

Time for reinvention

DENT, ONE OF THE OLDEST NAMES IN HOROLOGY, IS BEING REMODELLED FOR THE 21ST CENTURY BY TWO MEN WITH THE HIGHEST RESPECT FOR ITS TRADITIONS... AND BIG PLANS FOR ITS FUTURE. JULIA MAROZZI MEETS THEM >



As the hand on my watch ticked up towards the hour, I looked anxiously at the door. Not terribly reassuring if the partners of a watch company turn up even a second late, I thought. I needn't have worried. Bang on 10am, I walked Frank Spurrell and Twysden Moore, joint owners of Dent, maker of watches and clocks to royalty, explorers and governments the world over since 1814.

The two look much too modern, in their sharpish tailoring and Tom Ford-like sleekness, to be in charge of such an august institution as Dent, but that is the point. They're in the middle of turning one of the great British institutions, barely ticking along for the past few years, into a thoroughly successful business again – modern, resilient and responsive. They're crafting a company almost from scratch based on the timeless qualities of excellence, reliability and innovation.

The partners met while at school at Charterhouse and were reunited by a chance encounter some years later. Frank was publishing a watch magazine and Twysden was happily involved in developing night clubs, bars and property in the UK and abroad.

"About six years ago I heard of Dent and didn't know a great deal about it," says Frank. "But I picked up a book in my parents' library in Norfolk." This reminded me that we had met last year at an outdoor Jools Holland concert at Holkham Hall on the north Norfolk coast – an autumn evening characterised by high winds and unseasonal coolness – and we shared a love of the big skies and vast coastlines of East Anglia.

"I picked up a guide to the landed gentry from 1881 – there was an ad for Dent on the inside cover," he continues. "It showed a beautiful watch, plus there was information about the two most iconic clocks in the world, plus stories about royalty around the world."

"So I did a bit more research about the brand. Dr Livingstone and Darwin both had Dents. At the time, Dent was in the hands of Brian Norman, who used to be the managing director of IWC in the UK and he had a Formula One racing team. He was about 70. He was just gently making about four or five clocks a year. It was quite interesting and I just thought 'I would like to have this.'"

It's not hard to understand why Dent would have sparked the interest of an entrepreneur

with a passion for horology. The company was set up in 1814 by Edward J. Dent, and under him the company embraced the Victorian fervour for technology while creating precision chronometers for some of the era's most intrepid explorers on their historic voyages.

Dent chronometer no 633 was taken aboard the HMS Beagle in 1831 to accompany Charles Darwin on the voyage that formed the basis for his revolutionary book *The Origin of Species* – his groundbreaking theory of evolution.

Two decades later David Livingstone bought Dent chronometer no 1800 for his African explorations, and in 1890 the explorer H.M. Stanley was moved to write to Dent that 'the chronometers supplied by you, and which were taken across Africa in my last expedition, proved a very great service to me and were in every way thoroughly satisfactory and reliable'.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 included a Dent turret clock. Having won a Council Medal, the clock at Crystal Palace was then dismantled and erected at King's Cross station. But perhaps the clock that most impressed the Dent brand on the British psyche was the Great Clock for the Houses of Parliament, familiarly known as Big Ben. Three clock-makers submitted tenders

Time for reinvention and more



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Twysden Moore (left)
and Frank Spurrell
Above 'Big Ben', probably
the most iconic of
Dent's commissions.
Right Men's Dent
Parliament Power
Reserve with dual time
in rose gold with brown
double sided alligator
strap. Ladies watches
will be available in 2008.

for the contract, and Dent was awarded it in 1852, a unique chance to be associated with one of London's most symbolic architectural icons.

A company milestone was reached in 1871 when Dent received the honour of making the Standard Clock at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, the clock to which all others in the empire would be referred – also known as GMT. The company was also asked to make a second Standard Clock which was responsible for sending out the signal for the emission of the six 'pips' heard on the BBC World Service, first broadcast in 1924.

Frank takes up the story, "I went to see Brian and had a cup of tea and said: 'I would like to buy Dent from you', and he said: 'why should I sell it to you? I don't know you. Why should I?' He said he had had approaches before, mainly from the Far East."

Twysden says: "He was very concerned that he wanted to maintain the greatness of the company and hanging on and doing a few clocks a year was better than selling it. Behind his attitude was a deep concern to maintain the integrity of the company."

Frank adds: "We went to see him every two or three months for four years. We would talk about Bentleys, he had an old Continental drop-head, it was no major thing but he suddenly said: 'Fine, I'll sell it to you for x amount of money.'"

Twysden says: "We said 'fine', we turned up with a cheque, it was a lovely process. We bought the original company, the brand, the trademark and all the goodwill." That was two years ago. "Now we have to live up to it. We have to carry the company into the future in a way that we want to."

The pair have put a huge amount of research into the new range of watches and pooled resources with notable British case-makers and watch-makers in Switzerland. "There is a lot of engineering and clock-making talent in the UK but watch-making has all but disappeared here," says Twysden. "The skills have dwindled and there has been no government investment in the industry as there was in Switzerland after the Second World War."

The pair took on a range of senior British watch-makers, including Peter Roberts, formerly of Rolex and IWC, who examines Rolex watchmakers. Hackney Technical College watch-making school, where many notable watch-makers had trained, had sadly shut down so there was no pool of talent to draw from there.

"Then the St Pancras clock commission came along," says Twysden. "We have started making large architectural clocks again. This will be finished in October, it's 18 feet across, the largest clock under construction in Europe."

Frank adds: "The whole of St Pancras is Grade One listed. English Heritage do everything to be as close as possible to the original. People looked at the clock in the tower and saw that it was made by Dent. We were just randomly introduced to them and they asked if we could do it."

"It's going to revitalise that part of town, the whole development," says Twysden. "And our clock will be a big part of it. The station opens at the beginning of November and we are going to have our own watch launch at that time."

New Dent watch prototypes are being refined – Parliament, Power Reserve, Ministry, Chronograph – all in round or square cases in white or rose gold, and costing from £5,200 for a steel Chronograph to multiples of that for bespoke editions.

The straps are being made in France and the watches in Switzerland under Dent production, management and assembly, with the company's own quality control and a factory which makes cases, hands, dials, movements, buckles and screws. The partners oversee every stage of evolution and everything is checked about four times.

From initial design to buyer's wrist takes about two years – only a few hundred Dents will be made annually and everything is handmade.

"We are very confident when we consider our pre-orders," says Twysden. "When we have touched a door it seems to open for us. Peter Roberts has created our own movements and people are very interested in this."

"We put up the initial money with one other investor. We believe there is a place for Dent in the pantheon of watch-making. We only went to one friend to talk to him and we got the company and put in a certain amount of money. The first thing is to get the product right. It doesn't matter how good everything else is, if you don't recognise how wonderful the watches are then it won't make any difference. It's all about quality."

"We are making a bold statement. We want to be producing the best watch in the world, the best English watch. We have a thriving British company, which used to be a great success. With attention to detail, craftsmanship and top quality we are seeing a very exciting evolution of the business."

With all this talk of company values that reflect the same passion for excellence as Bentley, time has flown by. Frank and Twysden have a discreet look at their watches. They don't want to be late for their next appointment. It wouldn't do for the makers of the UK's oldest – and newest – watch company. **D**

