



Ventures in Time

Clive Sinclair's tentative horological in-roads of the '70s and '80s

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1973's Sinclair Radionics Black Watch - not only the watch that time forgot, but also the watch that forgot the time altogether. *QP* talks to Sir Clive, whose enthusiastic and visionary willingness to push technology to the limits meant that failure was almost always a step away. An active pioneer of consumer electronics since the 1960s, there are more than a few aces still up his sleeve, as Sinclair Research once more charts a steady course of success.

When I mentioned to a *QP* colleague that I had been tasked to visit Sir Clive Sinclair, her immediate reaction was to quip: "Where's he living these days? In a bedsit in Catford?"

It seems ironic that Sir Clive - undoubtedly one of the most significant British inventors of the past 30 years, creator of the hugely successful ZX home computer, the first pocket calculator and the pocket TV - is so often wrongly perceived as a failure. It just goes to show: you are only as good as your last Zike. Or C5. Or digital watch.

True, those are three ideas which he might have been better off without, but anyone with an IQ of 159 who ran a company worth close to £100 million back in the early 1980s is likely to be living rather comfortably as he enters his 65th year. And Sir Clive certainly is. In not one, but two luxury apartments in central London. So central, in fact, that he has the Admiral Lord Nelson as a next-door neighbour. Not a pub mind, but a statue on top of a rather large column.

My mission was to discover Sir Clive's current take on the wristwatch scene and to find out whether or not





In 1979 Clive Sinclair established a new company, Sinclair Research. Launched in February 1980, its first product, the Sinclair ZX80, was the first computer worldwide to sell for less than £100. 1982 saw the launch of the more advanced colour ZX Spectrum, pictured here. In 1983, 12,000 were selling per week, Sinclair was named Guardian Young Businessman of the Year and was knighted in the Queen's Birthday Honours.

he might consider dabbling in some light horology as a follow-up to his infamous Black Watch project of the mid-70s. It was such a disaster that it put Sir Clive's previously thriving business out of the black, so to speak, and into the red. It is obviously with some trepidation that I rang his doorbell, fully intending to raise the potentially thorny subject of watches.

Fascination

Bald, bespectacled and beaming, he greets me enthusiastically before immediately sitting down at a large meeting table to peruse the copy of *QP* I had brought him. It is Issue 10, with Michel Parmigiani's Bugatti watch on the cover. Clearly fascinated, he casts aside his glasses and draws the magazine to within an inch of his face to peer closely at the photographs of the horizontal movement.

"Marvellous isn't it? I love mechanical watches, they are so fascinating," enthuses Sir Clive. "I keep thinking of buying one, you know. I saw a lovely old Jaeger-LeCoultre in a shop the other day, but of course I'm far too mean to buy things so I'd never pay for something like that." This explains the chunky, plastic LCD chronograph that domi-

nates his left wrist, bought several years ago for a parsimonious £9.99.

For those who do not remember, the Black Watch was at the vanguard of digital watch development. Launched in 1975, its name was unusually frivolous for a Sinclair product, in that it alluded to the moulded black plastic case of the watch while simultaneously making a reference to the noble Scottish regiment.

The Black Watch could be bought in kit form for £17.95 (the equivalent nowadays to around £100) or completed and ready to wear for seven pounds more. It had a five-digit LED display activated by two panels beneath the face, which gradually dimmed to save power. A more expensive version of the Black Watch – confusingly coloured grey – also featured a date function but otherwise looked the same, styled, according to contemporary ads, "...in the cool prestige Sinclair fashion – no knobs, no buttons, no flash."

Intrinsically flawed

The advertisements further claimed that the kit version could be "easily built by anyone who could use a soldering iron in an

evening's straightforward assembly." So far, so good. But like so many pioneering objects, the Black Watch was a great idea that did not really work. The so-called "I Squared L" (I2L) electronic chip was adversely affected by static electricity from the nylon clothing so popular at the time; a problem that caused its two hearing-aid batteries to run down within hours, rather than the 10 days they were supposed to last. What is more, despite claims of accuracy to within a second per day, the Black Watch would gain or lose time dramatically according to the ambient temperature.

The most frustrated customers, however, were probably the ones who went for the kit option, which was not so straightforward to assemble as it first appeared. Even the boffins at *Practical Wireless* magazine (for whom Sinclair worked when he was 19) had to use clothes pegs, drawing pins and wire to get it all together. And it took four days to set the time.

All this and more made the Black Watch a resounding failure. In 1976, following 15 years of strong turnover and profit growth, Sinclair Radionics sustained losses



Late 1975 saw the introduction of Sinclair Research's ill-fated 'Black Watch', which used new integrated circuit technology. But in 1976, following 15 years of strong turnover and profit growth, Sinclair Radionics sustained losses due to difficulties with the supplies of chips for the Black Watch. Accordingly, additional funding was sought from the then National Enterprise Board to support the final stages of the pocket TV project.

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Further attempts

Other Sinclair assaults on the world of horology included the Microquartz car clock of 1977. Rather than throwing away the unwanted circuitry from Black Watch stockpiles, Sinclair instead opted to re-use it in this different format. The Microquartz worked in exactly the same way as the ill-fated watch, but by dispensing with the Black Watch case, many of the problems were resolved.

In 1985, the FM Wristwatch Radio was Sinclair's second attempt at both a wristwatch and a wrist-radio (the first of the latter was 1964's 'Transrista' – a 'Micro-6' radio with a nylon strap). An LCD watch with built-in radio, its production run was ended quickly by the financial crisis that landed Sinclair into the lap of Amstrad. It stayed on the market for only a matter of weeks. So what are the chances of seeing a Sinclair-branded wristwatch for the 21st century? Is there a Black Watch II waiting in the wings to take the horological world by storm?

"There is very little likelihood that I would ever try and design another watch," states Sir Clive. "I am obviously not in a position to make a mechanical one, nor do I have the interest. And anyway, just about everything that can be done *has* been done.

"The one thing left is to do an atomic watch and I believe somebody in America has managed to reduce



the size of an atomic clock to make it possible. It's all rather irrelevant though, as I don't think people are really that concerned with accuracy."

Back in the black

Despite the massive commercial success reaped by the Sinclair ZX and ZX Spectrum home computer systems during the early 1980s, it is perhaps not surprising that Sir Clive now prefers to spend his time developing eco-friendly two-wheelers instead of peddling time-pieces and other electronic white elephants. His current project is an ingenious-sounding folding electric bicycle, about which he was rather cagey. But I would not mind betting that this is the 'C6' he alluded to about a year ago.

His Zike electric bicycle of the early '90s enjoyed marginal success, as did the 15,000-selling ZETA power pack, and its successor ZETA III, which converted a normal bike to an electrically assisted one. Sinclair Research now touts two principal products: the wheelchair drive unit and the Z1 AM radio earpiece launched in 1999, 32 years on from Sinclair's pivotal success with the smaller-than-a-matchbox Micromatic radio. It seems Sir Clive is back to what he's good at. ○

Sinclair launched the FM Wristwatch Radio at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show in January 1985. The top section was the tuner, the middle section was the speaker and volume control and the bottom was the watch itself. The aerial was built into the strap.

In 1972, Sinclair launched the 'Executive', the world's first truly pocket calculator – initial price a then-revolutionary £79. It won numerous design awards and earned over £2.5m in export revenue.



Further information: www.sinclair-research.co.uk