but then re-established in 2016 by the great-great-grandson of the original founder. Today, Fears designs and makes its new watches both in Switzerland and Britain, using design elements from the extensive company archive. “We’re at pains not to simply copy and reproduce watches we made before, it’s important to us to use certain design elements from the company history,” explains founder Nicholas Bowman-Skargill. “All Fears watches can be read with a glance, making them both practical and elegant, worthy additions to your wrist,” he adds. Another huge advocate for the British watchmaking industry, Bowman-Skargill is proud that Fears is now starting to hand-build more of its watches here in Britain, with the recently launched ‘Brunswick’ model using a case, dial and hands that are entirely made in the UK. “It’s something that isn’t cheap, easy or quick to do, but very satisfying and true to our heritage,” says Bowman-Skargill.

“A watch purchase is one that should last a lifetime and the responsibility of this isn’t to be taken lightly by the maker.” Giles Ellis, Schofield Watch Company



Family Affair

Another proudly British brand, Harold Pinchbeck, makes all its watches in a small English workshop in Lincolnshire, the home of British watchmaking, where the business has been since it moved from London, and is soon to be launching a new watch with an English-made movement. “We don’t buy completed watches in from abroad – it’s not the cheapest approach, but it gives each watch a bit of a story, and it’s faithful to our heritage,” explains director Paul Pinchbeck. “We go for an understated, classically English look – simple elegance, and easy to tell the time at a glance. Our watches are made to last, so they need to look timeless and not date quickly.” The Pinchbeck family have been involved in watch and clock making since 1710 – a Christopher Pinchbeck clock made for George III is still in Buckingham Palace – and today it remains a family business.

Also keeping it in the family is Robert Loomes, who can trace his company’s roots back to what was then the largest clock and watch workshop in London in the 1650s, run by Thomas Loomes. “British watchmaking is all about quality and rarity,” says eponymous director Robert Loomes. “For us the charm is that the industry has not really evolved very far. We do not get involved with modern manufacturing techniques. British-made watches are still designed to last “forever” – in that any British Horological Institute trained watchmaker could service and repair one either now, or in a hundred years’ time.” A bonafide British watchmaker, Robert Loomes makes all its own dials, cases, and movements in the same workshop by its dedicated small team.

Modern Classic

Elsewhere though, as David Brailsford explained, some renowned British companies produce certain components in the UK, while sourcing the others from elsewhere, doing the assembly and finishing here. Pinion, who make their watches in this way, are a proudly British company, sourcing the parts of all their watches from abroad. “While components may be manufactured abroad, the very heart and soul of a watch is British if it has been devised and designed here,” says founder Piers Berry. “There’s a lot more to a watch than just the sum of its parts. Plus, design plays a big part in the quality of a British watch, and there are a lot of very talented designers hailing from the UK.” And in fact, what makes Pinion an exciting brand, is the very diversity of its mechanics. The Pinion Atom watch, for instance, is powered by a fairly new Japanese ‘Miyota’ movement, while it also sells some watches with the rare NOS (new-old-stock) Valjoux 7734 movements. “This hand-wound chronograph movement was very popular in the late 60s and early 70s, to use one which is nearly 50 years old, but practically new, is extremely rare,” explains Berry.

At Christopher Ward, skills and parts are sourced in Switzerland, where the brand still has an atelier in Biel. “This allows us to tap into the best watchmaking supply chain and skills the world has to offer,” says Mike France, co-founder of Christopher Ward, who is proud of the progress and contribution his brand has made to the industry. “Our horological developments – such as our chronometer Calibre SH21 – have meant that we are the first brand in ▷

“There’s a lot more to a watch than just the sum of its parts.” Piers Berry, Pinion





50 years to have produced a commercially viable in-house movement.” A huge step forward for the industry, Christopher Ward is also one brand working hard to develop the ecommerce side of the business. “Connecting the customer to the watchmaker is really something we believe in; the craftsmanship involved in designing and engineering a fine timepiece can be brought direct to the customer via the internet, and at a price that’s also great value,” adds France.

The impact of the internet is also not lost on Paul Sweetenham from Farer, known for its bright dials, strong use of colour and the blending of contemporary and vintage styles. Sweetenham says that the watch industry is being impacted heavily by the online world. “The watch industry is being changed itself by ecommerce. Sites such as Worn and Wound are immensely popular, encouraging choice and diversity away from the big brands, and allowing lesser-known brands to compete on the world stage - British watch brands are at the forefront of this trend.”

It is modern innovation, a desire for the British brand name and a willingness within the industry to acknowledge its challenges and promote its development that has ensured British watchmaking becoming one of the most important players on the world stage. As Giles English from Bremont reminds us: The world sets its time by Greenwich, not Geneva.” □

