

# Peter Speake-Marin

## An Englishman Abroad

by Theodore Diehl



It is a matter of record that the English dominance of matters horological is a phenomenon long gone. The drive and innovation of past masters such as John Harrison, John Arnold, George Graham and Thomas Tompion fed off the immediate needs of a fast-expanding mercantile empire. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, horology had matured as an industry and the climate of sheer immediate demand that had previously supported it in England was replaced by a more prosaic business of competition and efficiency. Nevertheless, it took until the short-sighted tax regimes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to finally kill off the industrial base of English horology. More recent master watchmakers such as George Daniels and Derek Pratt have had to work with the Swiss to achieve anything on a more than cottage-industry basis.

In the world of today, a place in which, for example, Italian football teams are filled with Dutch, Swedish and Brazilian players who do not know *scalopine* from *mortadella*, it is standard practice for watches with British exteriors to tick with the workmanship and accuracy only the Swiss seem able to provide. Peter Speake-Marin has though, to an extent, turned the tables. He has gone right into the lion's den and is using his English roots to produce the most English of watches – right in the heart of Switzerland.

Rolle, a beautiful small village on Lake Lemman situated just off Switzerland's A1 between Geneva and Lausanne, is where Peter finally took root after more than 10 years of watch-making wanderlust that began in 1985. His workshop is tidy, with space for about four watchmakers, and has every conceivable tool – hand, machine or computer – within reach.

Like Hugh Grant, Speake-Marin has an Englishman's propensity to blush when complimented – which makes him charming – and to fall over his own words whilst discussing watchmaking, which makes him blush even more, increasing his charm twofold. But do not be fooled by this superficial uneasiness. He produces wristwatches and pocket watches in his upper-floor workshop all by himself to a quality and level of complication that makes some of the well-known manufactures green with envy or shame. Since the absolute top of the Swiss industry can also be counted among his clients, that is not a surprise. But Peter is not one to kiss and tell, so it is a story you will not hear today.



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### Learning from the past

As with so many other talented people in the watch industry, Peter’s real entry into the world of watchmaking began after leaving school, since the only way to learn is by coming into contact with an unending stream of high-quality pieces that have undergone the ravages of time.

“During my 7 years’ work in London restoring and dealing in collectors’ watches, I had a chance to see which movements and complications survived. Often you saw beautiful movements that were just a mess because they were too thin or had some incongruous structural detail. Others, battered on the outside, the survivors of careless handling or history, were still functioning beautifully and needed not much more than a cleaning. It made me really stop and think ‘Would the watches I wanted to make survive this well?’ It made me deeply aware of the role of workmanship and careful planning. That’s why it took me many years before I felt secure enough to make a start for myself – not to mention the time required to find an original approach as well.”

Some of the watches Peter restored and worked on during this period, such as a Patek Philippe minute-repeating pocket watch with chronograph from circa 1900, or a Breguet quarter-repeater pocket watch from a century earlier, were typical benchmark examples of inspirational horology.

“These watches embodied what watchmaking used to be: mechanics, art and philosophy brought together and expressed in metal, springs and gears. Everything inside these watches is alive – made and designed by human hands without the use of computers or electrical machines. In an almost indefinable way the workmanship in these pieces contains a depth and life to it that many factory-made watches seem to be lacking today.

“This idea of a watch being a living thing became one of the major goals of my work. I know it might sound strange, but the way you design and shape your bridges, lay out your movement and select the types of finish to use, as well as the

mechanical quirkiness inherent in your design, all add up to a characteristic total resulting from personal decisions taken during an ongoing process. This is why working in smaller series of five to ten pieces with a high amount of ‘hands on’, organic decision making is optimal for me. I’d prefer not to have to compromise handwork in favour of larger, more machine-orientated production runs.”

### The foundation

Speake-Marin’s first piece is called his ‘foundation piece’ for a reason: it is not only his first act of faith as an independent watchmaker, but also holds within its case all the basic precepts of his attitudes to design, workmanship and watchmaking in general. These ideas form a thread through the entire present and future collections. The use of German silver bridges, diamond end-pieces on the tourbillon, a full-plate movement and a bi-metallic split balance with Breguet overcoil are all tributes to some of the finest features from two centuries of English and French pocket-watch manufacture. All the technical details – the proportions of the tourbillon cage, the Geneva stop work on the mainspring barrels to prevent breaking of the mainsprings, the cage jewels’ primary insertion into German silver rings before their positioning in the cage bridges, and many more – show Peter’s concentration on longevity and perfect functioning through the application of robust solutions.

The foundation pocket watch, presently in a working case of brass, weighs in at a hefty 200 g (when its 18 ct. gold case is finished it will be over 300 g) and represents more than 1,500 hours’ work. “In my restoration work – which I continue to do even today – I’ve seen what the ravages of use and time can do to a watch. Thinness might currently be considered sexy or chic in a watch of any kind today, but the survival rates of full-bodied watches – be they the wrist or pocket variety – are the highest. Maybe it’s conceit, but I hope my work will be around for a few hundred years at least!” This robust character of his work, combined with the tasteful elegance of engraving, dials, blued English-style hands and dozens of other sensitive features, makes his work unmistakably English in nature and appearance, and that is not to mention the names he gives his watch collections.

### Minute-repeating tourbillon wristwatch

Continuing the goals set by the collection’s foundation piece, the next step was to embody even more features, this time within the confines of a wristwatch. The visually warm aesthetics of the foundation piece’s case and engraving have been retained, and the full-bodied case allows the minute-

repeater’s gongs ample room for sonority. The slider mechanism, usually left undecorated, has in this case been adorned with engraving to match the dial’s aesthetics. “After several years’ work on repeater wristwatches, I soon realized that keeping them small and flat looked really impressive, but was not really conducive to a full sound. As I mentioned, I prefer wristwatches that refer aesthetically and technically in some way or other to pocket watches, but in this case, size equals sonorous.”

The German silver movement strikes the hours, quarters and minutes at request and contains a 60-s tourbillon with a double driving-train. In a gesture to past tradition, the tourbillon has diamond end-stones, and the repeater bridges and dial are beautifully engraved. As to the finish of the back of the movement, Peter has strict ideas: “I feel it is wrong to use Geneva stripes or other kinds of Swiss finishes – beautiful in themselves as they are – on a watch inspired by English tradition. So I thought a very subtle, concentric grained finish radiating outwards from the tourbillon was more subdued and true to character. For me it is just like the difference between English and French tailoring of men’s suits.” The somewhat esoteric use of wolf’s-teeth gearing on the upper ratchet wheel and barrel ratchet wheel complete this watch’s technical reverie to past tradition. Even the slight spray of diamonds on the dial is reserved enough not to come across as flashy, yet it can still certainly be seen. All in all, this minute-repeating tourbillon’s character is closer to ‘gentleman’s diamond tie pin’ than ‘Las Vegas nouveau’.

### The Piccadilly

With its case height of 11 mm, The Piccadilly, just like its namesake in London, has kept the beauty of old tradition but has adapted to modern times. The blued, hand-finished hour and minute hands, along with dials of either white and cream or engraved solid silver, typify its quintessentially English character. (However, the small blue screw located above 6 o’clock is a tribute to Breguet!)

The automatic movements are based on a simple 1950s arrangement, and the setting mechanism, cannon pinion, hour wheels, bridges and rotor have been redesigned to reflect this. The oscillating rotor resembles the shape of the foundation watch’s tourbillon cage and is cut out and finished with the same amount of loving detail, reinforcing every watch’s visual

and technical connection to the original foundation watch. The 38 mm cases of the first series of The Piccadilly will be available in yellow gold, white gold and rose gold, as well as steel, with the two types of dial coming as described. The straps are fixed to the sapphire glass-backed case by screwed-in bars attached to the sculpted shoulders, perfectly fitting the total visual character.

### Maturity beyond years

Although Peter is not yet 40, in horological years he is already an old man. His knowledge and command of complicated movements is simply astounding, and he is regularly engaged by colleagues and major brands in problem solving as well as the assembly of highly complicated watches. Some of these movements are so complicated and require such high standards that it takes his shop almost 4 weeks of hard work just for essential assembly, excluding casing, timing and final regulation.

The fact that these major brands trust him so explicitly with their charges is real proof of ability. Even large factories have sought his advice on quality control and improvements to their calibres, for he combines outstanding knowledge with a gentleman’s discretion – you will never hear him say a negative word about a colleague, and he keeps his secrets well.

Peter Speake-Marin embodies the best of the English character, and he somehow succeeds in transmitting these qualities to his creations. So, if you’re an Anglophile and a watch enthusiast, there is only one place to go for top-quality English watches – Rolle, Switzerland. ◉



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