



Audemars Piguet launched the first Royal Oak in 1972 and in doing so, began a lineage that has seen over 35 years of permutation. The octagonal bezel, prominent screws and celebration of steel were several reasons the Royal Oak was so revolutionary and innovative.



Patek Philippe 5980/1A
£20,240

Although the Royal Oak had a four-year lead on the Nautilus, this model showed a touch of restraint in Gerald Genta (I can't believe I used the words 'Genta' and 'restraint' in the same sentence). It is, without question, one of the most coveted watches in production today, and an even far more elegant solution to the sport/dress conundrum than the Royal Oak, thanks to its less edgy details. If you're going to buy a Nautilus, you may as well go for the most desirable:

The Nautilus Chronograph Ref. 5980/1 A contains the all-new, in-house self-winding, column-wheel-controlled calibre 28-520 C chronograph movement and the watch itself boasts the new 44 mm case size. Just be prepared to wait a while.



HUBLOT BIG BANG 301.PB.131.RX
£10,000

This is not apocryphal: I was in a watch store on Bond Street, when a guy walks in wearing a rose gold Offshore with black dial. Just as you would pop into a shop for a newspaper, without even bothering to try it on, he asked for and bought a rose-gold-and-black Big Bang chronograph. He said he wanted it for those occasions when it was 'wiser to leave my Royal Oak at home in the safe.' So, you can look at the Big Bang as a Royal Oak for the less-well-heeled, or as a Swatch for grown-ups. Whatever way you cut it, it's one of the most successful new watch ranges in recent memory. The selection is huge - all-white, anyone? chocolate brown dial? - so this model is the dead-cert if you're easily overwhelmed by huge catalogues.

Modern Classics: AP Royal Oak



A century of wristwatches has coughed up dozens of milestone horological monuments - Tank, Submariner, Caltrava, *et al* - but one post-war effort grabbed the label and acquired its iconic status in record time. Though this legendary watch has only just passed its 35th birthday, Audemars Piguet's Royal Oak is about as famous, recognisable and influential as a watch can be.

Ken Kessler

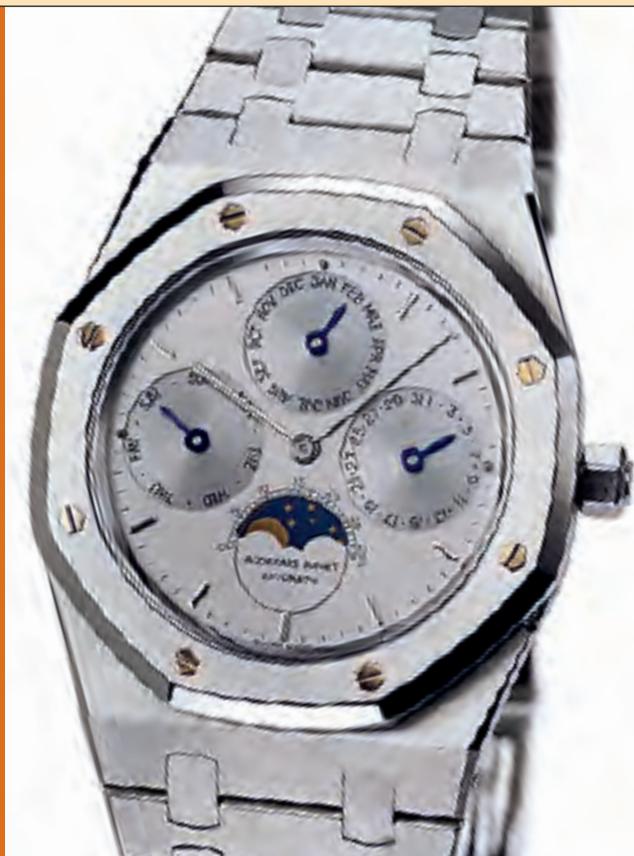
Praised for re-writing the rules of sport watch design - it predates its longest running rival, the Patek Philippe Nautilus, by four years - and derided for being about as cool as the trousers of the golfers who worship it, the Royal Oak has a life of its own. The Royal Oak has become, by any measure, one of the best selling high-end watch lines of all time. According to the great watch historian, Lucien F Trueb, 'Originally, AP hoped to sell 1,000 Royal Oaks; 30 years later the total was up to 150,000 and counting, at a furious rate.

Full steam ahead

And 'watch line' barely conveys the life that this model has taken on; the models and variants it has

sired are a legion. It is about as close to a self-sustaining force as a single model type can be. Even more noteworthy is that it has influenced dozens of brands that wish to emulate its success, from Hublot to Pequinet, Wyler to Patek Philippe, Concord to Baume & Mercier, Girard-Perregaux to Cartier to Bulgari. Its impact cannot be understated.

By any reckoning, 150,000-plus is an astonishing figure. When you consider that there is no 'budget' model, it's all the more impressive an achievement. And in 1972, to launch a ludicrously butch, all-metal sports watch with a high price tag required cojones the size of grapefruits. Especially at a time when the high price tag only got you stainless steel.



The success of the Royal Oak encourages Audemars Piguet to create more complex versions and in 1983 the Royal Oak Perpetual was presented.



The octagonal Royal Oak is reinterpreted in an extreme sport version: the Royal Oak Offshore collection is born, 1992. Bold and futuristic, this line offers watches with oversized cases and marries steel with rubber.

Genta genesis

Designed in 1972 by Gerald Genta, then working solely for Audemars Piguet, the Royal Oak launched both the entire concept of upscale sport watches (or, in the obverse, rugged dress watches) and Genta's career. As a hired gun, he would wield the pen that created the Patek Philippe Nautilus, the IWC Ingenieur - Genta had a thing about form-fitting integral bracelets - and models for Omega before striking out on his own.

With the Royal Oak, though, Genta created something so timeless and perfect for its role that a first-generation example is hard to tell from one made this year. In the intervening decades, it has served as a platform for every type of technology, every complication and every material that AP's engineers cared to incorporate into the Royal Oak template. And that in turn has, for example, provided Hublot - at the very least - with a formula for the hottest watch of the current age, the Big Bang.

Ship-shape

Regarded by most historians as the first high-end steel sports watch, the Royal Oak - named after a succession of important fighting ships - possessed one particular detail that rendered it instantly recognisable. In this context, it is as important as a red dot on the body of a Leica camera, or the white star on the cap of a Montblanc pen. Sheer genius: Genta made the bezel octagonal, and made a prominent detail of the screw-heads. And the bezel, shape and construction, was instantly recognised as resembling a porthole, with all the immunity to the elements that implies.

It was no mere conceit, for the watch was designed to be impregnable and supremely rugged. The machined-from-solid-steel 48x39mm case, some 7mm thick, doesn't even need upscaling to make it 21st Century-ready. It featured a fully integrated bracelet with connecting linkages than universally spaced lugs that are able to accept other bracelets



The Royal Oak Concept marked the 30 anniversary of the family, in 2002. The hand-wound watch features a tourbillon, a dynamograph, a linear power reserve indicator and a function selector. The case is made of alacrite 602, the bezel of titanium and the strap of kevlar.

or even straps. Like the bezel, the chunky bracelet became a signature detail, although later on, especially with the Offshore models and dressier variations, straps in assorted materials from rubber to leather to Kevlar would be fitted.

It's obvious to any watch enthusiast that the Royal Oak's bodywork was conceived with form following function, despite Genta's predilection for the whimsical. The octagonal bezel and solid back are mated to each other by the eight hexagonal screws visible at each of the eight points on the bezel, and with eight bolts entering through the back to secure it, the design offers excellent protection from dust and moisture.

The family tree

Over the decades, the Royal Oak has served as a platform for every horological trend that has come along, which means that it must be an awful lot of fun working in AP's Royal Oak design headquarters. It first appeared, as mentioned above, in steel, but that has been followed by every shade of gold, as well as platinum, titanium, tantalum, 602 alacrite (for the Concept), various metal combinations and rubberised steel, especially for the Offshore versions.



Chronology of Royal Oak milestones:

- 1972** Audemars Piguet introduced the first Royal Oak
- 1992** The Offshore is launched
- 1999** The Governor wears a Royal Oak Offshore in *End of Days*
- 2002** For its 30th anniversary, Audemars Piguet produced the Royal Oak Concept watch, 'dedicated to innovation' - probably the most radical take on a tourbillon ever seen
- 2003** AP issued the Royal Oak Offshore Alinghi with two time zones, power reserve indicator and date, combining a titanium case with a platinum bezel, the start of a fruitful association justifying AP's sponsorship of an America's Cup team
- 2003** AP makes a special version of the Offshore for the film *Terminator 3*
- 2004** Launch of the Lady Royal Oak, including models in steel with a white vulcanised bezel containing 32 diamonds set in groups of four between the sight screw-heads
- 2004** Royal Oak Offshore Juan Pablo Montoya chronograph
- 2005** Introduction of the automatic calibre 3120 with date display and centre seconds
- 2008** Audemars Piguet dedicates a special model to a female sailing crew with the Royal Oak Offshore Ladycat Chronograph

Launch of the fourth piece in the Tradition d'Excellence Collection, 2004. Limited to 20 pieces, the hand-wound tourbillon chronograph has a double ten-day power-reserve indication and a 30-minute counter. The caseback and the bracelet are made of platinum 950.



The Royal Oak Offshore Alinghi Team, 2007, is a tribute to the Alinghi boat. A first for watchmaking, the manufacture uses forged carbon for the case and the bezel of the watch.



Royal Oak Offshore Ladycat Chronograph, 2008. Dedicated to the all-female team who will soon be taking part in the 2008 Julius Baer Challenge on the waters of Lake Geneva.



Offshore T3 was developed for Arnold Schwarzenegger to wear during the filming of the 2003 blockbuster, Terminator 3. Available with anthracite or silver dials, it was a chronograph with date at 3 o'clock, a unique feature being its specially protected push-pieces, with titanium guards that clip over the buttons and measuring: 15.65mm thick, 61mm long and 57.20mm wide.

Anggun, the French-Indonesian model and ambassador for Audemars Piguet, wearing a Ladies' Royal Oak Offshore Chronograph. The watch has a date display and small seconds at 6 o'clock. The pink gold case has a bezel set with 32 diamonds.

Among the myriad movements that have been housed in the Royal Oak chassis are the most basic and therefore 'classic' version, the calibre 2121 automatic with date in an aperture at 3 o'clock; the calibre 2385 self-winding chronograph with date; the perpetual calendar model with moon phase driven by the calibre 2120/2802; the calibre 2226/2840 used in the ultra-macho Royal Oak Offshore with its black, rubberised bezel, and the ultimate incarnation of the watch; and the Royal Oak Concept of 2002, with the manual wind calibre 2896, a radical take on the tourbillon with unique functions such as a mainspring torque indicator.

There seems to be no end to AP's lateral thinking with this watch. In addition to using it as the basis for their most successful range based wholly on its flexibility in horological terms, the company has exploited its appeal by associating it with motorsports, sailing, celebrities, the cinema and any other vehicles that might enhance its marketability.

Wind in the sail

Probably the biggest boost for the line came in the early part of this decade when, with great prescience, AP sponsored the victorious Swiss racing yacht Alinghi in the America's Cup in 2003. To mark this association, AP issued the Royal Oak Offshore Alinghi with two time zones, power reserve indicator and date, using a titanium case with a platinum bezel. Thanks to this collaboration, AP is now one of the most visible Marques in a sport that bears an irresistible attraction for great watch houses.

With the exception, perhaps, of the 2002's Concept, with its Tourbillon Dynamograph movement, the T3 is one of the 'coolest' of the Royal Oaks, and that's not just my take on it. (Actually, I'm partial to the *End of Days* model.) If auction activity is a valid yardstick, then take a note of this: values of the T3 have almost doubled in the last four years, from circa US \$20,000 to over \$35,000. But would you expect anything less of an icon? ☺