

# Born in the USA



If you were told that you could buy an automatic, Swiss-made, *manufacture* GMT with glass back and robust 44 mm case for under £500, would it push your buttons? How about a three-dial chronograph for under a grand, a diving watch for under £400, pilot's watches for low three-figure price tags? If you're ticking 'yes' for all of those, then get out your wallet - Hamilton's back in the UK.

Ken Kessler

With serious marketing muscle behind its re-launch, this year sees the return to the UK of no less a brand than Hamilton. Once America's premier wristwatch producer, it has been owned by the massive Swatch Group since 1977. As a result of being part of a family boasting nearly 20 brands, and lacking the glamour of siblings like Blancpain or Breguet, Hamilton has suffered - how should we put this? - a distinct lack of attention from its custodians.

Recently, however, some bright spark has realised that this brand possesses a history as proud as any company in the horological firmament, with famous clientele, a track record containing both art deco icons and militaria, early electrical and digital watches, and decidedly hip appeal in Italy, which is ground zero for 'cool'.

## The American Patek

Hamilton was founded in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1892, and its early achievements included the release of hand-wound ladies' watches as far back

as 1915. It was behind the Pulsar electronic watch that kick-started the modern era, it made the clocks for the spacecraft in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, it provided a *million* military timepieces from 1940 to 1945. Hamilton was even honoured with five Army-Navy 'E' awards for such sterling war effort, having stopped 98% of its consumer production to focus on watches for the services.

Hamilton was even described by one devotee - no less than Gino Macaluso of Girard-Perregaux - as "America's Patek Philippe" (see JeanRichard Highlands feature, Issue 19). We are talking about one of the watchmaking greats here, not some ludicrous footnote of negligible importance, or the name of a maker of two prototypes in the 1700s unearthed by a cynic for a 'rebirth'. Hamilton is the Real Deal.

Of course, we live in times when all Things American are not necessarily looked upon with favour. But, as was pointed out by Paul Nolan, Brand Manager



Launched earlier this year, Hamilton's Khaki Navy Air Race on rubber strap (£420), driven by the ETA 2893-1 automatic GMT movement.

for Hamilton UK, "Other classic American brands have not suffered an anti-American feeling - brands such as Nike, Coca-Cola, Gap, etc. We see no reason for this to be an issue with watches." And it would be a shame if it was. After all, most GIs were wearing Hamiltons when they saved Europe's collective ass during WW2...

Hamilton had already supplied the US military with watches during the Great War, production starting in 1917. The company equipped over half of America's railway conductors and engineers with accurate timekeepers, its watches graced the wrists of flappers and lounge lizards in the Roaring Twenties with enamelled masterpieces like the Coronado and Piping Rock, and Hamiltons were probably on a few of the stockbrokers' wrists as they leaped from skyscrapers when the stock market crashed. Without any exaggeration, Hamilton represented the upper echelon in the US market for most of the 20th century.

**In the field**

In the years after its acquisition by the Swatch Group (then SMH), Hamilton watches appeared in countless films, including *Men In Black* (1997), which inspired a reissue of the triangular Ventura of 1957, *City of Angels* (1998), *The Producers* (2005) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001). Unfortunately, some cretin supplied a quartz watch to the wardrobe department for the latter film. But that watch was - to cement the half-century anachronism - a current Khaki, and the company issued a limited-edition *Pearl Harbor* model in the USA with suitably 'GI' packaging.

It's the Khaki line, with its spiritual roots in WW2, which has kept Hamilton firmly in the 'desirable' category for collectors. Conceived as an affordable watch with unmistakable military styling, the Khaki evolved into civilian form as a basic replica of the classic 987A and 987S used by the US Army and US Navy, and its later '6B' descendent employed by the RAF. As definitive a look as the IWC Mark 11, the dial shouts 'military' regardless of the wearer's attire. Khakis and all of the related models added to the basic 'field' version are no-nonsense, affordable, rugged, and - if you don't mind taking liberties with semantics - *manufacture*.

Let's not be coy about this. Hamilton is not a *manufacture* house by virtue of producing its own exclusive movements, but it *is* legitimately



(Above) Hamilton first launched the Electric watch range in 1957 - the most successful of which was the triangular Ventura model pictured in the centre of this ad from the period. They were the first watches to use battery power, appealing to a generation of consumers fascinated by progress and modernisation. Production ceased in 1969.

(Left) Hamilton Khaki Navy Frogman Auto Chrono (E665), with an unusual 'double bubble' magnifying lens arrangement for the 30-second counter and the date.



*manufacture* in the sense that its parent company makes more movements than the rest of the Swiss watch industry combined. Its validity, then, is no less pure than that of Jaguar, which accesses parent company Ford's parts bin; or Bentley, which surely has the odd bit of Audi between its bumpers.

That definition will not satisfy the sort of abject purist who obsessively interprets '*manufacture*' as only meaning 'in-house production of everything,



(Left) Hamilton stopped 98% of its commercial production to focus on military watch production during WW2. Pictured left and right are respective Army and Navy issues of the Hamilton 987A model (the spiritual ancestor of the current Khaki range), whose dials have been overprinted with insignia at a later stage by a collector (Hamilton would never interfere with key dial markings such as small seconds).

down to straps and boxes' (in which case, it's Rolex or nothing). But collectors and enthusiasts with a sense of the playful have all enjoyed the party trick of wearing the Navy GMT or titanium-cased, time-only Khaki - the punchline reward being the looks on the faces of those wearing far more expensive watches with far less credibility. And when you see the movement's finish even on the £300 watches...

**Welcome return**

True story: while in Milan last year, a friend's inherited 18 ct Rolex Datejust broke down. (Note to Rolex: don't worry. The watch is over 40 years old and has since been serviced.) An American who travels a lot, who couldn't be without a watch throughout the weeks before returning Stateside, he figured he'd buy something cheap and cheerful. He saw my Hamilton GMT and two hours later returned wearing one he had bought at Grimoldi's in Piazza Duomo - the coolest watch store in Italy. He now wears the Hamilton whenever he travels abroad, and his watch has the same effect on everyone he shows it to, resulting in a bunch of guys in Florida wearing Hamilton GMTs. On their yachts.

It was only partially true that my friend bought the watch for its American heritage. Hamilton, after all, has no physical base in the USA anymore; name and heritage aside, it's Swiss. But my friend recognised the honesty of the watch, coupled with sublime functionality and handsome styling. He's still chuckling about its bargain pricing.



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So how did the brand disappear from the UK - the most cost-conscious country on the planet? To solve the puzzle, QP turns to Nolan again, who is entrusted with overseeing the brand's return. As this author is both a Yank and a militant Hamilton collector, Nolan showed remarkable 'good grace' in responding to questions delivered in a belligerent, confrontational manner - not usually the norm in the genteel world of watches. Not pulling any punches, the opener was a terse "why did Hamilton pull out of the UK?"

Nolan was disarmingly straight. "At the time, the product was not as good as it is now and all markets were performing poorly. It was decided to concentrate on the US market, the home of the brand, to ensure this market was strong and supported before deciding to re-launch in other markets."

Electing to bring Hamilton back to the UK was "...a joint decision with Switzerland. As the brand was the largest-growing brand within the group last year, it was felt it was the right time to re-launch." Regarding its positioning - a valid question, given that the Swatch Group catalogue covers everything from its eponymous fashion toys to Breguet tourbillons - Nolan said that the company sees the brand as a "very much inspirational and classic timepiece, with a great heritage. It would sit between Tissot and Rado, price-point-wise. Pricing will be competitive for the mid to luxury market, with a new benchmark margin. We realise we need to offer something different in a competitive market."

(Top right) Designed to echo the look of a cockpit display, Hamilton's automatic Khaki Aviation QNE (E340) has dial calibrations that allow the calculation of altitude pressure.

(Above) Two pretty, satin-strapped examples of the Jazzmaster range - stylish watches apparently harking back to Hamilton's dominance throughout the golden age of jazz (left, E280; right, E375). The flower-shaped dial window offers a peek into the ETA 2824 automatic movement.



(Left) This blue 38 mm automatic (E245) is just one of many permutations of Hamilton's military-styled Khaki range, which starts at 33 mm in the basic manual-wind range, goes up to 42 mm in the Auto Chrono collection (centre; E590) and even 44 mm (right; E310).

### Bang for your buck

For Hamilton fans, as well as enthusiasts who simply like the idea of military-style watches, reissued art deco classics and sports watches at sensible prices, the news is terrific. Nolan confirmed that Hamilton "will offer the full collection in the UK. However, the main focus will be on key lines and bestsellers such as the classic Lloyd, Boulton and Khaki."

One suspects that Nolan is being cautious. Without a doubt, the Ventura - as favoured by a certain E. Presley Esq. - will grab sales from all of the tacky futuristic watches adored by fashionistas. The company's no-nonsense chronographs and diving watches might sell on price alone because canny customers will know a bargain when they see it. And what for the collectors with a sharp eye?

They'll gobble up the Khaki GMT Air Race with orange strap and numbers, the fascinating Khaki

Aviation QNE with altitude-pressure calculation (go for the cream dial and WW2-style leather strap) and, funkiest of all, the double-bubble Khaki Frogman Auto Chrono, with two magnifying lenses. They'll buy the accessories kits with spare canvas straps, and hound their retailer for copies of the newspaper-like *Hamilton Tribune* catalogue.

If an analogy exists, it has to be another reborn Yank icon: the current Shelby Ford Mustang. Americans get retro looks, genuine heritage, cool styling, outrageous performance, and a scary 500 bhp - all for the same price as a reasonably equipped Focus. If a watch can deliver 'more bang for the buck', then Hamilton is a sonovagun. ◯

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