



# A History of Time

In this, the latest instalment of our series on iconic timepieces that have shaped the way we live our lives today, Charles Tearle, watch expert and Director of Antiquorum Auctioneers, stakes a claim for the 1926 Rolex Oyster – the world's first truly water-resistant watch.



**Charles Tearle**  
Antiquorum

## Rolex Oyster 1926

When I was first asked to write about a timepiece that has shaped our lives, the obvious candidate was John Harrison's H4, but Jonathan Betts from the National Maritime Museum covered the topic in such detail it was no longer an option. Then I considered technical achievement from the 18th century with the most obvious being the advancement of the lever escapement; alas thanks to David Thompson from the British Museum this was also off the list.

After pondering my options and posing my theories to a few people I considered knowledgeable in the industry, I believed I had found the ideal technical topic and began my article. Then, as sometimes happens in life, fate intervened. One day a package arrived at the office and inside was a glass bowl mounted on a green base with a removable lid and internal watch holder, the sign on the lid said 'Rolex Oyster'. It happens that this slightly strange looking contraption was used as a store window display for the original Rolex Oyster Perpetual watches to advertise their water-resistance.

As more Antiquorum staff came along to look at the bowl I found myself repeating the history and importance of the first Oyster cased Rolex watches in the acceptance of the wristwatch. I knew then that I should change the subject of my article from developments in the movements of the 19th century to the greatest advancement in reading the time in the 20th century - the wristwatch. The reason I chose the original Oyster, patented in 1926, was because it not only protected the case from moisture and humidity, something that had been tried in various forms unsuccessfully for years prior, but because of the

fundamental way it made the case water-resistant by screwing down the bezel, back and crown - a method that is still used in most modern water-resistant watches today.

### A crown seal

The difficulty in manufacturing a water-resistant watch wasn't the aspect of screwing the case together but protecting the crown. Two Swiss watchmakers called Paul Perregaux and Georges Peret who patented a new locking system in Switzerland on 30 October 1925 finally overcame this problem. Realising this invention was vital for the case to successfully keep out dust and moisture, Rolex purchased the patent and on 29 July 1926 registered their own 'Oyster' design under a British patent no. 260554. Available in either a cushion or octagonal shaped case as a gentlemen's 32mm or ladies 28mm size the style was typical of the era, however, the serrated bezel and large onion-form crown gave the watch a more rugged and sports-oriented look.

The wristwatch's main rival at the time was the more popular pocket watch and Hans Wildorf (Rolex's founder) knew if a watch worn on the wrist was ever to become accepted then it had to be able to withstand the elements. This was particularly important in regions such as India where due to the environment, pre-Oyster cased watches were almost guaranteed to rust or be subject to the invasion of dust - something that made the oils inside more like a grinding paste. Rolex saw this not only as a vital market to control, but also as an obstacle that if overcome could finally make the wristwatch a practical alternative to the traditional pocket watch.



The cushion (left) and octagonal (bottom right) shaped Oyster cases were typical of the era, but the serrated bezel and large onion-shaped crown made the piece distinctive.



After training in the River Thames, in 1927 Mercedes Gleitz became the first British woman to swim the English Channel - wearing her Rolex Oyster, giving the brand the marketing boost of a lifetime.

As is the case with many evolving products, the market was reluctant to believe the Rolex claim since so many brands before had tried the same thing, only to fail. And so to prove his point, Wilsdorf - who was a genius at marketing - displayed the Oyster watches in store windows in glass fish bowls filled with water - and often fish as well - to demonstrate to passers by the confidence Rolex had in their water-resistant cases.

### The right Channel

Perhaps the greatest single moment of marketing brilliance, however, was with the collaboration of a certain 26-year-old secretary working in London named Mercedes Gleitz. On 7 October 1927, Ms Gleitz swam the English Channel from Cape Gris in France to Dover, England, becoming the first British woman to do so. This was a feat Rolex advertised heavily afterwards while at the same time displaying in bold letters she had completed the 15 hour 15 minute swim wearing a ladies octagonal cased Rolex Oyster wristwatch. Repeated newspaper stories and advertisements were circulated clearly displaying the Rolex on her wrist with the proclamation that, after such a period of submersion in

water, the timekeeping was still accurate upon her arrival in Dover.

Sales boomed. Rolex became a household name and the practical, wearable, dust- and water-resistant wristwatch was born. This single watch and remarkable feat of engineering paved the way for future generations of cases and permitted the wristwatch to finally be accepted in society as a practical replacement to the pocket watch. However it wasn't until 1930 that Wilsdorf finally succeeded and the sales of wristwatches overtook the sale of pocket watches - time telling has never looked back.

The Rolex Oyster is still in production today - not in the same case design as 1926, but retaining the same patented characteristics. The company that can claim the honor of being the most famous Swiss watch company in the world achieved that distinction with, among other notable innovations, the introduction of the Oyster - in my opinion a watch that not only launched the brand but also launched the wristwatch. Harrison might have developed portable time, Mudge might have made it accurate, but Rolex put it on your wrist. ☺

