

Mechanisms For the Modern

An eclectic past reveals the blueprint for Dunhill's future

Nicholas Foulkes



Chatting with Simon Critchell, the worldwide president of Dunhill, is a little like finding yourself in a rather smart travel agent. His large corner office overlooking Jermyn Street is strewn with all manner of prototypes, from cigar lighters to luggage to leather jackets. Yet, just as Critchell is about to pick up a prototype of, say, a hairbrush or a wristwatch, and use it to explain some particularly intricate facet of the luxury goods business, the phone rings and someone attempts to make an appointment to see him. "Tomorrow? Sorry, I have to go to Paris. Friday? I'm going to be in Hong Kong. Week after next? You are not going to believe this – I am going to the US!"



It seems that he is taking the job of helmsman of one of Britain's premier luxury goods brands quite seriously. But then Critchell is no stranger to luxury goods and large territories: he is the man who reshaped Cartier's North American business and then went on to run it for 10 highly successful years. Having sorted out Cartier in the US, he soon found that he was missing London and not spending nearly enough time at his villa on Cap d'Antibes. It was whilst thinking of what he might do to return to Europe that the job of running Dunhill, who are owned by the same group as Cartier, came along.

There is an air of distinction about the Lady Motorist who is equipped at Dunhill's.

The quality of the material is different—clever cutters and expert tailors are responsible for the style which distinguishes Dunhill's productions.

This statement is made for the information of the uninitiated. The motorist of experience already knows the virtues of Dunhill's Motorities.



Alfred Dunhill was keen to pitch his Motorities products to all types of motorist.

"I had thought about Alfred Dunhill before – after all I am English, but I have lived abroad for about 20 years. Then it struck me that for at least two generations, Dunhill have been an international brand."

One might say that Dunhill were the personification of the Englishman abroad. And much like the image of the quintessential Englishman, Dunhill have changed rather a lot since the beginning of the last century, when Alfred Dunhill established a business in London called Dunhill's Motorities.

The inventor

Alfred Dunhill was a late 19th and early 20th century genius of the kind only Britain could create – his invention of the concept of Motorities is testament to that. Every motorist, he thought, should have his priorities. He then put the two words together and came up with what I am sure some business school-educated luxury goods spreadsheet jockey would call a

products strategy, and what Alfred Dunhill probably called a jolly wheeze.

In those days, motoring was a minority pastime – the sort of thing practised by wealthy playboys, adventurous aristocrats and rich eccentrics. And Dunhill created everything from motoring coats to musical motor horns, from Dunhill's Bobby Finders (an early form of speed-trap detector) to a specially designed pipe for the convenience of the motorist and the billiard player, and the Neptune collapsible bath – for those impromptu roadside ablutions so beloved of the early 20th century road user – all intended to separate the Edwardian boy-racer from his guineas. Dunhill could, and did, sell some of the craziest paraphernalia ever to find itself on offer in the West End. In the summer of 1902, Dunhill opened what would now be known as a flagship store on fashionable Conduit Street. Such was its success that another followed quickly in 1904. He was a true student of luxury; he understood that some



The early Dunhill timepieces were typically functional, tending to include tachymeter and chronograph functions.

people would always be willing to pay that bit extra for the very best quality. "Compared with quality," he said, "price is relatively unimportant."

"Dunhill were selling timepieces as early ago as 1903," explains Critchell. Typical of Alfred Dunhill's ingenuity was the remarkable item known as Dunhill's Speedograph. This highly specialised timekeeping instrument offered its user a sophisticated fly-back chronograph, the seconds hand of which made two revolutions per minute, thus enabling the user to count off fractions as small as a tenth of a second, while another feature enabled the user to read in miles per hour the speed of an object being timed. Such accuracy and functionality would be remarkable on a mechanical timepiece today... not least in 1903.

However, levity and a sense of playfulness were parts of the Dunhill horological offer that were just as important as the practicality and functionality offered by timepieces such as the Speedograph. For particularly demanding clients, Alfred Dunhill was prepared to create uniquely whimsical objects. For instance, during the 1920s, one imaginative South American

customer, Santiago Soulas, commissioned a gold lighter and asked Dunhill to incorporate a small timepiece in one side, allowing him to sneak discreet glances at the time.

In the novelty-hungry, gadget-crazy art deco years, the watch-lighter, as it became known, was *le dernier cri*. This craze for ingenious objects that packed as much function into as small a space as possible reached its apotheosis in the early 1930s, with such items as the Dunhill Compendium case. A masterpiece even by Dunhill standards, this cigarette case had a built-in lighter, telescopic pencil, swizzle stick, postage-stamp holder, concealed ivory writing tablet, ruler, cigar piercer, magnifying glass and timepiece... all of which fitted comfortably into the breast pocket of one's Savile Row suit.

Then and now

It was this approach that accounted for Dunhill's success with a loyal and distinguished customer base of fashion leaders, among whom was the young Prince of Wales, later the Duke of Windsor, who granted Dunhill his Royal Warrant. Among the many famous Dunhill customers of the time were Douglas Fairbanks, PG Wodehouse, Ivor Novello, Somerset Maugham,

It is very hard to find a Dunhill product that does not feature extra functionality in some shape or form.



Rudolf Valentino and Noel Coward. Royalty wanted to snatch a bit of Dunhill style too: trend-setting monarch Don Alfonso of Spain used to swing by Dunhill to buy lighters with watches set in them; King Olaf of Norway, George VI, his brother the Duke of Kent, the King of Siam, fun-loving King Farouk of Egypt, Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands and even the Maharaja of Cooch Behar were proud to count themselves as Dunhill customers.

However, in more recent years, Dunhill and their timepieces have failed to achieve the same level of ingenuity that they reached in earlier times and have instead pandered to the (how does one put this delicately?) “accessory-oriented” end of the watch market; a trend Critchell is keen to reverse.

“My experience at Cartier has been useful, because the USA is a big and important watch market. While I was there, we made very significant inroads for Cartier through reorganising the business and doing a lot with the more special pieces. The experience was a very gratifying one from the point of view that it teaches you that if you apply rules of exclusivity, the market responds; the quality-watch market is not a business of breadth but of focus.

“This year is particularly important for Dunhill as we are going back to the uniquely Dunhill tradition of watchmaking. The company have had a real wristwatch business and we are serious

about watches. We are not a fashion brand, we are not in the fashion-watch business; we are in the real-watch business. Dunhill are not a sports-watch maker, and are not in the big, gigantic watch market making 50-mm cases and that sort of thing. Dunhill are into design and interesting functions, and that is what we are going to be building into watches in the future.”

Indeed, this year’s SIHH saw the debut of the most interesting and desirable Dunhill watch for many years: the X-Centric, which, with its off-centre dial in a pebble-like case of steel or 18-ct. gold, open back and decorative engraving, makes a striking statement. Nor is its appeal merely aesthetic; it is also technically different, with its off-centre movement yet “standard” crown position at 3 o’clock, and a specially designed “gearbox” unique to the X-Centric, including three gear wheels to transmit power from the winding crown to the movement. A patent is currently being applied for.

“People said to me: ‘You cannot have the crown there!’ But you can, and we have – and it is this sort of thing that gives a Dunhill watch its character. We decided that the design itself was so strong and so “Dunhill” that we focussed the majority of our efforts on it this year and we have some great new ideas for the next.”

Although Critchell is coy about his plans for the future, he is at least adhering to the Dunhill motto “*aliquid semper noviis ex Dunhill*” (there is always something new at Dunhill). The only prob-



A pocket watch-style volt-meter, complete with leather case and wire, “for testing accumulators”.

lem was that in recent years the only new thing about Dunhill seemed to be the bosses; they kept changing with a bewildering rapidity. “I felt that the brand had lost its way a little bit,” says Critchell, choosing his words carefully, adding that in recent years “it had done too much too quickly.” Instead, it is the founder’s views on quality and luxury that Critchell is reintroducing to Dunhill.

“It is an old, well-established brand, with different connotations for different generations. A lot of the older generation think of us as a fine old English tobacco brand, even though the business has not been involved in the tobacco trade for many years.”

And while Critchell’s predecessors had been obsessed with getting the brand perceived as “trendy”, “hip” and part of the “cool Britannia” culture of the late 1990s, Critchell’s style is rather more understated and grown-up: less *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and more *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Critchell is more concerned with restoring the reputation for quality and innovation that made Dunhill famous. “For me, the most interesting part of the company’s history is this early phase when things were on the move and this crazy inventor Alfred Dunhill was coming up with a hundred new ideas a day.” In a bid to maintain a steady supply of crazy inventions and innovations, Critchell has assembled a creative team that is luxury’s answer to the Addams Family.

The creative network

Over the last couple of years since Critchell arrived, the Dunhill HQ on Jermyn Street has become a stylish retreat for eccentrics from all over the world. At the moment Critchell is giving asylum to a man who is researching a history of the lighter. It is such a gargantuan task that the first man engaged on this book died, as one might say, on the job. To ensure that Dunhill are still full of surprises, Critchell is considering opening a hair salon superintended by the smart set’s favourite coiffeur Brent Pankhurst. Moreover, Critchell has employed young man about London and New York, Ben Elliot, nephew of Camilla Parker Bowles, to act as Dunhill’s social whipper-in and master of ceremonies.

Amongst Critchell’s closest henchmen is the mercurial Yann DeBelle De Montby – a man so French he makes Gerard Depardieu look like Vinnie Jones. He has come up with such far-fetched schemes as putting staff at Dunhill into leather aprons (subsequently abandoned, doubtless to the relief of the Dunhill sales assistants) and introducing the must-have to end all must-haves: a ravishing pocket pepper mill made of solid silver. Apparently, the first one to be sold was in Paris to a member of the Hermes family.

And then there is Italian maestro Giampiero Bodino, a man who sold two of his Harley Davidsons to buy himself a diamond only slightly smaller than the Ritz and who has created such



Two of Giampiero Bodino's Dunhill creations: the X-Centric (left), with its off-centre dial and crown at 3 o'clock, and the Facet Dunhillion City Diver (right), a striking mix of sports watch and cocktail watch.

future classics as a range of remarkable leather luggage for the Maybach (easily the best thing about this bizarre hybrid vehicle).

Nevertheless, the best thing about people like Bodino and De Montby is their interest in watches. De Montby is a dilettante watch collector who, despairing of the quality of ready-to-wear watch straps, introduced a bespoke watch-strap-making service into key Dunhill stores under the name "De Montby". He has also drawn London-based watch trader Tom Bolt into Critchell's orbit as an horological adviser.

Bodino is, of course, responsible for the design of the Panerai Luminor, which has become a cult watch. His influence at Dunhill can be seen in such striking concepts as overscaling the classic Dunhill facet watch and creating the City Diver, a successful if unlikely marriage of cocktail watch and sports watch. Bodino has been able to capture the Dunhill spirit with such innovative ideas as the racing strap, with its groovy stud fastening, and, of course, his *chef d'oeuvre*, the X-Centric.

Critchell's approach to reviving Dunhill is best described as accelerated evolution. He is not interested in making Dunhill the new Prada or the new Gucci. Instead, he wants to restore Dunhill to the position it used to enjoy as a purveyor of beguilingly entertaining *objets de luxe* for discriminating gentlemen with the money to indulge their tastes. One of the important strands of this strategy is creating timepieces with a uniquely Dunhill identity.

"There will be great watches with interesting and unusual designs, as well as real classics. Dunhill are like no other brand, and have 100 years of legitimacy in timepieces," says Critchell, adding that the new generation of Dunhill watches fits into a broader philosophy. "There is something special about this brand that I think is related to pleasure. We should be making and selling things that provide pleasure; this is part of the relationship between the brand and the customer. Dunhill could never succeed as a mere fashion brand, but people will be able to find things in the store that they like and that give them pleasure. There will always be something in the store for gentlemen of character." ●