

History revives as Big Ben's maker gets a wake-up call

By Alice Pfeiffer

LONDON
Dent of London is a name that may not ring a bell among watch collectors — but the British company rings some of the world's most famous chimes, and has been doing so for more than 150 years. In 1852, a year before his death, the company's founder, Edward J. Dent, won the order to build the Great Clock of the Houses of Parliament, better known as Big Ben.

Among other historical pieces, the company established by Mr. Dent made the chronometer carried by Charles Darwin's ship, H.M.S. Beagle, on the 1831 voyage to the Galápagos Islands that led to his revolutionary work, "The Origin of Species"; and the Standard Clock at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, built in 1871 as the reference point for Greenwich Mean Time.

This year, it completed restoration and installation of the station platform clock at St. Pancras, the Eurostar train's new London terminal — the original was destroyed in the 1970s.

Now, it has branched into a smaller line of business, making luxury wristwatches; but only after a major makeover of its own.

Established in 1814, the company originally focused on precision chronometers for the Royal Navy's navigation. From its earliest days it also dealt with royal commissions on a regular basis, providing clocks to Queen Victoria, several czars, Spanish royalty and many other crowned or otherwise distinguished patrons. In 1843, Dent built the standard astronomical clock for the National Observatory of Switzerland in Geneva. Dent was "a British clock that ran Swiss time," said Iain Hutchinson, the company's president since 2003.

But Mr. Dent's heirs and successors were horological purists, and the 20th-century arrival of electronic timekeeping passed them by. In the 1960's, convinced that authentic watchmaking was history, the last members of the family left the company, handing it into the keeping of an ardent collector, Brian Norman, who at the time was managing director of the British distributors for International Watch Co.

Over the next 40 years, Dent slipped into sleep mode, a hobbyists' curiosity, producing half a dozen clocks a year to be bought by a handful of discerning private clients.

Until, late in 2003, Mr. Hutchinson and a friend, Twysden Moore, stumbled upon the name. Both were working in property investment, and the clock business was not on their agenda until they saw a Dent ad on the back of an old book, "The Guide to the Landed Gentry."

"We were looking up our families," Mr. Moore said, "and then this odd ad popped up on the back and caught our attention."

After researching the history of the brand and discovering its near-dormant state, the pair decided to try to take over the business and contacted Mr. Norman. Convincing him turned



Bruce Anderson, top left; Simon Hazelgrove, above; Dent



Dent, the maker of the iconic Houses of Parliament clock in London, Big Ben, left, has been revived by new owners and has now added wristwatches to its business. From top left, clockwise: the Ministry automatic chronograph, in rose gold, with an ivory dial; a Great Wheel clock; and a Three-Train clock. The company makes its clocks in Britain, but its two watch lines are certified Swiss-made chronometers.

out not to be too difficult: "He was just looking for like-minded people," Mr. Moore, now chief executive, said.

Optimism and enthusiasm prevailed over lack of clockmaking experience. Mr. Moore had nursed a lifelong passion for watches and Mr. Hutchinson had a background in electronic engineering, so the new owners felt confident they could rise to the challenge of reviving the sleeping brand. "I had worked as an engineer for Rolls-Royce," Mr. Hutchinson said, "so going back into engineering didn't scare me. I just applied what I had learnt from motor engines onto watches."

To expand the brand into the wristwatch market, the partners turned to Swiss skills and technology. The collection introduced this year draws inspiration from the company's British past; but the pieces are officially certified Swiss chronometers.

Two lines of luxury watches are being presented, under the names "Ministry" and "Parliament." The Ministry design features a round dial marked with Roman numerals, set in a circular case. The Parliament line features a similar dial, set in a square case, unmistakably echoing Big Ben's iconic silhouette. "The case was the hardest part," Mr. Hutchinson said. "We threw away thousands before getting a prototype we were happy with."

The cases are mostly in 18-karat white or rose gold, except for the top-of-the-line Ministry Chronograph, in platinum. Each model is offered in a limited edition of 250 pieces, at prices ranging from £8,500, or \$12,300, to £25,000.

Sales outlets are limited to fewer than a dozen selected locations in the United States, Britain and Abu Dhabi.

True to its tradition, the new-style Dent continues to produce handmade chiming clocks — "it takes months to complete one," said Mr. Moore. The company has two models now in production — the "Three-Train" and the "Great Wheel" — both entirely manufactured in Yorkshire. All clocks come with a choice of chime sequences and are made in limited editions of 50 pieces, priced from £12,000 to £50,000.

"To us this is real, old-school luxury," Mr. Moore said. "We make everything in small quantities. We have workshops, not factories. We have no human resource department, no press office."

As heir to a grand imperial tradition, Dent was particularly pleased when it won the commission, in 2006, to remake the St. Pancras station clock. "We were lucky; we just happened to be the original gothic Victorian clock makers," Mr. Hutchinson said. Big Ben and the station clock bear many similarities: same dial, same use of 24-karat gold leaf — but the station clock, while modestly smaller, bears the once-again proud name of the brand. In Victoria's day, such self-advertisement might not have amused the queen.

In a fitting tribute to the resurrection of the company, Sultan Qaboos bin Saïd of Oman recently commissioned a magnum horological opus to ring in the jubilee celebrations for his 40-year reign in 2010. Taking its inspiration from the sultan's Great Mosque, a giant architectural monument inaugurated in 2001, it will feature the domes and arcade of the mosque, with the Oman coat of arms. British time booming in the desert, in unison with Big Ben: Queen Victoria herself would surely have approved.

Offering off-beat precision

By Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop

SINGAPORE
When Christopher Long, a brand manager working for a watch distributor, met Alvin Lye, a former executive who had quit a job with Sony to open a vintage watch store, the encounter blossomed into a shared adventure. In 2003, the two Singaporeans combined their engineering and business knowledge to found Azimuth, a maker of innovative design watches.

Mr. Long, now 32, began collecting watches 15 years ago. It was that passion that led him to Mr. Lye's shop.

When the pair set up Azimuth, they started by buying 200 vintage movements from a Swiss supplier selling stock from closed factories. With these they built their first model, the Bombardier I, a design inspired by a generic German Air Force watch dating from the 1940s, the B-Uhr, with a large onion crown, an oversized dial with bold Arabic numerals and riveted calf-leather strap.

But their ambition was to make something different: funky, avant-garde designs providing alternative ways of telling time.

"The designs are more machine-inspired — with portholes where different apertures tell you different times," Mr. Long said. "We're trying to emulate this kind of field in the world of watch making, so you're wearing more than just a watch, it also has a gadget feel."

Azimuth now works with a mix of modern ébauches, or half-finished blank movements, and assembled movements from Swiss watch makers which it modifies to its own designs. Made in Biel-Bienne in Switzerland, the watches, which incorporate such complications as split-second chronographs, retrograde counters, calendar functions and jumping hours, are distributed internationally and have attracted some attention from collectors. The company manufactures about 1,500 pieces a year.

Last year, it unveiled "Mr. Roboto," a watch inspired by a 1950s tin toy, the Lantern Robot. On the watch face, the left eye shows the

hour; the right eye is set to Greenwich Mean Time; the nose shows seconds and the mouth area a retrograde minute display.

This year, it is showing its new Twin Barrel Tourbillon at Basel-World, a model which Mr. Long hopes will become emblematic of Azimuth's ambition to "create complicated watches in avant-garde design."

"I was looking at a car magazine with a supercar on the front cover, and at that moment I could almost imagine a watch coming out," he said. "The T.B.T. is the very first watch designed to replicate the curves of the supercar faithfully. It's almost like strapping a car on your wrist."

The ultra-lightweight, aerodynamic case, is adorned with plates of carbon fiber fitted into recesses in its sides and back. Under a sapphire crystal domed "cockpit" a massive tourbillon mechanism, with a high beat 28,800 vibrations per hour, five-day power reserve, is revealed at the 6 o'clock position. The time is told by reading twin rotary discs suspended by a massive central titanium arm. Even and odd hours are divided on hexagonal discs, while the minutes are displayed in an arc at the edge of the dial from the traditional 3 o'clock position to the 9 o'clock position.

Azimuth is planning a limited edition of only 25 pieces, to retail for 120,000 Singapore dollars, or \$77,500, taking the brand sharply up market from its typical 5,000 dollar price point.

Mr. Long said: "Azimuth designs will continue to be headed in this direction."

"Avant-garde designs, unconventional ways of telling time, are definitely not for every man, but customers looking for interesting timepieces, or I should say weird-looking watches, come to us, and certainly we believe we have built a reputation around that."



Azimuth

Azimuth's penchant for weird-looking watches has earned the Singaporean brand some attention from collectors. Its "Mr. Roboto" model, left, was inspired by a tin robot toy from the 1950's. Its most recent offering, the Twin Barrel Tourbillon, below, aims for the supercar look.



AT AZIMUTH, 2 SINGAPOREANS FORGE A PARTNERSHIP THAT PRODUCES INTRICATE, AVANT-GARDE MECHANISMS