

House of Westminster



One of the most revered names in the history of English horology is that of Edward Dent - he helped Britannia rule the waves with his superlative marine chronometers, kept the Empire on time with his Standard Clock at the Royal Observatory and, after winning a ding-dong battle with his rival Benjamin Vulliamy, made the mechanism for the Houses of Parliament's Great Clock, AKA Big Ben. Now, the Dent name is back - this time in a handy wrist-sized format and, thankfully, still in London hands.

Simon de Burton

It is a well-known fact that history, heritage and a glorious past go a long way to ensuring the success of a watch brand. A few are fortunate enough to enjoy a direct link with their founders - Patek Philippe, Rolex and Audemars Piguet for example - but in the fast-moving, marketing-led world of modern watch-selling it can be rather inconvenient waiting a century or two before your dial name becomes iconic.

The obvious answer, therefore, is to buy a defunct one with a built-in pedigree, highlight a few milestone moments, incorporate the word 'depuis' in your advertising campaign (e.g. 'Depuis 1066' etc.) and pick up where



From the round 'Ministry' collection, Dent's new chronograph (£5,200) in steel, with a hand-finished COSC-certified Valjoux 7750 movement. A platinum version will also be available for £22,000. Note the trademark Dent triangle on the crown.

the old boys left off – only this time with a decent profit margin.

Until now, the only celebrated English watchmakers to come back from the dead with any significance have been John Arnold and George Graham, thanks to the ‘British Masters’, which has applied the Arnold and Graham names to two very different types of watches, the former being aimed at lovers of complications and the latter, with quirky trigger mechanisms and ‘fish eye’ subdials, at younger buyers. Come September, however, it will be possible to sport a timepiece bearing the celebrated name ‘Dent’ and its triangle trademark, due to its recent revival by an all-British consortium, which appears determined to ensure that this is one brand that will be more than just another ‘revived 45’ living off its past.

In addition to the five investors who have put up the substantial amount of cash

required to get the venture off the ground, there are three British directors running it at grass-roots level: Twysden Moore, Frank Spurrell and, most significantly, former Swatch UK MD Derek Salter, who has been appointed CEO and whose mere presence suggests that this is a genuine attempt to put the Dent name back near the top of the league table.

A dedicated *atelier* in Le Locle, Switzerland, has been up and running for almost two years now, employing seven watchmakers and technicians to modify and enhance the movements that will be used in the first products. But ambitious plans are already afoot to produce no fewer than six unique, in-house movements, some of which will be revealed at Baselworld 2008. Something that fans of traditional English watchmaking will find even more interesting is also on the cards for 2009 – but, as far as that is concerned, *QP* is sworn to secrecy!

Career man

With hindsight it seems remarkable that the Dent name has only now been snapped up for use on a modern-day wristwatch, for the story of Edward John Dent (1790-1853) is a marketing man’s dream. Dent was just 24 when his genius as a chronometer maker was first recognised, his horological future being assured 15 years later when one of his marine timekeepers won top prize at the 1829 Greenwich Trials.

The ‘First Premium’ award resulted in a partnership with John Arnold and a flood of commissions from celebrated explorers such as Charles Darwin, who used one aboard *HMS Beagle* in 1831, and both Dr David Livingstone and Sir Henry Stanley who took Dent chronometers on their African expeditions. It was Dent, too, who was charged by the Astronomer Royal Sir George Airy to create the Standard Clock at the Royal Observatory,

(Right) Edward John Dent (1790-1853) founded his firm in 1814 with the construction of the Standard Astronomical Clock for the Admiralty, which kept Greenwich Mean Time and continued to do so until replaced by an electronic clock in 1946. He proved a key player in Victorian horological history, and consolidated Britain’s reputation as the world’s horological force, which started when John Harrison’s mechanical solution to locate a ship’s position at sea won the coveted Board of Longitude prize in 1764.

(Far right) Dent Ministry Power Reserve (from £9,200 in red and white gold only) with second time-zone at 12 o’clock and a black double-sided alligator strap. A COSC-certified Soprod 9035 movement powers all Dent’s dual-time power-reserve watches.





(Above) In 1852 Dent won the commission to make the Great Clock for the Houses of Parliament after Edmund Beckett Grimthorpe's designs. Dent died before completing the project, but his sons Frederick and Richard - from his marriage to the widow of cousin and mentor Richard Rippon - took Dent's name and succeeded to his business. Frederick Rippon Dent finished Big Ben in 1854 and it was the biggest, most accurate and most powerful public clock of its time.

(Right) What should prove to be Dent's signature wristwatch: the Parliament Power Reserve (£14,500), styled after Dent's *magnum opus*, the Great Clock of Westminster.

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while his other creations were housed in the official observatories of Italy, Spain, Belgium, Russia, the USA, Japan - and, indeed, Switzerland.

His domestic clocks were no less superlative, attracting a Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria that made him the official watch and clockmaker for more than a century, as well as international 'royal warrants' from the Russian Tsars Alexander III and Nicolas II and the Japanese Emperor Meiji.

Along the way, Dent patented the first keyless winding mechanism, designed numerous improved balance springs and, during some rare, non-horological moments, found time to invent the lighthouse fog bell and the fluid compass. His most indelible achievement, however, was to win the task of designing a new mechanism for the Great Clock when architect Charles Barry was commissioned to rebuild the Palace of Westminster following its destruction by fire in 1834. The job did not, however, fall into Dent's lap. Barry initially gave the contract to Benjamin Vulliamy without having invited interest from anyone else - a fact that only came to light after Dent wrote to the government

offering his services. As a result the work was put out to tender and, having created the clock's design, Sir George Airy drew up a shortlist of three potential makers, including Dent and Vulliamy. This caused Vulliamy to ostensibly withdraw with the pompous words: "My general rule of conduct has been in all cases to decline competition."

Despite this, he submitted a drawing for the mechanism without an estimate. But Dent's quote of £1,500 got him the job, leading Vulliamy to launch an unsuccessful smear campaign by persuading the Clockmaker's Company to write to officials criticising Dent's abilities.

Revival

The rest, as they say, is history, and the Great Clock (colloquially known as Big Ben, which is really the name of the main bell) is probably the single most famous timekeeper in the world. Put like that, it isn't difficult to see why the consortium behind the 21st-century Dent wanted to revive the name and apply it to a range of wristwatches. If they sell well, they should provide the capital to continue the original Dent ethos of innovation.

Europe's New Clock

Eurostar's new high-speed terminal is set to open this November at St Pancras station in north London, whose faux-gothic exterior and grand Victorian fittings are being restored with admirable faith. Which means Dent plays a big part.

Ben Ruse, Head of Media for London and Continental Railways (LCR) explains: "When British Rail was in the process of stripping St Pancras of its various fittings and fixtures back in the Seventies and Eighties, an investor from the US put in a successful £1/4m bid for the great platform clock. However," laments Ruse, "it soon went rather wrong.

"As the four-tonne, slate clock-face was being lowered from its housing, it slipped and smashed to the ground below. Obviously, without the face, the American collector was disinterested and retracted his offer. BR ended-up selling the mechanism and 150 shards of slate to a railwayman working in the station for £25!"

Something of a keen hobbyist, the old train guard - a Mr Hoggart, now 92 - transported the clock back to his smallholding, and patiently set about rebuilding it. After years of seeing countless frantic passengers to their trains on time, the St Pancras platform clock was soon whole again... mounted to the side of a barn in Nottinghamshire.

When LCR began work on St Pancras in 2001, having been awarded Eurostar and the high-speed Channel Tunnel Rail Link project in 1996, LCR approached Hoggart to buy the reconstructed clock back. "Unfortunately," remarks Ruse, "as painstaking as his restoration was, it was more 'glue' than clock! It was clearly not fit for the purpose of bringing the station back to its former glory, so we decided to engage with Dent."

Frank Spurrell of Dent takes up the story: "Since St Pancras is grade-I listed, any restoration has to be as faithful to the past as possible. The original clock was so dominant that a replica was required. Given that Dent built the four-sided clock on

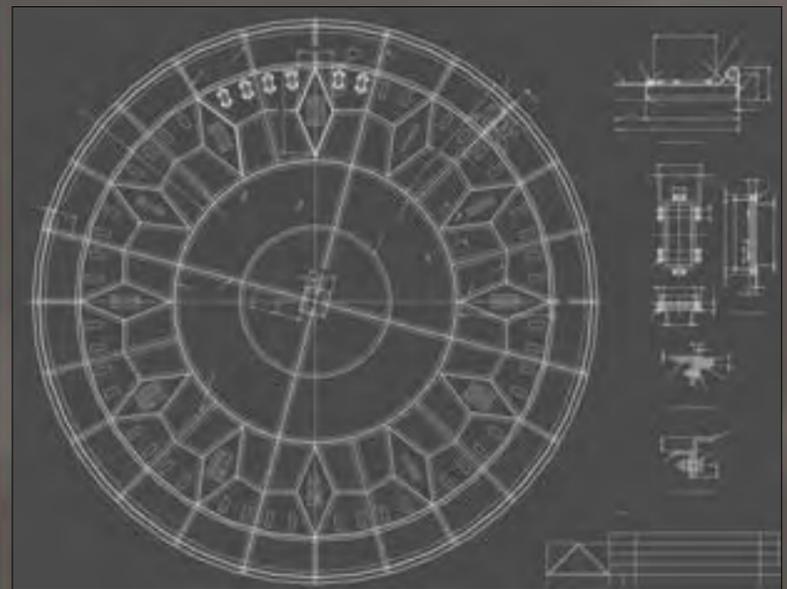


St Pancras' gothic tower (still there, working perfectly), I felt that we would be as good as they could get to restore the platform clock."

Dent's new clock, due to be installed in October ahead of the terminal's ribbon-cutting, complies fully with the demands of the modern age, running off an electric mechanism. "After all," remarks Spurrell, "we don't want passengers suing Dent for missing their train!" He emphasises that it's completely proprietary, adding that the motor will be regulated from Dent's control centre in London, linked by GPS.

This time around, much to the LCR contractors' relief, the new clock face will not be four tonnes of solid slate. However, laid into the 108-piece, 18-foot-diameter jigsaw puzzle (blueprint pictured) are diamond-shaped minute and hour markers that will be. "Mr Hoggart kindly donated an actual chunk of the original face," reveals Spurrell, "which we sent to Loughborough University for petrochemical testing, to ascertain the slate's provenance. We could then source the new stuff exactly."

Here's hoping it doesn't suffer the same fate going back up as the old stuff did coming down...



Computer rendering of the Ministry 'Keyless', named after one of Dent's many innovations - a means of winding and setting the watch without a key (patent diagram pictured, below). A Selita SW200 movement drives all of Dent's three-handed watches, which is effectively an modified ETA 2824-2 with 26 jewels instead of 25.



The First Watch Winding and Setting the Hands without a Key. Patented and Introduced by E. I. DENT. (Trade Mark )

Interestingly, although the man himself died in 1853, the Dent name has always remained linked with contemporary watch and clock production, having been owned until last year by a master clockmaker called Brian Norman, who used it on a small series of exquisite timekeepers that he made for specialist collectors. Dent also maintained the Royal Warrant until 1964 and watches and clocks bearing the name were issued to the Royal Air Force during World War II, with Dent wristwatches still being available until the 1960s when the brand was owned by the London-based Buckney family.

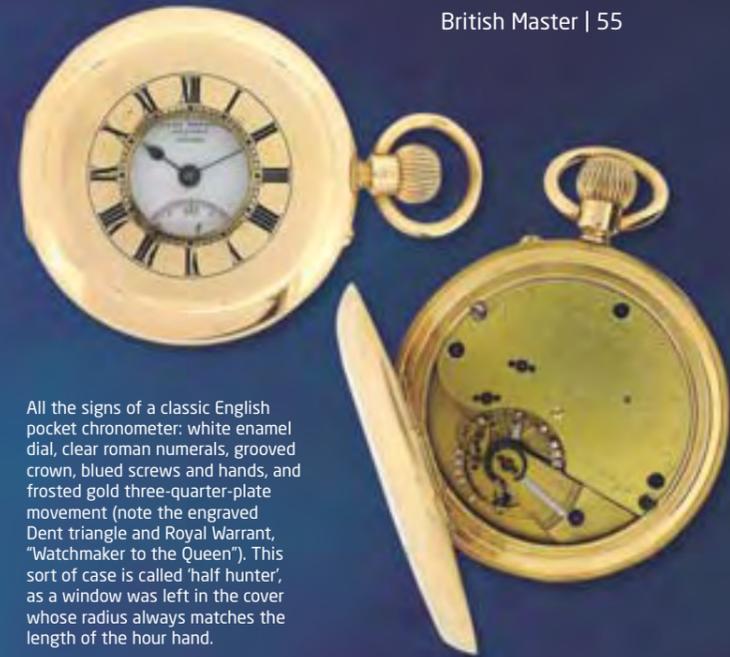
Frank Spurrell, Dent's Commercial Director, says its revival is already attracting worldwide interest: "The name is undoubtedly one of the greatest in horology and won many patents for improvements in watchmaking during nearly two centuries of production. It has always been up there with the top brands in terms of pedigree, it just needed to be revitalised. "It took us three years to persuade Mr Norman to sell it, and now we can build on what is simply one of the most famous names in the history of clock and watchmaking."

The first stages of the brand's revival have seen the design and production of two watch families, called Parliament and Ministry, both of which are constructed from high-quality, Swiss-made components. Chronograph versions are powered by the ubiquitous Valjoux 7750 movement, three-handers use the Selita SW200 and power reserve models the Soprod 9035.

In each case, the movements are modified with special engraving, upgraded balance springs and blued screws before the watches are assembled at the Dent *atelier*, where veteran English horologist Peter Roberts leads the team. Roberts was in fact the first Englishman to graduate from Switzerland's famous WOSTEP course, and counts Peter Speake-Marin and Stephen Forsey amongst his former pupils.

Away from Dent, Roberts' long background with Rolex has meant plenty of recent work examining the watch giant's watchmakers. But one look at Dent's new range is reassurance enough that Roberts is unlikely to quit his new day job just yet. The Parliament range comprises three-handed and power reserve versions which have cases that have been cleverly designed to resemble 'Big Ben', while the nobly proportioned 'Ministry' line is modelled on a Dent chronometer and comes in three-handed, power reserve and chronograph versions.

By the end of the year, the Dent name will also be seen on two rather larger timepieces - an 18-foot-diameter clock being created to dominate the Eurostar platforms at the all-new St Pancras terminal opening in November (see box), and another clock commissioned for the new Cunard liner *Queen Victoria* due to launch in the same month.



All the signs of a classic English pocket chronometer: white enamel dial, clear roman numerals, grooved crown, blued screws and hands, and frosted gold three-quarter-plate movement (note the engraved Dent triangle and Royal Warrant, "Watchmaker to the Queen"). This sort of case is called 'half hunter', as a window was left in the cover whose radius always matches the length of the hour hand.

And, having granted Dent its original Royal Warrant, that is something about which Her Majesty would undoubtedly have been amused. ○

Further information: Tel: 020 7873 2363, www.dentwatches.com
The range starts at £2,500 for the three-handed steel cased Ministry and from £7,500 for the Parliament models, which are only available in white or rose gold.