



(Above) George Daniels, a vintage car authority as well as a master watchmaker, in his supercharged 4.5 litre Bentley. Amongst other things, Daniels is a past Master of the Clockmakers' Guild in London and past President of the Horological Institute. He is also a noted author on horological subjects. His works include *The Art of Breguet* (published in 3 languages), *English and American Watches*, *The Practical Watch Escapement* and, famously, *Watchmaking* (published in 2 languages). (Photo: G Philip J White)

(Right) George Daniels' celebrated Space Traveller's pocket watch, completed in 1983. Blue steel hands display mean time with inset moonphase and age; gold hands indicate mean solar time with inset date of the month. The equation of time appears at the top, indicating the difference between solar and mean time, which depends on the point of Earth's orbit around the Sun and the pitch of the Earth's axis in relation to the Sun. The watch was inspired by the American landing on the moon.



# Living Legend

⌚ The auction rooms are eerily quiet during the summer months, when the big-spending jet-set are too busy soaking up some sun to be bothered about bidding for paintings, jewels or, indeed, watches. To prevent the galleries of Christie's and Sotheby's looking abandoned, it is therefore traditional to fill the gaps with a few interesting exhibitions. This year, Sotheby's is staging one that no self-respecting horophile can afford to miss - a retrospective of the work of Dr George Daniels, MBE. *Country Life* declared him a 'living national treasure' and others have compared his genius to Breguet's. But to most, Daniels is simply the greatest watchmaker of the 20th century.

## Simon de Burton

This year, George Daniels celebrates his 80th birthday. To mark the occasion, Sotheby's - to whom Daniels has acted as consultant for many years - will stage an unprecedented exhibition showcasing his remarkable 60-year career. It is anticipated that every watch Daniels has made since he completed his first in 1967 will be on show, save one held by the British Museum (probably because the museum's 2006 loan quota has already been reached). This still leaves 25 entirely hand-made pieces, brought together from collections around the world.

The majority are exquisitely finished pocket watches with a combined value in excess of £5m. They include the first watch Daniels made, for his friend and patron Cecil Clutton; two examples of the Daniels 'Space Traveller's' pocket watches which display the equation of time; and another pocket watch created in the late 1970s and sold to the celebrated American collector Esmond Bradley Martin in 1983.

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A pocket watch completed by Daniels in 1978, with prototype Co-Axial tourbillon escapement (the only example of this escapement in a pocket watch, and the only example combined with a tourbillon). It was sent for trials at the Royal Observatory in 1980 where it was proved so accurate that it earned Daniels the prestigious Tompion Medal - only the fifth to be awarded. It was sold to American collector Esmond Bradley Martin in 1983 and following Bradley Martin's death, the watch was auctioned by Sotheby's New York in 2002 for \$317,500.

(Below) Dr Daniels at the bench in his Isle of Man workshop. Sadly, given his age, the watch Daniels is working on now is very likely to be his last. He has received several awards in the past, notably the Gold Medal of Clockmakers' Company (established 1631), the Gold Medal of the British Horological Institute (established 1851), the Gold Medal of City of London Guild and the Kullberg Medal of the Stockholm Watchmakers' Guild.

(Below right) Fifty 'Millennium' wristwatches were made at the turn of the century by Daniels and Roger W Smith, using Omega Co-Axial ébauches. Smith joined Daniels on the Isle of Man in 1998 at the age of 28, when he convinced his hero to take him on, on the strength of his 'No. 2' pocket watch.



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Perhaps the most significant part of the exhibition, however, will be that devoted to the so-called 'Co-Axial' escapement which Dr Daniels began developing during the 1970s. He struggled for more than two decades to convince numerous Swiss watch brands that his revolutionary escapement, designed to run unaffected by the deterioration of its lubricant, was possibly the greatest advance in horology since Thomas Mudge invented the lever escapement 250 years ago.

Eventually his persistence paid off, and Omega, part of the giant Swatch Group, adopted the Co-Axial design. Omega introduced it in select models at the Basel Fair in 1999, and it has now being rolled out as the basis for all high-end mechanical Omegas.





### Watchmaker's watchmaker

The Sotheby's exhibition will include several experimental Co-Axial wristwatches, which Dr Daniels produced during the 1980s in conjunction with leading Swiss manufacturers such as Patek Philippe, Zenith and Rolex. Visitors will also be able to see some of the 50 Daniels series wristwatches that Daniels and his protégé Roger Smith (a fellow Isle of Man inhabitant) cased and dialled using Omega Co-Axial movements - examples of which are now highly collectable.

Numerous drawings and sketches will also be on show at Sotheby's. These, too, are exceptional, because unlike most watchmakers, Dr Daniels prefers to create his working diagrams after completing a watch rather than during its design. Instrumental in staging the exhibition was Andrew Crisford, a Director of Bobinet, an antique watch dealership that has handled the past sales of several Daniels watches.

"We were looking for a way to celebrate George's 80th birthday and a retrospective exhibition seemed to be the perfect answer," Crisford told *QP*. "He has one watch on the bench at the moment, which, because of his age and failing eyesight, will probably be the last one he makes." The exhibition is expected to attract watch aficionados from around the world, and present

on the opening night will be Tina Millar, who established Sotheby's watch department during the late 1960s and ran it for almost 30 years. She has known Dr Daniels throughout that time and applauds the fact that the exhibition offers the opportunity to bring his work to a wider audience.

"When I first met George during the late 1960s I had no idea what a gifted individual he was - I knew him solely as a maker of watches, but soon learned that his first great passion was vintage cars," said Miss Millar. "At the beginning of his career he decided that repairing watches for the trade might finance his love of old cars, which he restored entirely by himself. I was entranced by the speed at which his large hands could dismantle and re-assemble a pocket watch when, 24 hours previously, he was probably repairing the gearbox of one of his Bentleys.

"He is surely the greatest watchmaker of the 20th century. In the past, all watchmaking ateliers had a wide selection of outworkers who manufactured sole components such as cases, dials and wheels, which were then assembled under the eyes of an expert craftsman, tested and sold. George had access to none of these, and he therefore made every component himself down to the last blued screw." ○

(Above) A tourbillon-regulated wristwatch completed in 1992 - only the second wristwatch entirely made by Daniels. Like the first (a chronograph made in 1991 and on display at the Clockmakers' Museum), this watch was made to demonstrate the suitability of the Co-Axial escapement. A small button at 9 o'clock flips the case out to reveal the tourbillon window and date on the caseback.