

Quiet Giant



A Longines product might not be the first choice of today's high-end watch aficionado, but when *QP* visited the St Imier headquarters, your correspondent discovered a firm with a glorious horological history which, after 173 years in the business, is fast approaching the production of its 35 millionth timepiece. But for all the big numbers, the place is surprisingly quiet...

Simon de Burton

Knowing that the 30 millionth Longines watch was completed in 2001 and that the company currently produces roughly 500,000 pieces per year, I expected HQ to be a place of manic activity.

I had pictured lines of vast, articulated trucks gliding through the Longines portals before peeling off every which way to deliver watches to the world; I imagined Lowry-esque hoards of workers rushing hither and thither, desperately trying to keep up with the frantic pace of whirring production lines; I anticipated warehouses the size of sports stadia, stacked to the rafters with more watches than could ever be counted.

Instead, we were greeted by that familiar Swiss watchmaking sound - the one of almost total and utter silence, broken only in this instance by the rhythmic tap of

This Longines Evidenza moonphase (£1,450) is driven by an ETA-based L600 auto-winding movement.

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Eckhard Frank's footsteps as he walked calmly towards us. As Executive Vice President of Longines and with that massive output of watches to take care of, Frank could have been forgiven for looking frazzled and bedraggled. But of course, he was cool as your average cucumber, because, it seems Longines has got it taped. It knows its market, it knows its customers and it knows what it is doing. After all, it has been doing it since 1832.

Old hand

"Think about it!" laughs Frank. "How many times have you heard someone say the shape of a Longines Evidenza is 'just like a Franck Muller?'" I have to admit, my answer to this question would probably be "Never," but I understood what Frank was driving at. "The fact is, the Evidenza was in production long before Franck Muller's parents were even born.

"One of the great things we have going for us is our history and our heritage. This factory was built here in 1867 and was known as 'L'Usine Hydraulic de Longines' because it drew water from the Suze river to power the machinery. Longines made its first million watches between 1867 and 1899, and, over the years, the facility has been extended eight times to cope with the ever-increasing production," explains Frank.

"Now we can make a million watches in a year if we need to, as we did between 1998 and 1999 and, even before that, from 1969 to 1970 when the Swiss watch industry was apparently heading for crisis."

Such a capability does seem phenomenal - particularly considering the calm way in which it is executed - although it has to be said that 70% of new Longines watches have quartz movements. Around 95% of pieces, both quartz and mechanical, use ETA movements and, according to Frank, 80% of other components are produced within the holding Swatch Group.

"We have 27 affiliates within the group, which enables us to produce pieces of high quality that are also very attractively priced. Another reason we manage to keep costs down is that our large archive of past designs means we don't have such a large financial outlay on testing and development as many other manufacturers.

"The fact is, Breguet has to do tourbillons because that is its heritage. We remain true to our history too, but our history is not tourbillons and grande complications - it is classic and elegant-looking watches. And that is what we will continue to make."

Market awareness

The bread and butter of Longines is the DolceVita which is its number two seller worldwide and number one seller in the UK. The range encompasses everything from a £3,600 quartz-powered ladies cocktail watch set with 32 diamonds to a couple of chunky men's chronographs in either round or rectangular cases.

At the time of writing, the most expensive Longines you can buy is a special order, rectangular, diamond-pavé model at £18,000. But if you



(Left) Longines' DolceVita collection for women has three sizes. Left to right: ladies' model (£435); mini-size (£885), enhanced with 28 diamonds (0.26 ct); mid-size (£435). All are fitted with a black lacquered leather strap. (Centre) The 35-mm 'Francillon' from Longines' Heritage collection (£1,890) is named after Ernest Francillon - the nephew of founder Auguste Agassiz who consolidated the first Longines factory in 1867. Ever since his first watch in 1867, Francillon engraved a winged hourglass on all Longines movements. (Right) From the Master Collection, the moonphase model features a silver-finished 'barleycorn' dial, setting off the moonphase display at 6 o'clock, chronograph, circular date aperture, 24-hour indicator at 9 o'clock, and a day-and-month display at 12 o'clock. All for a very reasonable £1,350.

prefer to steer clear of bling, an extremely reasonable £3,000 or so buys you the beautifully finished, gold-cased Francillon (named after the firm's founding family) from the 'Heritage' line-up. Honestly, put another name on the dial with the initials 'VC', stand back a few paces and you could almost believe you were looking at the real thing.

The Francillon epitomises the Longines philosophy of sticking with what it knows and capitalising on its past. To this end, the company has kept at least one example of every watch it has developed as well as a paper and computer archive so comprehensive that it requires three full-time employees to oversee it.

"Providing an excellent after-sales service is very important to us," says Frank. "We keep every spare part for every model produced over the previous 15 years. Although there are occasions when we don't have the components required to repair an older piece we will go as far as the customer wants in order to keep a vintage watch working.

"We appreciate how personal a watch really is. It's not like a car or a television - something which you eventually throw

away. Even if they don't wear them, people keep their watches, so we take a great deal of care with our after-sales service because that ensures a long-lasting relationship with our customers."

History today

For the thousands of UK buyers of Longines products, there is a repair facility in Oldham, Lancashire which employs seven watchmakers and promises an average five-day turnaround for most work. Vintage pieces, however, may well end up back at St Imier in a workshop that, on first sight, appears to be a carefully contrived museum piece - not the service centre of such a giant watch producer.

No high-tech electronic lathes in here, just a faded poster of long-retired tennis player Gabriella Sabatini on the door and several watchmakers' benches piled high with the sort of tools that Ernest, Ida and Marie Francillon probably equipped the original factory with when they inaugurated it at Les Longines 137 years ago. Nestling among the debris, you are quite likely to see pieces from the breathtakingly comprehensive in-house

collections, demonstrating how illustrious Longines' history really is.

There is the 1867 Longines that won first prize at the Paris exposition; the watch which accompanied Captain Bernier to the North Pole in 1904, losing just four seconds in 429 days; the first automatic sports timing device from 1910; the timepiece made especially for the Graf Zeppelin which flew around the world in 1929. There are pocket watches commissioned by the national railway companies of Canada, Russia, Turkey and, of course, Switzerland. There are marine chronometers, the dual-time pocket watches, and some beautifully crafted minute repeaters. One area is dedicated to Longines' heritage in sports timing, which encompasses everything from 'marksman's' watches given as prizes in crossbow competitions, to equipment provided to time the Olympics Games and motor racing, in which the firm first became involved in 1933.

You see, as Franck Muller might agree, if it can be done, Longines has probably already done it - just rather more quietly than most, that is all. ○

Further information: 023 8064 6800, www.longines.com

With the inauguration of the new factory in 1867, the production of the first Longines movement, the L20A, commenced. At that time, watches were wound with a key. However, the first Longines watch, pictured here, had a 'lever' movement, wound and set with the crown. Francillon himself went to Paris to present this watch at the 1867 Universal Exhibition and returned with a bronze medal.

