

# Graham, by George!



With their propensity for fish-eye lenses, acid colourways and peculiar, trigger-operated chronograph pushers, Graham watches have a light-hearted personality - but, QP discovers, the brand was among the first to see that a British revival was in the offing.

Simon de Burton



Chronofighter R.A.C. Skeleton. Available in a rose gold or polished stainless steel case, the 43 mm case holds a Bi-compax automatic chronograph calibre G1742SQ with a 42-hour power reserve. Rounded counters at 9 o'clock show the minute countdown, while the seconds are displayed at 3 o'clock.



Chronofighter Oversize Overlord Mark II. The grey-green dial with rivet pattern is reminiscent of a fight-plane cabin and second hand display has the blue, white and red symbol for the Royal Air Force. The stainless steel case measures a 46 mm diameter and the movement is an automatic chronograph calibre G1732.

As QP regulars who have read our coverage of dial names such as Bremont, Dent, IWL and Roger W. Smith will have observed, watches with British connections are all the rage at the moment. But we can't help but notice that despite the patriotic fervour, one of the first companies to see the potential in referring back to Britain's past horological glories is often overlooked during discussions about 'New British' watchmaking.

### The British Masters

The one we refer to is The British Masters SA, established in 1995 by former Swatch Group product development manager Eric Loth and a small team of industry professionals who secured

the rights to use six of the best-known names in English watchmaking, among which were Arnold and Son, Tompion and Graham.

Of those three, the one you are most likely to have seen on an actual watch is Graham, which produces a three-family range of chronograph models with an entry-level price of around £4,000. The reason for every Graham being a chronograph is that George Graham is sometimes referred to as the 'father' of this particular complication - although it is unlikely that he could ever have imagined just how different a 21st century Graham wrist chronograph would be to the wall-mounted model he invented during the early 1700s.

Despite the use of the names 'Graham' and 'British Masters,' however, these watches don't really have very much to do with our sceptred isle, save for the fact that William Asprey, of the Asprey jewellery family and proprietor of the Mayfair luxury goods shop William and Son, is one of the BM's major shareholders. (It was his father John Asprey who originally had the foresight to buy up the English dial names prior to their transfer to the British Masters.)

### In shape and name

The watches are all Swiss made, using the rugged, reliable and ubiquitous ETA 7750 movement which is modified to Graham's requirements by La Joux-Perret, which also converts it to more prestigious column wheel specification for use on the 'smallest' watch in the range, the 43 mm Chronofighter R.A.C.

The British flavour is introduced by way of design elements and model names, such as the aforementioned 'R.A.C.' or the Chronofighter Oversize Overlord Mark III, which features a dial decorated with an RAF roundel and a cockpit-like rivet pattern. There is, however, a sort of British, or British Isles, aspect to the distinctive Swordfish in that, believe it or not, it was designed in Eire.

Loth set up a competition among students at the Dublin Design School to create an unusual-looking wristwatch that combined two of the products for which George Graham was known - chronographs and telescopes. The winner produced a drawing that magnified the watch subdials to the tune of 15 per cent by setting a pair of separate, extra-thick lenses



into the main crystal. This 'bulging eye' look made it into production and has now become a feature of the model, enabling a Swordfish to be spotted at 20 paces.

### Through the lens

The design - which met with a lukewarm reception when it was first launched - has also now been executed in a sort of 'Cyclops' version in the form of the Swordfish Grillo (that should be grilled, surely?), a GMT alarm watch, which has a date display enlarged by a magnifying lens. And, tantalisingly, it emerges that there was not just one winner of the Dublin Design School competition, but three - meaning there could be two more equally radical-looking Grahams waiting in the wings.

It is easy, of course, to dismiss the elements such as the magnifying lenses as nothing but gimmickry intended to make Graham chronos stand out from the plethora of others on the market - except that, as a gimmick, its both stylish and

witty and, as it happens, highly popular. But that doesn't change the fact that incorporating such a feature into a sports watch presents a technical challenge, particularly one called Swordfish, which everyone is going to expect to be water resistant. Graham seems to have overcome that challenge, because regular Swordfish models are water resistant to a reasonable 100 metres while the gem-set 'juices' versions are good to half as much.

And, talking of gimmickry, what about all that extra ironmongery that comes with the Chronofighter models in the form of the ostentatious chronograph trigger mechanism? Well, that too has a story to it, because the design was inspired by a World War II pilot's navigational pocket watch that can be seen in the British museum. The lack of heating systems in military aircraft of the era meant that pilots and crew were invariably swathed in heavy clothing to provide warmth - therefore, to make it possible to activate

Swordfish Big 12-6. Practical and easy to use controls, clear and legible luminescent markers, 12 hours with sweeping seconds and 30-minute counters under sapphire crystal magnifying glasses. Also available is the Swordfish Juice in alternative 'fruity' colours and adorned with 322 VVS diamonds (totalling 3.263ct).



Graham King George. Combining three movements, the watch is a chronograph minute repeater with four hammers working its auditory features - two for the minute repeater and two for the chronograph (purported as being the world's first chiming chronograph).

Grand Silverstone Luffield. As the name suggests, the watch makes assertions to the world of motor racing. It has a flyback-function chronograph and a stainless steel bezel.



Swordfish Grillo GMT-Alarm with Bigger Date. Retaining many of the previous Swordfish characteristics, the new model is distinguished by a single protuberant eye dramatically magnifying the date and leaving space for the GMT function display and the alarm function.



the watch while wearing thick mittens, the trigger system was invented. (The trigger on the Chronofighter R.A.C, apparently, is based on the shape of a waste bin pedal encountered in the lavatory of an English country pub, either that or Eric Loth is indulging in the more obvious pub art if taking the mick).

**From wings to wheels**

In QP issue 27, I attempted to formulate an idea for my ideal motorcyclist's wristwatch - well, on reflection, something like the Chronofighter Oversize GMT Big Date might almost be it. On an extra-long strap, it could be worn over leathers, the big trigger allows it to be activated with gloves on (in accordance with the original design) and the 47 mm case size and Superluminova dial markings make it easy to read on the move. In fact, rumour has it that Eric Loth is keen to approach the organisers of the Isle of Man TT motorcycle races in order to make Graham a sponsor and 'official' watch of the event.

The brand has already enjoyed success in the car world, partly though its co-sponsorship with McLaren of the Young Driver of the Year competition run by the British Racing Driver's Club (BRDC). As well as a year's contract to work as a McLaren test driver, the winner also gets cash prize and a Graham watch. Perhaps the most high-profile racer to have come through the

Chronofighter Oversize GMT Big Date. The case is 47 mm in diameter and made of stainless steel, with GMT bezel - black for night and orange for day.

programme is 29-year-old Dan Wheldon who went on to win the Indianapolis 500 in 2005 - and is frequently pictured wearing one of the several Graham watches he now owns. The legendary Brazilian driver Emerson Fittipaldi is also a fan of the brand.

To make the most of the car guy appeal, which its watches clearly have, Graham also offers the Silverstone range of chronographs that are supplied on Chopard-like 'tyre tread' rubber straps. Made in a different limited edition each year, the models are named after sections of the Silverstone circuit - last year's was called Woodcote, while the latest is called Luffield.

**This England**

Neither, however, is quite as collectable as the ultimate Graham watch produced so far, which is the King George made in collaboration with Christophe Claret. Clearly intended to elevate the brand's horological credentials, the King George - named after George III as well as George Graham - was produced in 10 pieces, five in platinum and five in gold, each with a grande complication movement featuring a tourbillon, minute repeater and split-seconds chronograph which also activated the chiming mechanism when it was started and stopped.

The price was a cool £350,000 and as every one was sold, the Madness of King George quip will have to stay in the box. ☹

**Futher information:** [www.graham-london.com](http://www.graham-london.com)

