

# Deep Roots

Glashütte Original weathers the Cold War and quartz revolution as Dresden's watchmaking mainstay

Timothy Treffry

 The village of Glashütte has a reputation as a German La Chaux-de-Fonds. With the final remnants of the DDR being swept away, QP took a tour of Glashütte Original's newly refurbished factory and found an enormously innovative watch company with a keen sense of community.

Glashütte Original 'Senator Perpetual Calendar'. The red dot indicates a leap year. Pushers on the rim permit rapid adjustment if the watch is allowed to stop. In a steel case this 'QP' costs £7,970.



(Above) The PanoMaticChrono, launched at BASELWORLD in April, is a limited-edition, self-winding chronograph with large date and flyback function. The raised chapter ring for the chronograph's seconds partially obscures the other dials but, like other Glashütte Original watches, makes a strong design statement.

(Above right) The column-wheel calibre 95 chronograph movement used in the PanoMaticChrono is superbly hand-finished. Note the sharply defined edges of the cocks and plates and the flat graining and precisely angled edges of the steel work.



UK watch enthusiasts looking for that special something now have a wider choice; Glashütte Original is finally being marketed over here. Although part of the Swatch Group, Glashütte Original is a quintessentially German brand. It is not just a name on a dial; it is a manufacturer. It even makes its own screws.

The Glashütte Original company was acquired by the Swatch Group four years ago to become one of its prestige brands, alongside the likes of Blancpain and Breguet. The watches take their name from the small German town where they are made, about 40 km south-east of Dresden. QP visited the factory soon after the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, a few months before the same anniversary of Dresden's destruction by allied bombing in February 1945 and the less-widely reported devastation of Glashütte in the closing hours of World War II.

### Ups and downs

Some watch brands claim a fantasy history, practically dating back to biblical times. But Glashütte Original has a direct and continuous connection to the start of watchmaking in Glashütte in 1845. The industrial revolution that began in England a century earlier was being taken up enthusiastically by German entrepreneurs who had much in common with those in the English Midlands or American North East. A watchmakers' guild had been established in Dresden since 1668 and its members flourished as the city became the administrative and commercial capital of a thriving Central European empire.

The story of Ferdinand Lange's role in creating a watch industry is widely known, as were the economic ups and downs. But the biggest upset to the Glashütte story was to come after World War II, when the so-called Iron Curtain descended across Europe



(Left) Great care is taken in polishing the angles of the steel components. The part being polished is mounted on special holder and the edges are pressed firmly against a rapidly rotating tungsten carbide lap.  
(Right) The atrium of Glashütte Original's newly refurbished factory makes an ideal concert venue for the town.



and the small town became part of the DDR. All its watchmaking enterprises were nationalised as a people's cooperative – the VEB Glashütter Uhrenbetriebe (GUB). With a captive market in the Warsaw Pact, the GUB continued to produce both mechanical and quartz watches throughout the 1970s, when the Swiss industry was almost wiped out by the quartz revolution (the word 'decimated' is often used but it was actually much worse than that). Although the output of the GUB was rather utilitarian throughout the DDR's existence, the watchmaking skills and industrial capacity developed over 100 years were nonetheless retained.

### Another chance

After the collapse of Soviet power and German reunification in 1989, GUB watches might have become as much a quaint historical oddity as the Trabant car, had it not been for the determination of Bavarian entrepreneur Heinz W Pfeifer.

A dedicated watch collector, Pfeifer sold his successful medical electronics firm and, in partnership with the owner of a West German jewellery chain, bought almost the entire GUB from the state privatisation board. Pfeifer realised that the only viable future lay in

switching production to high-quality, hand-finished watches for the serious end of the market. His first limited-edition (25) 'Julius Assmann', with flying tourbillon and perpetual calendar, sold out instantly at DM290,000 (£100,000) each and established the credentials of his 'Glashütte Original' brand.

The 'Senator Perpetual Calendar', undoubtedly the most pleasing design available for this type of watch, was voted 'Watch of the Year' by German enthusiasts in 2000 and the extraordinary 'PanoRetroGraph' gained the same accolade the following year. To have 'Made in Germany' on the dial gave these watches special patriotic appeal.

### Shrewd move

By this time it was clear that mechanical watchmaking had not only survived but, especially at the luxury end, was highly profitable. A number of companies changed hands at high prices as manufacturers of other luxury goods sought acquisitions. Pfeifer realised that massive amounts of capital were required if Glashütte Original was to gain its rightful place in the market. Rather than be linked to a group "whose core competence might be fashion, tobacco or perfume,"

Pfeifer made a tentative approach to the Swatch Group. Nicolas G Hayek immediately recognised a kindred spirit in this self-made Bavarian engineer-cum-entrepreneur. He was also impressed with the local work force and its watchmaking tradition and agreed to buy the company. Pfeifer moved into the upper echelon of Swatch Group management and Dr Frank Müller (not to be confused with the troubled founder of the Swiss watch company bearing that name) became President of Glashütte Original.

As part of the deal, the 1960s VEB building was completely transformed and the central courtyard has become a galleried atrium. Astonishingly, the work was completed in 18 months without interruption of production; the original building was sufficiently spacious for areas to be vacated while being worked on. The 'new' building had its official opening in August 2002, a few days before the flood that devastated Dresden. Unfortunately, Glashütte was also affected, resulting in nearly a foot of water and mud deluging the machine rooms on the ground floor. Given the company's inimitable history, the small matter of some unwelcome water was hardly ever likely to set progress back however.



(Above) The movement of the PanoRetroGraph shows the features of a top Glashütte Original watch. The steel work has a flat, grained finish achieved on a tin block in the traditional way. Edges are angled and crisp, the screws are blue, and the jewels are set in gold chatons. This permits very precise adjustment of the gears' meshing during assembly, giving a very smooth delivery of power to the escapement. The raised peripheral ring is the gong, struck at the end of countdown timing.

(Left) The 'PanoRetroGraph' is a unique chronograph that also works in countdown mode and strikes on a gong when a set time has expired. German enthusiasts' 'Watch of the Year' 2001. Available in 24 ct. gold at £24,630.

### Re-established

Müller says that in retrospect the period behind the Iron Curtain can be seen as one of Glashütte Original's great strengths; cut off from suppliers in the West, the VEB had to be almost completely self-contained. Moreover, in a 'command economy' it was able to maintain the facilities and skills for the production of mechanical watches while training and development in Switzerland almost completely ceased.

Naturally, Müller, whose PhD is in marketing communications, is mainly involved in maintaining and developing the heritage of the brand and selling the watches, but he is also alive to the principles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century entrepreneurs who developed the German watchmaking industry in Glashütte. The new premises house a school,

started by his predecessor, with 12 students on the 3-year watchmaking course and three on a 3½-year toolmaking course.

Rather than using 'brand ambassadors' to promote Glashütte Original, Müller has established an international classical music prize, the 'Saeculum', and a programme of concerts associated with the Dresden Music Festival. It transpired that the new atrium possesses excellent acoustics and provides a fine venue. Literary evenings are also planned. Many of those working in Glashütte choose to commute from Dresden, but it is hoped that providing better nightlife will make the town a more attractive place to live. Unemployment rates in the former DDR still exceed the German average, so the watch industry retains the 19<sup>th</sup> century role of offering skilled employment and, through Glashütte Original itself, providing cultural activities as well. Proof indeed that where heritage and reputation are core to a company's philosophy, there will always be more to fine watchmaking than merely making watches. ○

**Further information:** Glashütte Original UK, 112 Southampton Road, Eastleigh, Hampshire SO50 5PB.  
Tel: 023 8064 6841, [www.glashuette-original.com](http://www.glashuette-original.com)