

The latest TAG LINE



Early in 2010, the decidedly 21st-century McLaren Technology Centre proved the perfect venue for TAG Heuer's launch of its 150th anniversary celebrations. *QP* was there to hear the speeches, toast the future, witness the rebirth of a classic watch - and see Lewis Hamilton being sent home for an early night...

Simon de Burton



Watch innovator, great-grandson of Heuer watch founder Edouard and honorary chairman of TAG Heuer Jack Heuer, executive chairman of McLaren Automotive Ron Dennis and president and CEO of TAG Heuer Jean Christophe Babin.



Jean Christophe Babin and Jack Heuer get up close and personal with TAG Heuer ambassador Lewis Hamilton.



To mark Heuer's founding year, only 1860 of each colour Silverstone reissue has been made.



Yes, I'm as cynical as the next hack. But that didn't stop a lump arriving in my throat when, out of the black of a rain-soaked Surrey night, a 1986 McLaren Formula One car - spectacularly illuminated by pink fibre optics - came snaking along the approach road to the front door of the MCT. It didn't take long to work out that the driver was Lewis Hamilton and suspicions were confirmed when he pulled off his logo-bedecked crash helmet to reveal an expression of pure delight at having experienced an albeit short drive in the actual car that helped Alain Prost win the F1 World Championship for the second time.

Hamilton is paid to talk at events such as this - but for a few seconds he seemed genuinely lost for words, marveling at how different Grand Prix racing must have been before electronics played a pivotal role in motorsport. He is also likely to have been reflecting on the fact that he was not even one year old when Prost last drove the car in anger.

Like the rest of us, Hamilton was there to help celebrate 2010 being a double anniversary - the 25th year of TAG Heuer's association with McLaren as well as the 150th anniversary of the

founding of Heuer, or TAG Heuer as it became in 1985 when the company was bought by TAG (Techniques d'Avant Garde), then a maker of F1 components. That was also the year that McLaren chairman Ron Dennis engineered the partnership with TAG Heuer that endures to this day, strengthening the brand's already powerful link with racing that dates back to the 1960s.

A classic re-born

But when Hamilton and Dennis stood up to say a few words along with TAG Heuer CEO Jean-Christophe Babin, McLaren Racing boss Martin Whitmarsh and, of course, Jack Heuer, (four speeches is usually enough) there was a distinct feeling that some members of the audience were distracted by what Hamilton had on his wrist. It turned out to be the re-born version of one of Heuer's great driving watches of the past, the Silverstone of 1974.

"I want to keep it," said Hamilton into the microphone. "We're sure they'll let you," thought the audience.

While the Monaco V4 (analysed in QP40) goes on sale this year as a mark of TAG Heuer's take on the future of watchmaking,



the brand's all important past is being represented by the Silverstone which is almost as redolent of the high octane world of 1970s pit lanes as the Cosmograph Daytona or, indeed, the Heuer Monaco.

"We launched the Silverstone as a less aggressive alternative to the Monaco, but the case maker went out of business so no more than 5,000 examples of the original were ever produced," Jack Heuer told *QP*. "The watch was always one of my favourite designs and it is wonderful to see it back, but if anyone had told me that it would still be around 36 years after we first made it, I would never have believed them."

Although Baselworld will give many people the first opportunity to see the watch, it officially went on sale in February with a choice of blue or brown dials, each in a limited edition of 1,860 pieces to mark Heuer's founding year - and with its left-hand winding crown and TAG-free 'Heuer' logo it's a dead-ringer for the original (apart from its sapphire crystal back). The £4,600 price tag also includes the sort of perforated leather strap that is *de rigueur* on any self-respecting retro driver's watch and, needless to say, the arrival of the reincarnation has sent the price of the original models soaring.

Although Bonhams auctioneers sold a delectable, maroon-dialled version in November for around £1,500, Jean-Christophe Babin revealed that he had to pay considerably more to secure a couple at the Patrizzi and Co sale of a

single-owner Heuer collection in Milan. "Everyone seemed to want to buy them, but we needed them for the museum so I was forced to pay more than €4,500 each - but I'm pleased to have bought them now rather than in a year's time because prices are bound to be higher," said Babin.

In addition to the Silverstone, TAG Heuer also pulled the wraps off a limited edition anniversary set comprising a special version of the Grand Carrera Calibre 17RS chronograph and a Meridiist mobile telephone. An anniversary-appropriate 150 sets will be made, each supplied in a hand-stitched 'steamer' style trunk made by Parisian luggage maestro Fred Pinel that, rather neatly, houses a USB connector to recharge the TAG Heuer phone and a watch winder. The two components of the set carry matching edition numbers, and the watch also differs from the standard model in having orange strap stitching.

After the grand unveilings, all that remained was to sit down and celebrate the birthday in style at an extraordinary table that stretched the entire length of McLaren's not insignificant trophy room. But the fun didn't last long for Lewis Hamilton - at the stroke of 10 o'clock, Ron Dennis took him gently by the shoulders and told us that the 2008 Formula One world champion was about to say goodbye.

"He's got to work tomorrow - can't let him get too tired," explained Dennis. And, on this point, Hamilton clearly wasn't about to argue. ☺



The anniversary Grand Carrera Calibre 17RS chronograph is made in a limited edition of 150 and is packaged in an exquisite Fred Pinel case accompanied by a Meridiist mobile telephone.



From the horse's mouth

Jack Heuer tells *QP* of his surprise that the brand founded by his great-grandfather is still thriving in 2010.

"To be quite honest with you, I never thought I would see this moment - not because I wouldn't be here, but because I didn't think the brand would survive this long." So says Jack Heuer of this year's 150th anniversary of the watch firm founded by his great-grandfather, Edouard Heuer, that established its credentials as one of the world's leading producers of sports-orientated timekeepers back in 1916 when it created the astonishing Micrograph stop watch that could record elapsed times down to an accuracy of 100th of a second.

Jack Heuer's one-time misgivings about the future of the company had nothing to do with the quality of its products, but to the fact that he can recall all too clearly an economic recession that made the current situation pale into insignificance - in watch manufacturing terms, at least.

Between 1958 and 1982, Jack built Heuer's first American sales subsidiary, oversaw the joint development of the world's first automatic chronograph (1969), established the name in Formula One timekeeping, perfected the 100th of a second, hand-held quartz stop watch and invented the automatic car identification and timing system still used in motor racing today. But, in the middle of all that, came a double blow.

"Everything was going well for us until 1972 when we were hit by both the dollar crisis, which meant our prices trebled in the US - our strongest market - and the oil crisis, which caused a whole other set of problems. No one saw it coming, but by 1975 our exports dropped by 40 per cent and we were looking at projecting a budget for the following year of minus SFr.20 million," recalls Jack. "I stayed with the company until 24 June 1982, when I left and gave away my shares so that Heuer could survive. Nobody lost their job, but I was essentially ruined, 50 and had two children to support!"

But, in typical style, Jack bounced back and became a partner in a consulting company that saw him travel around the world before he decided to relocate to Hong Kong where he established a business making hand-held stop watches. "We started with 200 people and the company ended up, after 20 years, with a pay roll of 10,000. The firm was hugely successful and invented items such as a patented digital barometer and a digital hygrometer."

In 2002, at the age of 70, Jack was persuaded to return to work with TAG Heuer (by then owned by the luxury goods group LVMH) as a highly valued ambassador, advisor, historian and all-round guru - what he doesn't know about the brand simply isn't worth knowing. "Being here to see the firm's 150th year is an amazing privilege. I feel honoured to have been part of it."

Further information: www.tagheuer.com