

George Daniels

Justin Koullapis pays a personal tribute

"Remember that the *watch* is historic, intellectual, technical, aesthetic and useful." I often wonder how many times George Daniels has pondered this mantra. I certainly expect he has repeated it many times to those who approach him for guidance, inspiration or help in their pursuit of high horology. And the more I think about watchmaking, and about Dr Daniels himself, the more I realise how very distilled those words are, and what gravity they convey. All that remains for the watchmaker hearing them is to bring them to life, in one mechanical way or another.

And bringing his own creations to life is exactly the thing for which George Daniels has become so celebrated. The story is very well documented so far; if you want it first-hand, *All in Good Time* makes for excellent reading, its matter-of-fact tone gives a liveliness to the account that I imagine is a perfect reflection of its author. The book *Watchmaking*, too, subtly reveals much more than being what is an ostensible technical guide. Again, the sense of immediacy and dynamism is very clear.

Are there workmen whose physical craft equals Daniels's? Of course there are. The world of horology has many outstanding craftsmen. You probably know at least one or two watch or clock restorers who are capable of superb work. Given the time, money and incentive, most of them would likely be able to produce an excellent timepiece. I believe it's not for his craftsmanship that George Daniels has become so respected; it is for his fidelity to an ideal.

It is an ideal that, by his own account, began forming in the late 1960s; when asked by somebody to explain and to defend his craft in the light of the burgeoning quartz watch revolution, he began to

realise that if he were to become more than a fabulous horological impresario, he would have to fight a serious, long-term defence in favour of the mechanical watch. The lever escapement, invented by Englishman Thomas Mudge in 1769 had reached a plateau of development, despite marvellous refinements to its geometry by the Swiss watch industry's best minds. Everybody knew about its shortcomings, as we do today, but back in 1974, George Daniels was the only man about with the guts to do anything about it.

Since 1969, he has produced about one watch per year, working on his own, to a fantastically disciplined schedule. Once he had begun contriving improvements to the escapement, the watches themselves became elaborate vehicles within which he could test his ideas, so that at no time after that was a watch simply made *for the sake of it*. Each timepiece had, in his mind, to carry some improvement, small or great, to the furtherance of the new escapement.

Reactions were mixed. Collectors and fellow horologists were enthusiastic, but the high ranks of the industry were far more cool in their view of the new escapement, which by the late 70s and early 80s had reached a very high degree of sophistication. It's all well and good convincing your friends and supporters that your ideas are great, but the only real test is whether your detractors, too, can be won round. For people of my era, which is not yet very long, the benefits of the escapement seem all too obvious. When I first began to be interested in horology, I didn't even have an idea of how things *were* done, let alone how they supposedly *ought* to be done. I simply read, analysed, and accepted what seemed to be good, logical sense. For those whose livelihoods depended on



keeping the precarious balance of the Swiss industry back then afloat, though, I can see why they might not have wanted to take risks, but it is also obvious that a blind stubbornness has long hindered progress in this field. Persistence and loyalty to his ideal paid off, though. Happily, Omega Watch Company have come to the table, and now fit George Daniels's escapement into more and more of their watches, just as easily as the old lever escapement, and the benefits of more stable timekeeping are apparent to everybody.

This success did not come easily at all, mind you. There was a long period of stagnation when George and the Swiss were apparently going nowhere. He spent four years refining, transposing, and re-formulating the pocket-watch sized escapement to fit very slender wristwatches. Bear in mind that most watch companies have teams of specialist development engineers to do this sort of thing, and even then they might take years to perfect whatever variation of an existing theme it is they are working on. George did this all alone in his workshop, with not a piece of software in sight, only his dogged ideal hovering ever before him.

Everywhere he went, I expect, he was repeating his mantra, in some form or another. If the world doesn't know, how can it care? My friend who owned a large Clerkenwell material house tells me how George Daniels would occasionally visit in the Eighties, and the Co-Axial escapement would be the thing on his lips. I expect much of his seed fell on rocky ground, never to sprout, but I do know that at least a few kernels fell on good, fertile earth, and what germinated there, he has cultivated carefully, relentlessly educating, writing books, making sure that the ideal was never lost or forgotten.

Part of the cultivating process had been to patent the device. Not necessarily for monetary gain, for seeing a patent all the way from

the application to it being granted, is a fabulously expensive exercise, and there is at no point in the process any guarantee that the money will be well spent. If the application is denied, you certainly don't get your money back! From experience with a close friend (and successful patentee!) I can vouch for the officiousness and disagreeable temper of the patent system. All it takes is one unhelpful patent officer to potentially derail years of work on a perfectly valid patent. In any event, the patent for the Co-Axial escapement was finally granted, after two years' wrangling.

In July, as this issue goes to press, and probably for the only time ever, all Daniels's watches will be gathered in one place, at a special exhibition examining his work so far. If the feedback I get from people I talk to is anything to go by, it will be a veritable Mecca, with visitors from around the globe. What a great way to doff the industry's hat to the poor London boy who came up trumps.

Historic, intellectual, technical, aesthetic and useful. Yes, the mantra fits the man as perfectly as the watch.

Reading, and thinking about all the achievements that George Daniels has earned and the acres of ground he has gained for the rest of us less determined horologists, is what convinces me that the gem in Daniels is not the *craftsman*, but the *Man*. He has, over the past eighty or so years, demonstrated what needs to be done, what qualities must be manifested if one is to be successful in whatever pursuit one chooses. People are weak when they have nothing to fight for, but in this, George Daniels is mighty. That almost invisible contraption of metal and ruby, that people will eventually take totally for granted, has been handed to us at an enormous price. If George had devoted his life to a family, we probably would never have heard of him. If he hadn't battled illness, he'd be the less. Without that singular goal of materialising his ideal, our world would be a very much poorer place indeed. □

News: Omega Co-axial Course



N Towndrow, I Andrew, B Kennedy, M Butcher, A Burtoft, J Lawrence, P Roseblade, S Michlmayr and N Dockx.

With over a million Omega watches with the famous Daniels Co-axial escapement now in the hands of consumers, Swatch Group's Omega team are shifting the emphasis on after-sales service towards the company's agencies throughout the UK.

Omega is taking a pragmatic and realistically protective approach to spare parts supply for these calibres. Watchmakers who can demonstrate that they have the necessary equipment to service the co-axial watches, and who have successfully

completed the Omega training course will have full access to spare parts.

Omega's **Nick Towndrow** and **Nikolaas Dockx** have been training a group of watchmakers in the watch workshop at the BHI's Upton Hall headquarters. Tutors and students alike found the experience both useful and enjoyable. 'We wondered whether the Co-axial was really so different that it would require 2 days' training,' said BHI member Richard West, 'but by the second day of the course we realised that these calibres really do require special knowledge.' □



N Dockx, A Awan, R West, P Barr, J Murphy, I Goodwin, R Manfredi, N Towndrow.