

Time *in* Hand



La Montre Hermès has produced in excess of 2.6 million watches since its founding exactly 30 years ago. Until now, more than 90 per cent of its products have been quartz-powered - but with the arrival of the H1 movement the brand are due a serious upgrading in their horological credentials.

Simon de Burton

Although Hermès has only had a dedicated watch making division since 1978, its relationship with timepieces goes back considerably further, to around 1912. That is when the young Jacqueline Hermès, a direct descendant of Thierry Hermès who had set-up as a high-end harness maker in Paris 75 years earlier, began to vex her parents with a fondness for energetic play.

According to family folklore, it had become such a regular occurrence for her pocket watch to end up on the floor as she leapt around the garden, her father invoked the services of an Hermès craftsman to fashion a strong leather case with an integral strap in order that Jacqueline could wear the timepiece



on her wrist - I have even seen an archive photograph to back the story up!

This early 'wrist watch' - which preceded the widespread popularity of the trend by several years - failed, however, to inspire Hermès to create an immediate brand extension, as the company was already doing very nicely out of the aristocratic horse riders of Europe, Russia, America and Asia with its range of bridles, saddles and 'haut à courroies' bags in which to carry them.

Pastures new

In 1918, the firm did branch out into clothing when it obtained the exclusive right to use a zip for leather goods and began to produce luxurious leather jackets - not for aviators or motorcyclists, but for golfers. Handbags, luggage and, indeed, watches and straps, followed during the 1920s, scarves and riding wear in the '30s and ties and perfume in the '40s.

Forays into horology began in 1928 with the Ermeto handbag watch and later through



Cape Cod H1 Grandes Heures based on the Hermès H1 self-winding Movement with additional "Grand Hours" module (hour hand moving at variable speeds). Prices start £5,900.



Clipper H1 Sport with the automatic H1 movement displays hours, minutes and seconds.



collaborations with various firms ranging from Jaeger-LeCoultre to Mido, Ulysse Nardin and Movado - in 1945, Hermès even made a belt buckle watch for Umberto II of Italy to wear while skiing.

The timepiece side of the business gradually faded away after the war, however, and it was not until the late 1970s that anyone thought to re-visit the brand's past by not only making luxurious straps, but the watches to go with them. The move happened as the firm came under the chairmanship of Jean-Louis Dumas-Hermès, who took the helm from his father in 1978, at a time when the company was failing to hold its own against stiff competition from manufacturers with lower standards and faster production methods.

Keen to reverse his family firm's ailing fortunes, Jean-Louis introduced new product lines alongside the more traditional goods and employed young, cutting-edge designers who created ostrich leather jeans and motorcycle jackets made from python skin, while smart marketers rejuvenated the fuddy-duddy image of Hermès scarves being for middle-aged women by promoting them on nubile, denim-clad models.

The seemingly unstoppable progress of quartz, meanwhile, promised to give Hermès a further string to its bow. While most long-standing watch brands were agonising over their future in the face of the imminent demise of the mechanical timepiece, the newly-formed Montres Hermès was able to seize the opportunity of introducing a range of technologically up-to-date watches



The Dressage Annual Calendar houses a self-winding movement by Vaucher Manufacture Fleurier and features a retrograde date display, forming a 225° arc around the centre of the dial, with a red crescent tipped date indicator. The Dressage starts at £10,800.

More enjoyable hours of the day appear to last longer, while the ones that usually drag seem to go more quickly.

powered by good quality but relatively inexpensive movements, giving them added value by fitting them with superior leather straps that were hand-stitched and finished in the way that only the world's finest harness makers knew how.

Self-improvement

Now, La Montre Hermès is just one of 14 product divisions within the group, but it makes a significant contribution to the overall brand's success by selling more than 100,000 watches per year. Until 2003, when it introduced the Dressage watch with its distinctive numerals-within-circles (inspired by a dressage ring), Hermès timepieces were almost exclusively quartz-powered - the Dressage, however, marked the first significant product of an association with the respected Fleurier-based mechanical movement maker, Vaucher, in which Hermès bought a 25-per-cent stake in 2006.

This was an obvious sign that Hermès was getting serious about watch production, a sign that was quickly bolstered by the appearance of the Dressage Moon Phase, the Cape Cod eight days jumping hours and last year, the Dressage Annual Calendar that was introduced to mark the 170th anniversary of the company's founding.

This year's Baselworld show, however, saw Hermès make a far bolder step by introducing its very own Vaucher-built movement in the Clipper, a neat-looking sports watch that incorporates a





Hermès Bugatti

Hermès may have lost out to Parmigiani in making the 'official' Bugatti watch - but the leather legend has certainly made up for it with its latest project to produce a specially-trimmed edition of the 253 mph, 16 cylinder, quad turbo, 1,001 horsepower Veyron that costs Euros 1.5 million.

The Bugatti Veyron Fbg par Hermès is only available with a two-tone ebony and taupe paint scheme, taupe trim and black seats. The interior door handles are modelled on those from a Hermès travel bag and the aluminium dashboard of the standard car has been replaced with one that is covered in supreme quality, hand-stitched bull calfskin.

Other interior touches include a glove box that houses a matching Hermès wallet and a leather-lined boot containing a fitted calfskin case. Outside, the car features eight-spoke polished aluminium wheels, based on those fitted to the legendary Bugatti

Type 35 of 1924, but with 'H' engraved centres, while the air vents around the rims have been designed to resemble Hermès-style saddle-stitching.

The horseshoe radiator grille is made from lightweight alloy and incorporates the 'H' monogram, while the fuel filler flap is engraved with the car's official name, the 'Fbg', which refers to the most luxurious shopping street in Paris, the rue Faubourg Saint-Honore - Hermès HQ is at number 24.

The collaboration between the two firms is said to date back to the 1920s when Ettore Bugatti ordered a bespoke suitcase from Emile Hermès - but that was in the days before the marketing men had realised the true value of co-branding. The Hermès Bugatti costs almost Euros 400,000 more than the 'standard' version, but the good news is that fuel economy remains the same - at a planet-unfriendly average of 7 mpg.



Photo courtesy of Nick Dimbleby.

'safe setting' feature allowing the date to be adjusted at midnight without damaging the mechanism - not an essential addition, perhaps, but at least it shows that the Hermès designers are thinking pretty deeply about what they are doing.

The new movement has been named the 'H1,' and Hermès further demonstrated its fearlessness for experimentation by simultaneously introducing a new cushion-cased Cape Cod called the Grandes Heures, equipped with a version of the H1 enhanced by a module comprising a system of oval-toothed wheels that makes it possible to effectively speed-up or slow down the movement of the hour hand while the minutes and seconds move at the usual pace.

The philosophy behind this 'variable speed' hour hand is, according to Hermès, that it enables time to be shown 'according to the heart' - in other words, the more enjoyable hours of the day appear to last longer while the ones that usually drag seem to go more quickly. Not quite as smart as Franck Muller's Crazy Hours, but an interesting concept nonetheless.

Aside from the 'safety setting' feature and the use of ceramic ball bearings, there is nothing especially radical about the base H1, but Hermès can genuinely claim it as its own and has proudly engraved the oscillating weight, balance cock and both winding and gear train bridges with its distinctive 'H' logo.

But, according to Emmanuel Raffner, CEO of Montre Hermès for the past four years, this is merely the tip of a mechanically creative iceberg.

Threefold

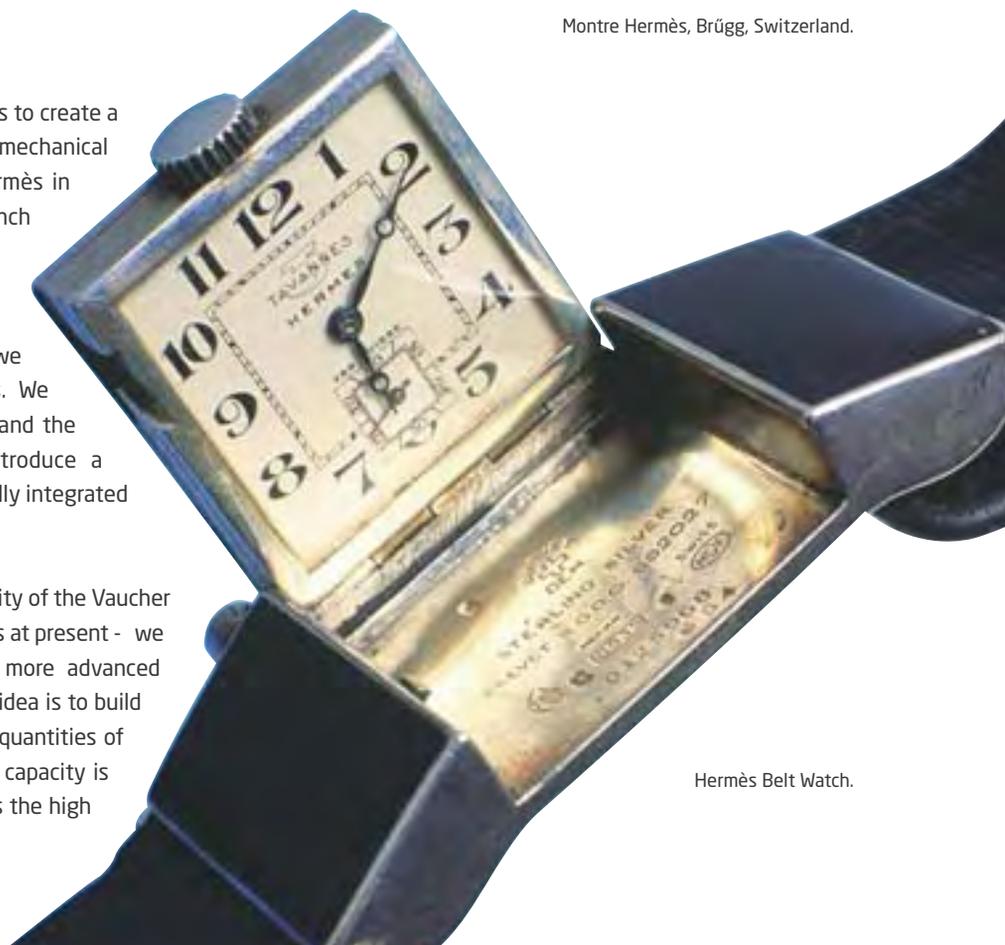
"The idea of our collaboration with Vaucher was to create a three-axis strategy for making a really strong mechanical watch range," says Raffner, who came to Hermès in 2000 after several years with another French brand, Peigniet.

"The first axis involved using the Dressage as the starting point from which, step by step, we decided to make more complicated watches. We have done a moonphase, an annual calendar and the Grandes Heures and next year we will introduce a perpetual calendar and, in the longer term, a fully integrated chronograph wristwatch.

"The second axis involves developing the capacity of the Vaucher manufacture to make it more industrial than it is at present - we want to combine Vaucher's know-how with more advanced tooling to make it a real industrial project. The idea is to build a complete workshop capable of making large quantities of movements per year. Vaucher's current annual capacity is only around 10,000, mostly orientated towards the high



Montre Hermès, Brugg, Switzerland.



Hermès Belt Watch.



Jacqueline Hermès and her sister, wearing her custom built pocket watch-wrist attachment.

Aside from whimsical musings on time, there is a hard commercial side to Hermès going all-out for manufacture status

end for brands such as Richard Mille, Parmigiani and Corum, as well as Hermès. By the end of 2009, we will open a new 40,000 square metre workshop to bring all the facilities from three different sites under the same roof.

“The third axis is all about creating more movements inspired by the world and the spirit of Hermès - time is part of the value of any Hermès product and time is also a great consideration in modern society. We want to make more movements like the Grand Heures, which remind us that we do not always have to be slaves to time. In a way, Hermès products are intended to be the antidote to devices such as the Blackberry or the mobile phone. We need modern technology to work efficiently and successfully, but we also need a watch that reminds us that the human touch is central to everything,” opines Raffner.

Aside from such whimsical musings on time, however, there is a hard commercial side to Hermès going all-out for manufacture status. The ratio of quartz to mechanical watches carrying the Hermès dial name currently stands at 92 per cent to eight per cent, whereas the split is expected to be 80 - 20 within the next three years, so increasing profit margins dramatically. Also, there is potential money to be made from Vaucher’s newly industrialised capacity, for in 2010 ETA and other SWATCH Group suppliers will begin to reduce the supply of components to non-SWATCH companies.

Let’s hope, however, that investing heavily in the move to mechanical in the midst of a global economic downturn isn’t an ironic case of bad timing. ☺

