

Collecting Conversations: Roger W. Smith, The Watchmaker

By John Cote, NAWCC Fellow (IN)

Mentored by British watchmaking legend George Daniels, Roger Smith beautifully melds art and science in his handcrafted mechanical watches. His own brand (rwsmithwatches.com) has a lengthy waiting list of eager clients. Smith is a leader in the current resurgence of British watchmaking and clockmaking, serving as the chairman of the Alliance of British Watch and Clock Makers. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2018 for Services to British Watchmaking.

JOHN COTE: Roger, thank you for joining us for this edition of the NAWCC's ongoing series of *Collecting Conversations*. Where does this conversation find you this morning?

ROGER SMITH: I'm based here in the Isle of Man and just a stone's throw away from the workshop we have here (Figure 1).

COTE: I'm in Indianapolis, IN, so we both seem to be in motorsport places.

SMITH: Yes.

COTE: Maybe we'll get to that a little bit later. By way of introduction, I think everybody probably knows who you are, but by way of introducing me to you, I'd love to recount a little experience that I had a couple of years



Figure 1. Roger Smith in his workshop on the Isle of Man. PHOTO BY MATTHEW TOWN.

ago, an amazing experience. I'll start by saying that I'm the son of a watch collector and amateur watchmaker. My first memories of watches were probably when I was a couple of years old. There are pictures of me outside



Figure 2A. The Roger Smith No. 2 pocket watch. **B.** The movement of the Roger Smith No. 2 watch. AUTHOR'S PHOTOS.

jewelry stores with my mother who had a horrible look on her face while waiting for my father to come out with more watches. I also remember, from the time I was a little kid, my father holding watches up to my ear and letting me hear the tick, and trying to explain different escapements to me and how they sounded. So, I grew up with that, and then when I was a little older, I remember being handed different watches.

I'd like to recount a story about being handed a watch. Several years ago, I was standing at a high table during an NAWCC donors' event. I was sipping a cocktail with a distinguished looking gentleman, whose name I won't mention right now, but I think you will get to the point when you'll know who it is. During our conversation, I noticed that he had a beautiful fob and a chain leading into his breast pocket. I said, "Wow, that's a beautiful chain and fob. What's on the other end?" He obligingly took the chain out of his buttonhole, and making sure that I had my hand over the table and not over the floor, which my father had taught me to do, he handed me the Roger Smith Pocket Watch No. 2. He started smiling even more broadly as my hands started to shake. I looked at

the watch front and back and especially the movement. My father taught me that the movement was the important part of the watch. My hands didn't stop shaking for quite a while, but they finally did long enough so I could take an iPhone picture of the watch (Figure 2). I have to tell you, Roger, that after leading a life of being handed watches, that was the most memorable and meaningful handing of a watch that I've ever experienced. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about this watch, for anybody who doesn't know about Roger Smith No. 2.

SMITH: Thank you, John, that was very nice. When I made No. 1, I took it to show George Daniels and that was a watch that he rejected. And he sent me away with a few pointers, which was basically to focus on perfecting all the skills that are required to make a fully handmade watch. And so, I took that on board and started creating the pocket watch, which you're talking about, the No. 2. I made it more complicated, because I wanted that extra work. I added a four-year perpetual calendar mechanism, alongside the tourbillon and the detent escapement, and the watch was ticking away quite merrily within a year, actually. So was an improvement on the first watch, but

I then started to look at the components I'd made at the beginning of the year and thought that I could improve because I'd improved over the course of that year. And it started this cycle of remaking that watch. I think I remade it about four times over the period of five and a half years.

COTE: Amazing. George liked the watch, I guess.

SMITH: Yes, he did. Ultimately, I showed it to him. That was a watch that cemented my relationship with George and led to everything that's happened to this day, really.

COTE: So let's go back a little. How old were you when all of this started taking place?

SMITH: I started making the first watch when I was 19, and I think I started the second watch when I was 22 years old.

COTE: That's interesting. You'll be at our National Convention in June, and I'll introduce you to a very promising young watchmaker who is 15 now, and his father amazingly sort of hopes that he starts actually making watches.

What started your interest in actually making watches, not just repairing and restoring watches?

SMITH: I was at college in Manchester. I was on the three-year British Horological Institute course. And George Daniels visited as a guest speaker. He spent the day touring the workshops, meeting the students. And it's there that I got to see his space traveler pocket watch. Like you, I saw a pocket watch chain appearing out of his waistcoat and I asked what was on the end of it and out came the space traveler. Prior to that, I'd heard that this man, George Daniels, could make a watch by hand, but I just didn't think it was possible. We were struggling to make fairly large clock components and repair clocks and struggling and struggling with components for a pocket watch. So I just thought this whole idea, well, I didn't really believe it until I saw the watch. And then I realized that this was something special. It really ignited something in me. On the evening of his visit, he gave a lecture on his watchmaking exploits, and that really sealed it. I remember just sort of thinking, I've witnessed greatness. And I was hooked. So I went into repairs, I finished college, I did about a year and a half of repair work. But I just thought I need to give this watchmaking a go, you know?

COTE: Did you have access to the tools at the Institute, or did you start accumulating your own tools? By tools to make a watch, we are talking about more major tools than a watch repair person has.

SMITH: Yes, you're right. I was very fortunate. My father lent me money to buy a Schaublin lathe. I mean, that was the key to it. Without that, I don't think I would have done it. So I was very fortunate to be in that position. He helped me buy this lathe. He set a very stringent repayment plan for me, so I had to keep doing trade repairs during this period to pay back the loan. And I bought a watchmaker's lathe. It was an appalling watchmaker's lathe, actually, but anyway, between those bits of equipment, I managed to make a watch. And my first two pocket watches.

COTE: I think you will be an inspiration to this young man, who you will meet at the National. I have dibs on his future No. 2, at least for now!

British watchmaking has a storied history and certainly a history that has had a major influence on watchmaking all over the world, but especially in colonial America, which is a subject near and dear to me. The NAWCC has a large British Horology Chapter, and one continuing conversation in this group is about British watches that were sold in the States and are completely British watches, British watches that were finished in the States, and then British watches that were perhaps mostly made here in the US. We also are fascinated with British watchmakers who came here to work, or American watchmakers who went to Great Britain to train and then returned and made watches in the US. We have a great history of watchmaking in the United States, which came later and focused on a different ethos of making watches than in England. But both the British and the American watch industries failed. They failed well before the quartz crisis that threatened to kill the Swiss watch industry. The Swiss became dominant and sort of alone in watchmaking. Why do you think the US and England failed, and the Swiss continued to be successful watchmakers?

SMITH: I think it's a bit of an age-old problem for the Brits, really. Our industry failed a lot before yours in America. Ours started to really peter off in the 1850s when Americans started to mass produce watches. Americans wanted cheaper watches, if I'm correct, for their railroads. I think very quickly they were producing higher-quality, or as good a quality, watches as the British,

but at a third of the price. And I think that started the long, slow decline of British watchmaking. The last gasp was sort of in the early 1900s. I think even at that point it was pretty well finished, even though it did limp on. We had Smith's Industries, which made wristwatches until the 1970s, but it was tiny in comparison to what was happening in Switzerland. I can't really speak for what happened in America, but I think it was the adoption of the wristwatch, really, wasn't it? I think that's what really finished off the American industry. You know, first off, the Brits weren't prepared to industrialize their way of making watches. Then, I think when the mechanical wristwatch started to appear in the early 1900s, that kind of finished off the industries in America and what was left of Britain. I think it's just an unwillingness to change. I think that's basically it, an unwillingness to read the markets and see what's happening. And Switzerland did very well in terms of refining the products. They are brilliant engineers on a micro scale.

COTE: Yes, I worked for a Swiss machine tool company in my last job before retiring. It was a great job working for great people, and they are dogged and amazing engineers. I'm not sure they do everything right for what the rest of the world needs all the time. But anyway, the US made wristwatch movements for a long time—the Illinois Watch Co. and then Hamilton—but ultimately, we abandoned that and started buying movements from the Swiss. I suppose it is their doggedness and a willingness on the part of the government to support the industry that was very important.

SMITH: Yes. I mean, it's a fairly small nation, isn't it?

COTE: Yes, we could drive from one side to the other fairly quickly. Except for those mountains, those pesky mountains.

SMITH: I think you've summed it up really well.

COTE: Let's continue with British watchmaking. In an open letter from October 2014, which I read on Hodinkee.com, you decried the state of British watchmaking. You stated:

Making a mass-produced British watch is an incredibly difficult endeavor. It will take huge investment and a concerted effort—perhaps an unprecedented partnership between our British watch companies. But isn't that the point? A true British watch is not meant to be easy. Easy has no interest or value. George Daniels achieved

his acclaim and rightful place in horological history by climbing that most difficult face of the watchmaking mountain. Lacking any readily available British components, he worked out how to make each and every one of them and hand made his watches from scratch. It was brave; unprecedented. It should have been impossible—like using an ascent of Everest as a course in rock climbing! Today, the current crop of "watchmakers" are indeed planting their Union Jacks in the same spot at the top of that mountain. But instead of climbing it, they are flying up it, business class—courtesy of "Swiss Air."

That's just brilliant. Has anything changed about British watchmaking in the intervening 10-plus years? For one thing, I know that you have started the Alliance of British Watch and Clock Makers.

SMITH: I think a lot has changed and in my view, you know, 10 years is a long time. When I wrote that, I think my main gripe was the fact that a particular brand was claiming to be making watches in Britain, which everyone knew was blatantly not the case. They were claiming to be making British watches, and they weren't, they were buying everything in from Switzerland or wherever. That was the main problem I had with it. And the reason why I had a problem with it was because I felt it was being dishonest to the end consumers. I always felt that if ever we are going to rebuild British watchmaking, in whatever semblance that may be, we had to be honest, from day one. You know, we have the opportunity to create a very open and honest relationship with the end user so that was, I think, the main problem I had when I wrote that letter. But it had an effect. Well, I mean, we are still 100% reliant upon other watchmaking nations to make our watches.

We founded the Alliance about four years ago, and we now have over 100 trade members. We've just completed our second British Watchmakers' Day event, which was held on March 8 in London, and it was an incredible success. I think what the Alliance is doing is shining a light on British watchmaking and saying that it can be done. And it is being done, but we are reliant on other watchmaking nations, that's the difference.

We will never go back, in my lifetime, to those glory days of British watchmaking, where we rule the waves with watchmaking and clockmaking. The problem is we've

lost the know-how. That's the problem. I mean, I know how to make a watch, and we make between 15 and 20 watches a year from start to finish with raw material entering one end of the building and a complete watch at the other end, but you can't make an industry out of people like me. Even if you had a hundred R. W. Smiths or George Daniels, you still don't have an industry. And we can all buy the same machines that Switzerland have or any other watchmaking nation. But what we've lost is that intellectual property, that real know-how: how to make a component and take it through maybe 20 processes until you have a single, finely polished, super-accurate component at the end of it. That's our problem. Nevertheless, we are a sector that is developing. We've just completed our second update to the Bellwether Report that we did three years ago, and we'll be releasing more information in a month's time, and it's all very positive. We'll see where this takes us.

COTE: I look forward to that. We seem to have sort of a nascent watchmaking effort in the US. For instance, RGM Watch Co. is located near where our National Convention will be this year. They are making watches, maybe not like yours but more along the lines of the American system," where tools and machines were almost more important than the watches. The success the US did have as watchmakers was because we invented machines that turned out 10,000 screws in an hour, all exactly the same, just as our Eli Whitney did in the gun-making industry. Everybody remembers him as the cotton gin guy, but his real success was in making machines that produced rifles with interchangeable parts for the US war effort. What lessons might we take from the current British experience here in the United States? Or is it just not going to be profitable to have a mass-produced, modern watchmaking industry?

SMITH: I think it could be profitable. It's getting there. That's the problem. Because as I say, both the US and Britain have lost that core knowledge. We no longer know how to mass produce watches. You know, in order to make a viable movement, you have to be—and I'm guessing now—probably making a quarter of a million or half a million movements a year, maybe more, and selling those movements around the world. And that's the problem. I think the only way we can do it is very slowly. You know, picking off the low-hanging fruit. So I do see that we could be making dials in Britain, printing our own dials very soon. I think that could be happening, and we could start supplying our trade members with those dials.

We could start making cases. We could certainly buy the equipment to do it. That would be an easier job than making every single component for a movement. But you have to look at the Swiss watch industry, and even that is divided into groups. You still have companies that only specialize in making wheels and pinions. And the reason why they do that is because it's very difficult to make wheels and pinions on a repeatable scale in mass volume. That's where the challenges are. How do we do that? And the only way to do it would be to bring in the expertise. We can buy the machines, but we don't have the expertise. So you'd have to bring in Swiss, highly skilled, very expensive technicians to teach us how to do it. I don't think we will see it in the foreseeable future, and I don't think we'll see it in my lifetime. We may see the beginnings of something happening.

COTE: I guess, in a way, none of us had that Huguenot cottage industry mentality. We talk about the Swiss adapting, but in a lot of ways, they still go back to the Huguenots going across the border and starting shops in these little Swiss cottages that made different components and then somebody assembled a watch from them.

SMITH: Exactly.

COTE: The National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors has members with a variety of collecting interests. I would say that a lot of interest is American industry-focused. We have our bias and our prejudice. And I'm not sure that this is true, but many people feel that the American industry is given short shrift by the British and the Swiss, even though from the 1850s to the 1930s, let's say before the war and even during World War II, we produced more watches by far than anybody and arguably great quality watches. Have you had much chance to study American watches or American watchmaking?

SMITH: Well, I suppose the only time I did really was when I was at college, when I was a student. I must admit I've never heard that sort of comment about Europeans looking down on American watchmaking. Everything, as I saw, was brilliant. I remember the Walthams; you did have the lower levels, but some of the finishing on those Waltham pocket watches was really quite incredible. And I remember seeing one pocket watch which was beautifully patterned all over the backplates. It had gold wheels, black polished gold wheels. I think that's why I now black polish all the wheels in our watches. Taking inspiration from those watches, you know, there's an

incredible level of finishing going on. Another watch that I really do admire is the Hamilton chronometers, you know, in the caliber 22. Yes, and 21. Those are incredible pieces, and they stood the test of time.

COTE: To me, Hamilton is sort of the ultimate, the ultimate heritage of this American idea of manufacturing, where we industrialize everything to make it standard. You go from the British chronometer to the Ulysse Nardin chronometer to the Hamilton 21. The Hamilton may not be as elegant as some of those, although it's pretty nicely finished. I have my father's, and it's ticking away downstairs right now. Every night at 10 o'clock when he went to bed, he'd turn on the time service and see how far off his Model 21 ship's chronometer was. He recorded the seconds, plus or minus, in a little brown book. It's a worthless thing, but it's my father's.

SMITH: Well, what sort of impressed me, I mean, you just said it in a nutshell, really. Hamilton did an incredible job of mass producing these components, these watches and pocket watches. And the quality—the fact that you can just buy a new detent and slip it in and it works. I mean, that wouldn't happen with any of any British watches that have ever been made, except for ours.

COTE: We got very close [to completely interchangeable parts] even with the railroad watches. Hamilton probably got the closest. Perhaps we'll get a little tour of the Hamilton watch factory in Lancaster when we are in nearby York this summer. Our National Watch & Clock Museum has an excellent gallery of Hamilton timepieces. Hamilton serial numbers 1 and 2 are on display there and are an interesting study. One of them was locked up in the safe and one of them was used by a railroad man. One of the great, small American makers was a German immigrant named Charles Fasoldt. In 1859, Fasoldt patented a chronometer escapement, a detent escapement with coaxial double escape wheels. He produced around 400 coaxial escapement watches and continued to improve them. There are a lot of different iterations of Fasoldt escapements, but he made around 400 coaxial escapement watches. Many of these survive and continue to work to this day. Hopefully, you will have a chance to inspect them when you're in the States for our National Convention. I believe George Daniels mentioned Fasoldt a little. I like to think that the reason why he didn't mention Fasoldt's coaxial escapement very much was that he just didn't know much about it. Have you ever had a chance to study this double-wheel coaxial

escapement? I know it's a little different than yours. It gets impulse from only one pallet instead of getting impulse from all of its pallets, which is good and bad. It doesn't have as much vibration from the pallet striking, but it won't self-start.

SMITH: Yes, a problem. Bit of a problem.

COTE: But all you have to do to start it is do what you do with a ship's chronometer. So have you ever had a chance to look much at these Fasoldt coaxial escapements?

SMITH: No, I haven't seen one in the flesh, but I know the escapements, I've studied the escapements and so on. And yes, there are some, in the escapement world, some very serious drawbacks with the Fasoldts, which, as you say, are single beats. So in any practical watch that you strap onto your wrist or [place in a] pocket, you do not want it to be delivering power in just one direction. That's a big problem. And this isn't self-starting, as you've said—again, another major drawback to the escapements. It's all done through the lever, which is, again, not ideal. But it's an evolution.

COTE: Yes, it is a place in the evolution of what George Daniels and you sort of perfected and what maybe is now in the Omega coaxial escapement, which I love.

SMITH: The single wheel there, yes, exactly. I mean, with George, you only need to look at his book of watches to see that he examined and understood every single conceivable escapement that's ever been created. He stripped them down and photographed them, and he serviced these watches, and he had an innate understanding of escapements. And he took the best bits from lots of different escapements, and I suppose, put them together into his own version, which is a coaxial escapement, which is also very identifiably his own.

COTE: So, nothing wrong with that. I mean, that's how machines evolve. We all have our own ideas, but we all copy. Music, automobiles, everything.

SMITH: Nothing bad to be said about that, not at all. And so, yes, it's interesting. I'm intrigued with people making this comparison and link.

COTE: Well, we'll bring a few to the convention so that you can put them under your loupe and inspect them.

SMITH: I would really like to see one, actually.

COTE: You will be our honored guest and our keynote speaker at the 2025 NAWCC National Convention this June in York, PA. Could you give just a little bit of flavor about what you might be sharing with us?

SMITH: I think what I am wanting to talk about is British watchmaking in general. You know, its rise, its fall, and its hopeful rise again. I could stand up and talk about myself, but I've done that quite a bit over the years. And, you know, this sort of resurgence that we're witnessing now, for me it is really exciting. I think horology is just such an incredible industry and very much underrepresented and with incredible opportunities, not just at the bench. You don't have to be just sitting at the bench repairing or making watches or clocks. There is everything from sales to marketing to design. There are so many different interesting facets to the sector that I'd like to talk about. What I'm going to be talking about, basically, are my experiences of British watchmaking (Figure 3). I started, gosh, over 30 years ago. I've seen a lot of change during that period. And I suppose what I'm hoping to do is to sort of try and pass some of that enthusiasm on to the audience, and hopefully we can see some significant resurgence within the United States.

COTE: I hope so, too, and we all look forward to meeting you in person, hearing what you have to say, and showing you our museum, which is under the direction of Rory McEvoy, who's just an amazing fellow. The museum is an exciting thing to watch as it evolves. So I look forward to that.

One last thing. From some photos I've seen of you online, I get the impression that you are somewhat of a motorsport enthusiast. You're standing next to a Mini Cooper in one photo that looks like it could be a lot of fun to drive. I think it's interesting that the ticktock you get from a clock or the ticktock you get from a watch on your wrist or in your pocket is like a beating heart. There's something soul-satisfying about it to us. It's sort of the same for motorsports. Why do you think so many horology people, watch collectors in particular, are motorsport nuts?

SMITH: I think it's everything mechanical. For me, that's certainly what intrigues me. They're all toys at the end of the day. That's the truth. And I'm afraid, as men, we never really grow up. We just carry on playing for as long as possible. So, I think for me, it's that attraction to the mechanical devices, motors. I always see the wristwatch or a pocket watch as just being a tiny machine. That's how I envisage them.



Figure 3. Roger at the sold-out British Watchmakers' Day event at Lindley Hall in London on March 8, 2025.

COTE: I certainly agree. And maybe, one day, we'll get you over here for the greatest spectacle in racing, the Indianapolis 500, which is near and dear to me. We can go back to Jim Clark, the greatest racer in the world and a good Scotsman who won at Indy in 1965.

I really thank you for your time. I know your time is valuable. And I look forward to meeting you in York at our National, as do a lot of our members. And it would be a joy to take you on a tour of our museum with Rory.

SMITH: I really look forward to that. I am very much looking forward to it and it's not long off, not long off at all.

COTE: Yes, this June. So, all of you NAWCC members, get ready to come. It'll be an amazing National Convention as it always is, but even more amazing because we'll have Roger Smith as our guest.

About the Author

John Cote is a longtime member and current Board member of the NAWCC. He is the son of 34-year member Louis Cote. John has been collecting pocket watches and wristwatches since he was a little kid. He is a Fellow of the NAWCC and a frequent contributor to the *Bulletin*. Hunting for watches is still John's main passion.