

Deals on Wheels

Passion runs high on the watch fair circuit

Claire Adler



There is a watch underworld few know about. But for those in the know, some of the most serious watch dealing in the business goes on at an unearthly hour on a Sunday morning. The setting is unapologetically unglamorous, but the devotion is unparalleled. *QP* goes bargain hunting at one of the UK's many clock and watch fairs.

Ten times a year, Clock and Watch Fairs are held in some rather strange places: the Midland National Motorcycle Museum and Bracknell Sports and Leisure Centre, to be precise.

The glamour is there; it's just all about recognising it. There are even a couple of H-list celebrities if you look hard enough. At a recent fair I attended, Patrick Allen (the actor who did a voiceover on Frankie Goes to Hollywood's 'Two Tribes' soundtrack in the 1980s and who later appeared on a Barratt Houses ad) was spotted. And the snooker player Tony Meo was also

seen browsing through the rich gamut of timepieces on offer.

From all corners

If you know what you're looking for, these fairs can be something of a goldmine. They are unlike regular antique fairs – eighty per cent of the items are unrestored and many are bought by dealers who restore them and sell them on at a profit. But the fairs are also popular with private collectors and enthusiasts. In other words, this is where the watch geeks hang out and they are loving every minute.



(Left) Jonathan Scatchard, founder of www.vintageheuer.com, at a recent Clock and Watch Fair. (Right) A hobby that got out of hand – John Marshall from East Yorkshire, a retired greeting card company sales manager.



"Six per cent of visitors to the Bracknell fairs and four per cent at the Midland fairs are from overseas. They come from the US, Germany, France, Israel, Austria, Italy and the Far East. There used to be more American visitors but since 9/11 that has unfortunately changed," says Carl Barnes who, together with Paul Dungate and his wife Liz, has been organising the fairs since 1988. "We started out with 40 stands, but today these fairs are the biggest of their kind in the UK and possibly in Europe. Many Dutch visitors plan their holidays to be able to attend the fairs and one lady comes over from France to every one," says Dungate. Despite the strength of the pound, the Japanese keep coming back. IWC and Seiko black-dialled military wristwatches from the

Second World War are favourites with the Japanese – particularly the dealers. The supply of military watches has virtually dried up from the MOD and they are not being auctioned off anymore.

The early bird...

It is generally acknowledged that the some of the best deals are struck between watch dealers in the car park before the fair officially opens. "The Europeans are always after a good bargain," says Dungate. As a result, some watches might be sold and re-sold more than once in the course of a day. The watch fairs take place between 9am and 3pm and each one now attracts approximately 1,000 visitors. Given that the cost of renting a stall is little more than £50

it is no surprise that there is a queue of people waiting to be stallholders. Most traders arrive at around 8am. When I arrived at 9am the place was brimming with people and a steady flow of visitors continued to pour in throughout the morning. On buying habits at the Watch and Clock Fairs, Dungate says: "Men are too mean to buy a watch for their wives. I never sell a ladies watch till after 1pm."

Strikingly and rather refreshingly, the watch lovers who attend the fairs are not status seekers or typical buyers of luxury. They are watch aficionados and they are prepared to part with serious money for their passion. "Watches are works of art. I love looking at the movements and I am very interested in the craft of watch-making, the history and prestige of brands like Audemars Piguet and Vacheron Constantin," says Alex Georgiou, from Barnet, who has brought along his love of watches and two friendly pals.

Stripped of the gloss of a luxury retail environment, buying a watch here is more about striking a deal and often involves good old-fashioned haggling, swaps or part exchanges. Jonathan Scatchard, a stallholder who in 2003 established the first ever website to sell vintage TAG Heuers (www.vintageheuer.com), recalls his unforgettable "bacon sandwich deal". "A dear customer of mine, Harry, came along to the fair once and I was after a Heuer he had – he wanted £200 for it but I thought that was too much. Harry is a regular extra on *Coronation Street* and also plays the harmonica on cruise ships. I thought he was joking when he offered me the watch for £100 plus breakfast," says Scatchard. But the deal was done.

So engrossed were most of the fair's attendees in inspecting the watches, they hardly noticed the people climbing the walls. The

Further information: Bracknell Clock & Watch Fair, Nov 28th, Midland Clock & Watch Fair, Oct 24th, Contact Carl Barnes on 01895 834 694.



The variety on offer at the shows is endless. Nowhere else will you find such disparate and unusual watches lumped together, from vintage '40s and '50s models, to a modern-day Cartier Roadster!

fair I attended was in Uxbridge University's gym, although this venue is not being used at present. At one end of a buzzing hall filled with watch stands and visitors, a small group of amateur climbers were scrambling their way up a special climbing wall and then, rather alarmingly, appeared to be jumping down again. I can only imagine what I will find at the next Clock and Watch Fair at the Midland National Motorcycle Museum. ○