

Facelift

Dunhill gets a much-needed make-over from an unexpected corner

James Gurney



Brought in to breathe new life into a collection that lacked that elusive X-factor, Tom Bolt relished the chance to be a real watch guru. As he explains to *QP*, his impromptu recruitment was a bold step for Dunhill, but probably a chance the British stalwart needed to take. Bolt's radical update proves that the gamble paid off.

The last thing that Tom Bolt had on his mind when he met with Dunhill's new CEO, Simon Critchell, was starting a revolution. Far from turning perceptions of Dunhill upside-down, Tom Bolt had arrived in Watch Guru guise to talk about vintage Dunhill pieces. Fatefully, the conversation turned to the state of Dunhill's contemporary collections and the realisation dawned on the Dunhill CEO that Bolt just might be the person to provide the infusion of character and originality that Critchell knew Dunhill's watches needed.

As Tom Bolt has it, he suddenly found himself presenting his views and analysis in the cavernous

boardroom at Richemont's headquarters in Switzerland (Richemont being Dunhill's parent company). It was at this point that he realised the scale of the commitment he was about to make and the seriousness of the task ahead – revitalising the watches of one of England's most globally recognised brands. Dunhill was about to become part of his life.

Understanding the brand

But what was the problem that Bolt saw that no one else had? As he puts it, "Essentially nothing. There was nothing actively wrong as a whole, but there was almost nothing at Dunhill that had that 'X-factor' that Dunhill should be about."



Computer rendering of Dunhill's SP30 'Bobby Finder' chronograph – the result of Tom Bolt's radical new vision for the British institution.



The inspiration behind the SP30's eye-like subdial arrangement was Alfred Dunhill's 'Bobby Finders' binoculars from 1903 – launched out of spite for his infamous speeding fine.

"The answer was there however; just think of the X-Centric from 2003 – all that Alfred Dunhill was: ambitious, eccentric and very English." While it might not have been exactly a stroke of genius to realise that Dunhill watches should match the aspirations of the original Dunhill, Bolt realised that this could only happen by understanding what those aspirations really were. "Dunhill should and could be more ambitious."

With his experience in dealing with and within watches, Tom Bolt understood what a pure designer might not: that people need to see watches that were both authentically Dunhill and were impressive in themselves. Bolt is, in fact, quite passionate on the subject of designers parachuted in "to do watches for a bit." He believes that experience in the world of watches "confers a sort of membership that both validates the emerging design but makes sure the design is rooted in the craft." Quite a conservative vision for the originator of such an offbeat concept as the new CityFighter!

Either way, the headline pieces shown at Geneva this year caught the attention of journalists and buyers alike. Bolt was keen to stress that these eye-catchers have an important secondary role, which is to shed a more intriguing light on the whole collection; even the more conservative items – the update of which actually took up far more time than the blockbusters such as the SP30 'Bobby Finder'. This was particularly true of the Facet watches – long a mainstay of the Dunhill collection – and the D-Type; both of which he felt lacked the X-factor that separates an ordinary design from a special one.

Up to speed

Nevertheless, the CityFighter and the SP30 are the emblems of Dunhill's future direction. The SP30 Bobby Finder harks back to the Bobby Finder binoculars Alfred Dunhill introduced in 1903 to alert drivers to the presence of over-eager policemen, following his infamous speeding fine ("Will spot a policeman at half a mile, even if disguised as a respectable man" runs the ad copy of the day).



The keener motorists will recognise 'SP30' as the official term for a speeding penalty.

The watch itself is, however, an intriguing enough design in its own right. A twin-counter chronograph with an elegant, uncluttered dial, it has a rotating bezel that causes the crown and chrono buttons to retract behind a sliding cover when turned.

The difficulty in engineering an achievable solution meant this was a feature that tested the ingenuity of both Dunhill's Swiss watchmakers and Bolt himself, to say nothing of their diplomatic skills. Quite apart from creating a mount that moves the chronograph buttons further into the case without interfering with the function of the chronograph, the sliding case element initially suffered problems with grit getting caught and stuck in

the gap between slider and case. It is testament to the faith placed in Bolt and his designs that Dunhill have devoted over a year's worth of work in this one element – a heavy investment to place in a feature that is more statement than utilitarian improvement.

One step beyond

The CityFighter and CityTamer are even more radical, given that they stem from one of the mainstays of Dunhill's watch collections over the last few years – the Facet watch. Previously treated as a sort of modern dress watch by Dunhill, it has

(From left to right) The SP30 chronograph's pushers are retracted and covered with a protective slide by twisting the bezel clockwise. This year's new X-Centric model features an industry first: the 'gear stick' crown at 6 o'clock, which unscrews and slides down into the adjusting position. The Dunhill CityFighter features a two-piece faceted case very similar to the CityTamer, but comes with a clip-on shield with integrated dial magnifying glass, for 'ultimate urban protection'.



Tom Bolt's reinterpretation of Dunhill's Facet time-piece, the CityTamer. The two-part case design was intended to mirror the sculpted bonnet of a performance car.

appeared in various guises, but always with a touch of understatement. Bolt's contribution here is simple: attitude. From the screwed-down case front with its mix of metals cheekily recalling the Rolex Princes of the 1930s, to the rather disreputable bulldog image engraved on the case back, the CityTamer could hardly be more different from its predecessors, yet essentially the same watch. The CityFighter takes the process a step further with its strange 'over-case' shield that fits over the basic watch with a magnification window set into it.

At first sight, it appears that Bolt was simply out to see how far Dunhill could be pushed. Indeed, it was

tempting to ask whether he discovered the limits of its tolerance. But this misses the point entirely. Simon Critchell clearly saw both the problem and the means to the solution. He trusted Bolt's vision and was duly repaid. Tom Bolt understood the nature of this trust and the responsibility that goes with it, even before the crucial meeting at the Richemont Group. It might be contentious to say it, but Bolt has clearly proved his point about watch design. As he says himself, "My experience and knowledge gave me a membership, an understanding, that meant I knew the product before knowing the design. This is why I believe the watches have personality." ◉