

PERFECT

ONE MAKER'S **MASTERPIECES** BENEFIT FROM ISLAND ISOLATION

SOLITUDE

BY **KEITH W. STRANDBERG**

No one—well, virtually no one—studies watchmaking in the hopes of someday making it to the Isle of Man. Switzerland is both the epicenter and the Holy Grail of modern fine watchmaking and the primary goal of many an aspiring watchmaker; Germany ranks a close second. If the isle in the Irish Sea is on the list at all, it must be near the bottom. Nevertheless, Roger W. Smith, a thoroughly ambitious and remarkably talented independent watchmaker, has happily lived and worked here for years. →

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I went to the Isle of Man to ride the TT course, 38 miles of public roads that have served as the site of the famed TT Races for the past 100 years. Tracing the route on a proper British motorcycle—the Triumph Bonneville—I suddenly understood why this scenic island is the ideal place for Smith to live and work. The isolation.

Smith is content to turn out his beautiful, hand-finished watches in the perfect isolation of the island. The solitude helps Smith focus on his mission—making excellent watches in the English tradition. If he were stationed in the Swiss Jura, like so many others, he would be hard-pressed not to be influenced by what those around him were working on. Here, industry influence is not a problem. Throughout the three days I spent with Smith on the island and in his workshop, I would sometimes ask what he thought of a particular watch brand or a certain watchmaker, and his answer was most often a shrug. "Don't know that brand," he'd say. In an industry where the president of ABC company is great friends with the head of XYZ, and designer Q creates watches for just about everyone, it's refreshing that Smith stays out of the loop. And it's vital to his work.

"The Isle of Man attracts unusual people in general," admits Smith. "The first automatic wristwatch was invented on the Isle of Man by John Harwood. I think the isolation here is good. We don't have the industry here, so we become very inventive. We have to think for ourselves and overcome

many different challenges. Had I gone to work in Switzerland, or if I were living in Switzerland, it certainly wouldn't be the same watch. I think the isolation has helped me to develop my style."
"It forced me to learn everything from scratch," Smith continues. "I have been able to keep the English way. We don't use the CNC for volume but for precision, and then we finish everything by hand. We are not bothered by the fashions. For me, it's about the quality of the piece. Even the smallest component under the dial is as important as the case or the dial. I pay the same attention to every piece and part."

was incredible. When I was 19, I wrote to George to see if he would apprentice me."

Daniels, long situated on the Isle of Man, invited Smith to his workshop, showed him around, took him to lunch, and then challenged Smith to make his own watch. After five years, several attempts and numerous scathing critiques from Daniels, Smith succeeded. The watch was a detent escape-ment tourbillon with perpetual calendar. About six months later, Daniels asked Smith to work with him on an Omega coaxial movement project. "I started working with him in January 1998," Smith remembers. "I spent three years with George, and

"THERE WAS ONE POINT AT WHICH I WONDERED IF I SHOULD BUY MOVEMENTS. BUT I PREFERRED TO MAKE THEM MYSELF BECAUSE THERE WAS NOTHING OUT THERE THAT I WANTED TO BUY." —ROGER W. SMITH

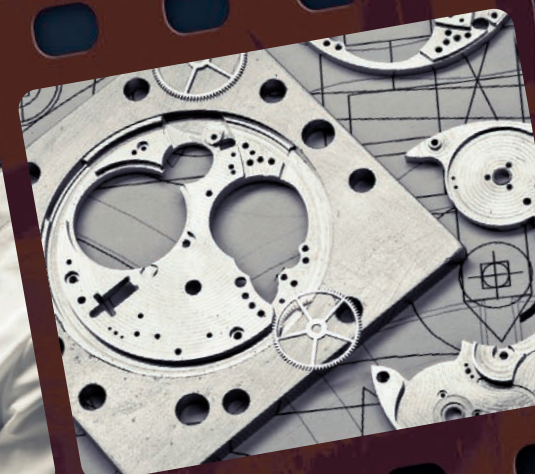
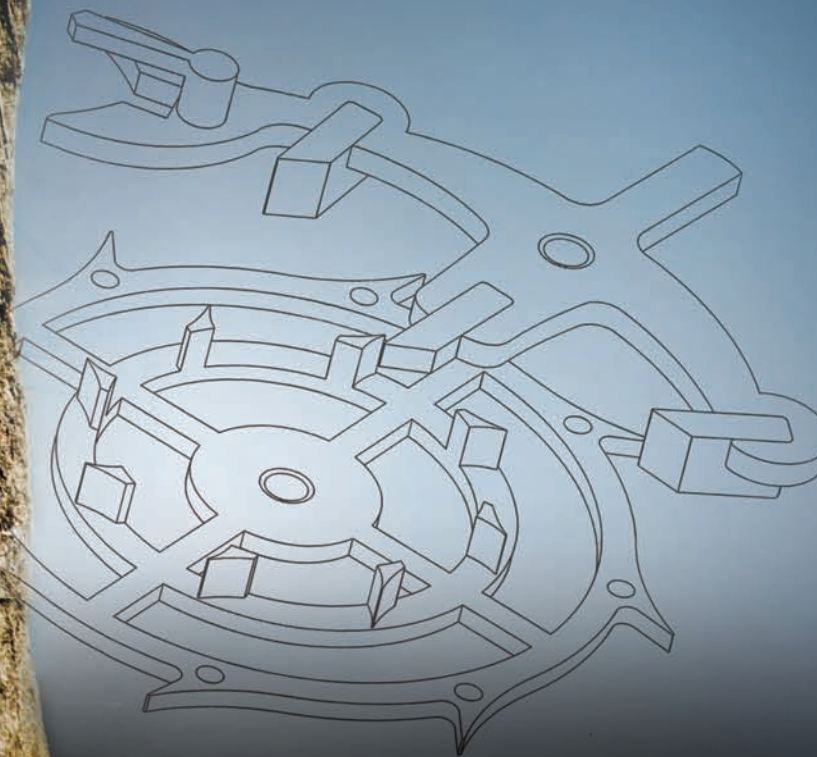
GETTING THERE

Smith started out at the Manchester School of Horology, studying repair and restoration. When he graduated, he went into clock restoration. "What got me going on the watchmaking side was George Daniels," he recalls. "When I was 18, he came to the college and gave a lecture, and that was the turning point. The idea that one man could make amazing watches from start to finish, when we were struggling to make one big clock component,

we built 50 pieces, known as the Daniels Millennium, with the raw caliber from Omega. The biggest thing he taught me was to develop my own style."

ON HIS OWN

Following that experience, Smith set up his own small, home-based workshop on the Isle of Man, about 20 minutes from where Daniels works. He and Daniels still collaborate from time to time, but Smith now concentrates on his own timepieces.





Series 2, No. 69, a unique piece in platinum with hand-engraved, floral-motif silver dial, white gold hands and numerals, displaying hours, minutes, small seconds and remaining power reserve



Tourbillon Commission No. 1, a unique piece in 18-karat rose gold with one-minute flying tourbillon, Danials Co-axial escapement, grand date, small seconds and engraved silver dial



"I set up a workshop in my spare bedroom and started to make the Series 1," he says. "Years earlier, as I was repairing modern wristwatches of all different kinds, I began to realize that none of these watches was being made to the level of quality I was trying to achieve. I was doing restorations of circa 1750-1850 pocket watches at the same time. They seemed to have real life, spirit and depth to them, but they were also very simple and made for longevity. I didn't like what was happening in mass production, and I wanted to build a modern mechanical watch to the exacting standards of the great English work out there." Smith's workshop is still in his home, but it has outgrown his spare bedroom and moved into a purpose-built addition. Smith employs three watchmakers, and, together, they fabricate and hand-finish each and every watch.

THE WATCHES

Launched in 2004, the Series 2 is the pillar

of Smith's production. With its frosted and gilded plates, jewels set in gold chatons, engine-turned, hand-engraved and frosted dials, handmade gold hands, and screws blued by hand in small batches, it embodies all the characteristics that Smith views as essential to English watchmaking. Every part of every watch Smith makes is manufactured on the Isle of Man. He has now delivered 40 pieces.

Series 2 watches are offered in yellow, rose and white gold. But, says Smith, "Most clients want commissioned pieces. We don't change the design, but we can change the materials. Clients can have a different case, or a different dial, different engraving, different hands, and more. Ninety percent of the watches we make are commissioned pieces."

In addition, Smith offers completely bespoke watches, with unique movements and cases. "The one we are finishing now is a one-minute flying tourbillon with grand

date, which took three years to complete." Prices range from £72,500 to £114,000, while bespoke pieces can be £250,000 or more.

THE FUTURE

Smith has more than enough orders to keep him busy in his island workshop for the next three or four years. It's a good position to be in, although he would like to reduce that to two years. He has plans for expanding his line, too. "I want to build up a catalog of perhaps four types of wristwatches, a clock and a pocketwatch," says Smith. "I want to produce these at very high quality, and I see no way of increasing volume [projected at about 35 pieces a year total] without compromising quality, which I am not prepared to do. I think we are unique in the watchmaking world. We are keeping everything in house, and we are making an incredibly unique English wristwatch."

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