

Eire and Graces

⌚ Ireland. The name conjures up an abundance of associations: 'The Emerald Isle', Guinness, literature, whiskey, watchmaking... Watchmaking? Until recently, anyone mentioning 'Ireland' and 'watchmaking' in the same breath may have had a few drams too many. But with the arrival of John and Stephen McGonigle and their exquisitely executed tourbillon, such preconceptions are set to change for good. Over a few pints with the brothers, *QP* discovered how two young master watchmakers developed the gracefully Celtic watch entirely themselves, reinventing Irish *haute horlogerie* without once encroaching on twee leprechaun territory.

Ian Skellern

Mr McGonigle Snr was a practical man for whom repairing timepieces was one of many talents. While there was little demand for watchmakers in the Westmeath region of Ireland, he nevertheless advised first son John to study watchmaking, as he believed the micro-mechanical skills learnt would be attractive to large local companies such as Aer Lingus, Hewlett Packard and Intel.

Warily, John heeded the advice; a decision he never regretted. From the moment he touched his first watch, he was hooked. It seemed the watchmaking skills he was developing would actually be used for watchmaking.

A few years later, brother Stephen, younger by seven years, recalls John bringing a watch home to fix. "He set

the watch on the kitchen table and sat down on something low to work at eye level. John was doing something vitally important, yet nobody could see what it was. It looked like magic and I was mesmerised. I went from having absolutely no interest in watchmaking to being fascinated." And so Stephen followed in his brother's footsteps, at the well-renowned, now-defunct Irish/Swiss Institute of Horology in Dublin.

Meanwhile, realising that to operate at the highest level of watchmaking meant working in Switzerland, John enrolled in a WOSTEP course in Neuchâtel. As well as boosting his credentials, this fast-tracked a Swiss working visa. On finishing the course he accepted an offer from Audemars Piguet. John spent two years in



(Top) Stephen McGonigle gives his brother John a little encouragement at the latter's studio in Athlone, Ireland.

(Right) The first McGonigle watch is a beautifully finished tourbillon based on a Christophe Claret ébauche - one that both brothers had extensive experience with during their time at the famous complications studio. The first two watches will be made of platinum.



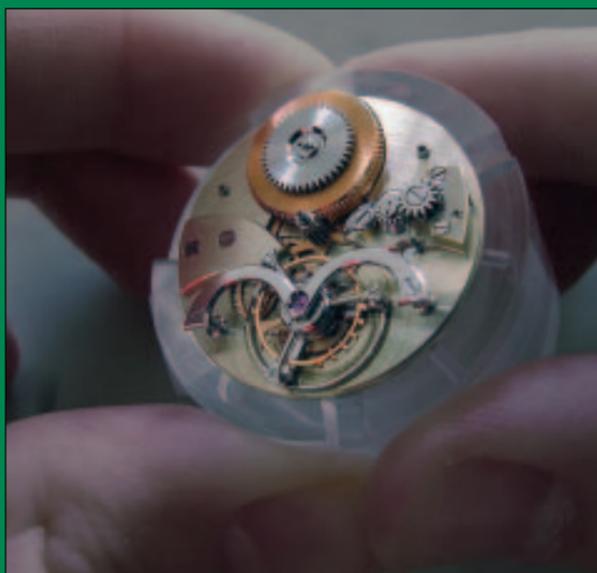
AP's regulation department, before being selected to train on all of the marque's complications - a rare opportunity, as many watchmakers will attest. "All this regulation had been forced upon me, but I learnt an incredible amount. Very few people know how to do proper regulation anymore."

The call of Claret

Despite the invaluable grounding, he was ready for a change after five years at AP. When a friend mentioned possibilities at the renowned Christophe Claret facility, John jumped at the chance: "All my dreams came true at Claret's. I loved cosmopolitan La Chaux-de-Fonds after the insular world of La Vallée de Joux. I thought that this was as good as watchmaking got. They were crazy times - I was often leaving work so late that I was meeting guys starting in the morning! It was high-octane watchmaking," enthuses John, without even a trace of irony.

Two years of this frenetic pace were enough though. Returning to Athlone in 1999, John set up his own atelier and settled down to develop prototypes for Claret and make watches for Claret's clients.

Elsewhere, Stephen was finishing his training and moving to London. There, he started working in restoration for the highly reputed Somlo Antiques, on the recommendation of Peter Speake-Marin - a notable alumnus who even named his Piccadilly watches after Somlo's location. "The skills learnt in high-quality restoration enable a watchmaker to do virtually anything - vital when you're learning how to do prototype work," Stephen explains. "However, the McGonigle watch is more a development of the skills we've gained over the past 10 years working on complications for other customers; sapphire tourbillons, Westminster repeater tourbillons, grand complications..."



(Left) The tourbillon has been given plenty of light and space resulting in a very three-dimensional dial - mainly thanks to the effective use of sapphire for the dial.

(Below) The display caseback reveals sister Frances' engraving over a fine circular grained finish.

(Opposite page, below left) The quality of the movement's finish is exceptional - there are tourbillons and then there are Tourbillons. The movement is hand-wound with a 110-hour power reserve.

(Opposite page, below right) The notches in the crown are characters from an ancient Celtic alphabet called Ogham. The letters here do not spell anything, or so the brothers maintain, but have been chosen for their uniform spacing.

Stephen did not need much coaxing to join his brother in Switzerland when John called with the words, "There could be a position at Claret for you if you are interested..." He too found the experience at Claret priceless: making complications for prestigious clients such as Girard-Perregaux, Franck Muller, Ulysse Nardin and Parmigiani, as well as developing prototypes. Between leaving Claret in 1999 and setting up as an independent in Neuchâtel in 2003, Stephen also worked for Muller in the complications after-sales service department, for Breguet in charge of after-sales service and as Head of Complications for The British Masters. Speedy progress indeed.

The watch

Le Locle, Switzerland, 2003. Attending a meeting of collectors and independent watchmakers organised by American watchmaker Ron de Corte, John and Stephen found themselves in an enjoyable discussion with two American collectors, Tom Bales and Rudy Kranys. When the McGonigles heard the words, "You know, if you ever need [financial] backing to do something on your own, we would like to help."

"Well we didn't have to be asked twice! John and I were always having ideas for watches; here was our chance to make these dreams a reality!"

Initially, the brothers planned to make only two watches (one for each patron), not a brand. However, as John explains, "As we got more and more into it, we quickly found that we were not

happy doing things by halves. With our name on the dial, it had to be super. Stephen and I also discovered - to our mutual surprise - how similar our taste in watches was. Lange & Söhne make watches that we'd both gladly wear; Philippe Dufour we admire for sheer quality; we love the drama and inventiveness of Vianney Halter, and everything made by Derek Pratt [a relatively unsung English master, about to retire]. When it came to the design process, it was surprisingly easy - we get on very well, after all! We are in daily contact by phone, and we managed to meet about once a month either at Stephen's workshop in Neuchâtel, or mine back in Athlone."

The resulting watch has a strong Irish identity, but with a clean, coherent and contemporary design. The eye is immediately drawn to the bold 'M' of the tourbillon bridge and the blued arrow-head hands, before taking in more discreet elements such as the hour numbers, the sapphire dial and the circular graining on the main plate that radiates out from the tourbillon.





(Left) Circular graining on the top-plate radiates out from the tourbillon and is clearly visible through the crystal dial. (Right) The presentation case crafted from ancient bog-oak, and stamped with 'McGonigle Timepieces' in Ogham symbols. Bog-oak is extremely hard wood preserved in Irish Bog and can be up to 5,000 years old.

“We wanted the watch to be identified as Irish, but we were very aware of going too far – we didn’t want leprechauns or four-leaf clovers all over the dial!”

Taking your time to examine the case reveals surprises everywhere. The lugs flare out ever so slightly, the crown tapers in, and the case is imperceptibly oval at 40 mm x 41 mm. The case even has a screw back/screw front case – expensive to make, but technically the best practice.

Deeper and deeper

The McGonigles decided to base their movement on a Claret tourbillon ébauche almost immediately. “We both knew the movement so well, we knew how we would improve or individualise virtually every single piece.” The tourbillon cage has been changed completely from the Claret design; it is lighter, free-sprung and an entire lower arm (with regulator) has been taken out. In keeping with the finest tradition, balancing the tourbillon cage involves removing weight rather than the easier, but detrimental route of adding it.

The McGonigles have made enormous efforts to produce an exceptional finish throughout the entire piece. The circular grain across the plates on both the front and back demand total perfection in execution; even the very slightest error will show. And the quality extends far beyond the visible. Screws have mirror-polished tops, straight-grained sides and anglage around the head that matches the anglage inside the slot – something only another watchmaker is ever likely to see. Wolf-tooth gearing throughout the gear train (possibly unique in a wristwatch) adds to the feeling of no-expense-spared

excellence. “Plates and bridges in German silver was something we always wanted to do too, as we feel that there is too much use of rhodium plating,” says John, justifying yet another unprecedented level of detail.

Turn the watch over and the revelations continue. The Celtic-style script engraved on the mainplate was designed by yet another McGonigle – their sister Frances. The dots and lines around the circumference are characters from an ancient Irish alphabet called Ogham. Ogham symbols also make up the notches in the crown, and spell out ‘McGonigle Timepieces’ on the bog-oak presentation case. (‘McGonigle Watches’ was not an option as there is no W in the Ogham alphabet.) As Stephen explains, “We wanted the watch to be identified as Irish, but we were very aware of going too far – we didn’t want leprechauns or four-leaf clovers all over the dial! It was always more important that the watch looked good rather than looked Irish.”

Each McGonigle tourbillon can be personalised to such a degree that every one is virtually a unique piece. No serial numbers here; instead, the timepiece is simply dated and signed by its maker – either John or Stephen. For many though, the €120,000 (plus VAT) price-tag probably best reflects the incredible amount of meticulous hand-crafting in evidence. “As regards our next project?” Stephen raises one eyebrow gnomically. “We’re not giving away any hints at all at the moment. But *QP*’ll be among the first to know when we’re ready...” ◉