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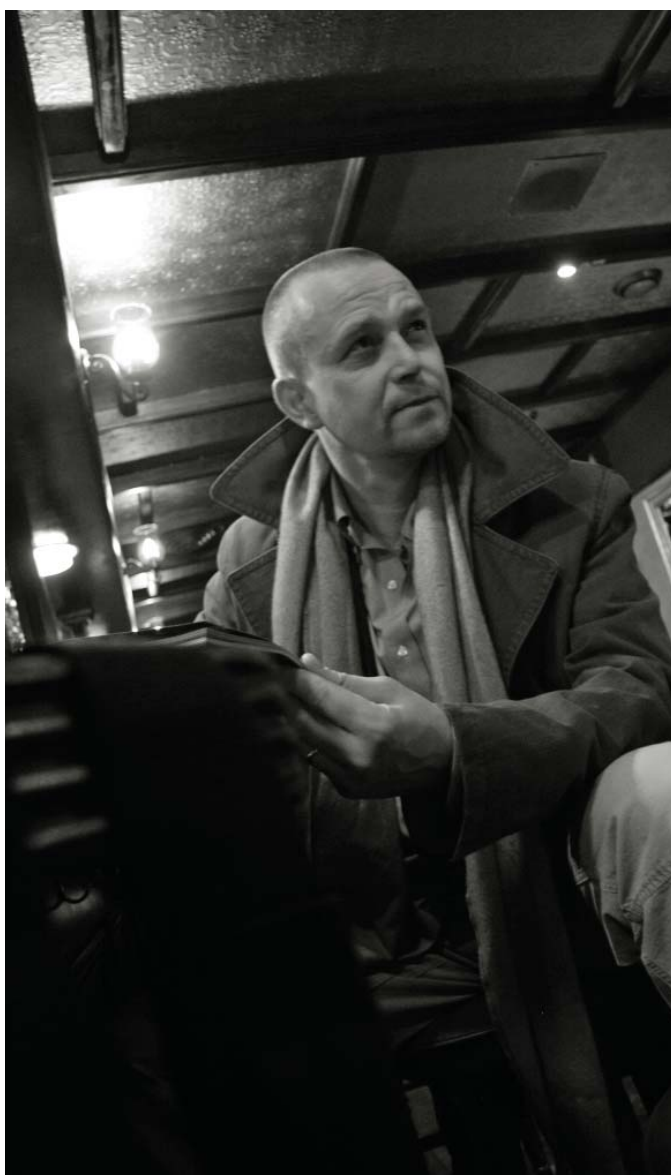




The new BHI Supporters scheme is a way of encouraging successful independent watchmakers from the United Kingdom to become more closely associated with the British Horological Institute. Links with these high profile watchmakers is seen as being a positive move, not only from the point of view of promoting high quality craftsmanship, but also from the inspiration they can bring to young aspiring watchmakers.

Over the next year, Timothy Treffry HonFBHI, will be interviewing some of the UK's finest watchmakers, giving an outline of their background, training, achievements and motivation, and showing their portfolio of watches and latest collections.

BHI Director, Mike Cardew, explained: 'The objective is to 'gather together' these top independent watchmakers to be firmly associated with the BHI, hopefully leading to the Institute acting as a forum for British and Irish watchmakers raising the profile of independent watchmaking.'



Peter Speake-Marin in 'The Watch Workshop' in Rolle, Switzerland.

Peter Speake-Marin was born in Essex in 1968 and began his horological journey at Hackney Technical College in 1985. The course dealt with both clocks and watches and soon after graduating in 1987, deciding to concentrate his attention on watchmaking, he travelled to Neuchâtel to complete the watchmaker's 'Refresher Course' at WOSTEP.

This gave him an immediate entree into watch servicing and, returning to the UK, he worked for Watches of Switzerland in Oxford for 6 months, did another 6 months with Piaget in London and a mere 4 weeks for Omega in Southampton. Peter attributes this high churn rate to his low boredom threshold. Perhaps unusually for a watchmaker, he soon loses interest when work becomes repetitive; as Peter says: 'You can only read the same book a limited number of times!'

Everchanging Kaleidoscope

Two events in 1989 changed his life. Firstly he started work at Somlo Antiques in the Burlington Arcade in London's Piccadilly, and secondly he met Daniela Marin. Romantics may attribute the change simply to 'the love of a good woman' but at the same time Peter also discovered his 'love of a good watch'! Somlo specialises in exceptional antique pocket watches and vintage wristwatches.



The movement of the Marin 1. The large deeply fluted crown is a Speake-Marin trademark. Note the twin-screw mechanism for adjusting the regulator (detail left). All parts of this SM-2 calibre are hand finished and, apart from the jewels and springs, are made by Peter and his associates.



Dial side of the SM-2 showing detail of the setting mechanism.

The ever-changing kaleidoscope of material passing through the workshop kept Peter at Somlo for 7 years (with a break in 1991 for the WOSTEP 'Complicated Watches' course).

Watchmaker's Heaven

Peter describes Somlo's, where he worked on early form watches; crucifixes and skulls, watches by Tompion, Arnold, Graham and Breguet and quality wristwatches up to the 1950s; as 'watchmaker's heaven'. Much of the work involved making replacement parts. Doing this, especially in valuable antiques, requires close attention to detail, familiarity with similar watches of the period, and, sometimes, an attempt to get inside the mind of the maker. The early years in Somlo's basement workshop had a steep learning curve. This gradually flattened, the work began to become routine, it was time to move on (but he is still with Daniela; they recently had their second child).

Casting around for a new challenge he found an opening at Renaud and Papi in Le Locle in 1996. The firm had been founded a decade earlier to develop wristwatch movements for high-end brands; catering for the developing market for tourbillons, minute repeaters and 'grand complications' and subsequently became a subsidiary of Audemars Piguet. As mechanical watchmaking began to recover, it was actively recruiting from the limited pool of skilled watchmakers available after the quartz crisis.

International Flavour

The workshops soon had a very international flavour with two Englishmen (the other being Stephen Forsey), Dutchmen, Finns, French, Spaniards and a New Zealander; they were to become a 'finishing school' for top-of-the-line watchmakers. Having mastered the production of highly complicated, superbly finished movements, Peter became involved in the training of new recruits. But the old problem began to re-emerge; he got itchy feet.

Peter and Daniela had rented a generously sized apartment in a Swiss farmhouse nearby where Peter had established a workshop and had begun acquiring tools and equipment. Every watchmaker wants to make his own watch, and a new project was emerging. It was a twin train tourbillon pocket watch with stand (*HJ June 2001*). This 'Foundation Watch' is essentially English, with a large frosted watch plate, but it also reflects aspects of the early work of Patek Philippe, Cartier, Breguet and Lange and Söhne. The sinuous arms of the tourbillon carriage were inspired by the drive wheel of a 19th century topping tool; a design now repeated in the winding rotors of his automatic watches. Six months later (*HJ January 2002*) Peter described his first wristwatch. It was to be the first of a series called 'Piccadilly'; a tribute to his time at Somlo Antiques and all he had learned of the traditions of fine watchmaking.

The Watchmaker's Workshop

Taking the plunge as an independent, Peter left Renaud and Papi in 2000 and, with the support of Daniela's work in a communications company, established 'The Watch Workshop' in the picturesque village of Rolle, on the northern shore of Lake Geneva. He began exhibiting at Basel with the AHCI in 2002. Initially he had no intention of starting a brand, but the Piccadilly attracted a lot of attention among collectors looking for distinctive hand-finished pieces. Several orders were received and the first piece left his workshop at the end of 2003. His income was supplemented by work with Harry Winston, MB&F and Maîtres du Temps, but since the beginning of 2008 he has worked only for himself.



Parts of the setting mechanism.



Underside of the train bridge and balance cock.



Various components of SM-2.



Engraved Piccadilly.



Peter Speak-Marin at the bench.

www.speake-marin.com

The Watch Workshop has now sold around 500 watches and provides livelihoods for Peter, two other watchmakers and three ancillary staff. It also helps to support six outworkers producing components. Initially the watches were based on movements by ETA, Christophe Claret and Dimier, but the movements are now produced entirely by the Speake-Marin team. This reflects the fact that the market for the independents is becoming more and more focused on exclusive short-run pieces. Peter operates at the sharp end of the price/volume pyramid. The entry level for his watches is around £22,000.

Form Follows Function

Sales arise mainly from visits to specialist outlets catering for collectors. Initially Japan was a good market but has now gone very quiet. A major focus on the US has gone through a rough patch but is now picking up. With only a few watches to sell, buyers certainly exist; it is just a matter of locating them.

In Peter's designs, form follows function. His aim is to produce distinctive well-made watches which will eventually join the ranks of those that passed over his bench at Somlo Antiques; watches that will withstand the test of time and be valued for generations. Moreover, with a succession of new projects, he shows no signs of becoming bored!

Timothy Treffry HonFBHI

Next time we will look at the work of brothers John and Stephen McGonigle, who have workshops in Athlone, Northern Ireland, and Neuchatel, Switzerland.



Serpents Calendar.



SPEAKE-MARIN