

Fully Restored



We British have a distinct knack for coming up with good ideas, getting them off the ground and then looking-on helplessly while smart thinkers from abroad adopt them and realise their full potential. Bolton-born John Harwood had a good idea - why not make a wristwatch that winds itself? QP explains why Rolex has something to thank him for.

Simon de Burton

I've said before in these pages that the Isle of Man appears to attract a disproportionate number of brilliant watchmakers, given that its current population of 80,000 includes both Dr George Daniels and Roger W. Smith. Long before they arrived, an important horologist called John Harwood had made the island his home.

Harwood was actually born in Bolton, Lancs. 1893, making him a prime piece of canon fodder when the Great War erupted 21 years later. Leaving his job at the Oldham watch dealer Hirst Brothers behind him, Harwood headed off for the trenches where he encountered officers wearing some of the first 'wrist' watches, many of which quickly suffered from the adverse effects of dust, water, mud, shocks and vibration, which were all part and parcel of life on the front line.

Harwood current offer one model available with variation on case material and strap. Prices range from £2,340 in stainless steel to £2,475 in silver, with a platinum version at £14,400.



Needs fixing

As a skilled and enthusiastic watchmaker, Harwood quickly identified the Achilles heel of the wristwatch as being the winding crown, which necessitated a hole being made in the case through which the stem could pass - along with all manner of 'foreign bodies' detrimental to the life and smooth running of the movement. It was this that made Harwood start to think about alternative ways of winding, and setting, a wristwatch that did not require the use of the traditional and vulnerable crown.

He knew, of course, that Abraham-Louis Perrelet had developed the first feasible automatic winding system for a pocket watch way back in the 1770s, and that Breguet had produced many pieces - including the celebrated pocket watch for Marie-Antoinette - using his own, not particularly reliable, 'perpetuelle' system. Indeed, none of the devices that had gone before were practical for long-term production, either because they were too delicate, too bulky or not sufficiently sophisticated to stop winding the mainspring once it was fully tensioned.

Furthermore, they all relied on the confounded winding crown for adjustment - a component that, reasoned Harwood, simply had to be done away with in order to achieve a truly dust-proof seal.

Having returned from the war unscathed, he moved to Baldrine on the Isle of Man, where he set about pondering the question of automatic winding. One of his solutions was the Autorist, which relied on the movement of the wearer's wrist to keep it wound - the strap was attached to a pivoted retainer on the case lug, which in turn connected to a lever within the movement and kept the mainspring fully wound.

Too complicated and temperamental to be viable, he ceased development of the Autorist after allegedly enjoying his 'eureka!' moment while observing two children playing on a see-saw - the human-powered version of the oscillating weight that has become such a familiar sight behind the display backs of modern wristwatches.

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Harwood's most effective prototype used a weight that moved in a 300-degree arc with a buffer at the top of each upswing and a friction system to prevent overwinding. Even better, he developed a method by which the hands could be adjusted via a knurled bezel - thus enabling him to do away with the winding crown altogether. (Anyone seen a modern-day Vogard, by the way?)

A British patent was granted for the system in 1924, the year after he had perfected it, with further American and European patents (including Swiss) quickly following.

Short shrift

Indeed, in a manner rather reminiscent of Dr George Daniels' early efforts to persuade the Swiss that his Co-Axial escapement had a future, Harwood received short shrift from several Swiss companies whom he approached with his idea to see if they would be interested in mass-producing movements with automatic winding.

Undeterred, he set-up his own production facility back on the Isle of Man, made a few dozen movements and returned to Switzerland where he struck a deal with movement-producer A.Schild for the Harwood system to be supplied to the Fortis brand under the name of Harwood Automatic.

As promising as all this sounds, however, success was not to be Harwood's destiny - he went bust in 1929 and, although Fortis had produced tens of thousands of Harwood Automatics, production was halted in 1930s after the Wall Street Crash of '29.

More importantly, however, Harwood either didn't have the cash or the inclination to renew his patents on the automatic system, leaving Rolex to help itself to the basic idea and modify it slightly so that the oscillating weight was free to turn 360 degrees. The result was the Rolex Perpetual, millions of which had been sold by the time Harwood died in 1965 - with little more to his credit than a gold medal from the British Horological Institute.

Now, however, the good name of Harwood is once again to be found on the dial of a quality wristwatch thanks to the Fortis brand, which has owned the rights to it since Harwood himself went broke almost 80 years ago. At this stage, production numbers remain relatively small and only one basic model is available in two case sizes (35 mm or 39 mm) with black or white

dials and made from a choice of three different materials. Prices start at £2,340 for a steel case, rising to £2,475 for one in sterling silver, and on to the range-topping Louis Reguin platinum limited edition, costing £14,400. (It has a hand-enamelled dial and is named after a celebrated French miniaturist born in 1872).



(Top) Harwood joined Tour Britannia 2008 to promote the recently revived brand.

Back on British shores

Former UK Chronoswiss distributor Nick Wiseman, who is now working with Fortis, has recently brought the Harwood name back home and is already enjoying sales success from the mechanically minded who appreciate the ingenious Harwood automatic system. The red dot visible at the six o'clock position signifies that the bezel is in the fixed or 'neutral' position - turn it clockwise, however, and the red dot disappears, meaning the bezel can be used to wind the mainspring; turn it anti-clockwise and it sets the hands in the same way as a conventional crown.

"I came across the Harwood watches during a visit to the Fortis HQ at Grenchen," Wiseman told QP.

"Not much seemed to be happening with it, but I persuaded them to let me promote the brand in the UK and it has attracted a large amount of interest. People are often amazed to learn that such an important development in watch history was perfected by an Englishman and they love the fact that the modern-day watches are virtually identical to the ones that were on sale during the 1920s." ☺

Harwood and the Tour Britannia

The Harwood story struck a chord with Alec Poole, commercial director of the Tour Britannia classic car rally, to such an extent that he asked for it to become the 'official watch' of this year's event, which took place in September. The Tour Britannia, which was first held in 2005, traditionally takes in more than 1,000 miles of public roads and race circuits, this year starting in Cambridge and finishing at Coombe Abbey in the Midlands.

Entrants may choose between 'competition' and 'regularity' classes, with this year's event attracting 68 competitors in cars ranging from a Ferrari Daytona to a Mini Cooper. A pair of Harwood watches were presented to the winners of the regularity category, Emma Henchoz and Jeanne Taylor who drove a Volvo PV544. They chose 35 mm versions, one with a black dial, the other a white one.

Plans are afoot to involve Harwood in next year's event, possibly on a larger scale.



Tour Britannia sees more than 70 classic cars taking part in a three-day parade that takes in some of England's finest stately homes.

