

The Gents of Dent

A British duo reinvents the illustrious watch house behind Big Ben.

Portrait by EMMA HARDY



Above: Twysden Moore (left) and Frank Spurrell.
Below left: Dent & Co.'s 18k rose gold watch with alligator band. \$16,000, dentwatches.com.

Big Ben, the grand and imposing clock atop the Houses of Parliament in London, is easily the most identifiable timekeeper in the world. Less well known is the masterful house behind the famous (and famously accurate) ticker, Dent & Co., once a world-renowned British clock and watchmaking firm.

Like most people, Frank Spurrell had little idea of the firm's distinguished 193-year history until he spent a fateful weekend at his parents' English country house in 2000. Leafing through an 1881 British social register (in which, he points out, his own family was listed), he found an ad for Dent & Co. that chronicled its esteemed projects and upper-crust clientele, including Her Majesty Queen Victoria. "If you go to any old gentlemen's club in central London, most have a Dent clock," says Spurrell. "But I had no idea how great the business was."

He would learn that the house's accomplishments were impressive indeed, but that by the late 20th century, Dent & Co. had all but fallen

off the radar, manufacturing only four to six clocks a year for a dwindling private clientele. Spurrell, a founder of *Watch* magazine and a former consultant to watchmakers such as Bell & Ross and Ulysse Nardin, and his boys-school chum, real-estate developer and watch lover Twysden Moore, began to court the house's then owner, Brian Norman. Over the course of three years, they persuaded him to hand over the reins. "We would go have cups of tea with him and talk about his vintage Bentleys and Jaguars," Spurrell says. "We convinced him that we would do the right thing with the legacy of the business."

After Spurrell and Moore, both 37, purchased the firm for an undisclosed sum in 2006, they quickly set about reinvigorating the dusty house with new life, designing the first watches under the Dent & Co. name in more than 40 years. "From the first second that I became acquainted with Dent, I knew that I could make it work," Spurrell says.

This fall they are relaunching the house in style, with two new watch collections. Naturally,

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Dent & Co.'s 18k white gold watch with alligator band, \$8,000, dentwatches.com

it made sense to pay homage to the company's history with designs that take cues from two of its most notable achievements: Big Ben and the marine chronometer.

The six-piece Parliament line, which comes in 18-karat white or rose gold, echoes Big Ben with faces that feature boldly demarcated minute lines and shapely hands. And since Dent & Co.'s maintenance team used to calibrate Big Ben by placing British pennies on its gargantuan mechanisms, the rotor (the half moon-shaped device that winds an automatic watch) on the back of the watch bears the design of a Victorian coin. The nine-piece Ministry line, meanwhile, mimics the chronometer face with multiple chronographs and elongated Roman numerals and is available in stainless steel or 18-karat white or rose gold. The watches, priced from about \$5,000 to \$16,000, feature metal, rubber or alligator bands, and though they are intended for men, the owners expect women to be snapping them up as well. The collection will be available this fall at 29 boutiques worldwide, including locations in London and the U.S.

Of course, Dent & Co.'s goal is to once again become a household name (in the kind of household where Daddy collects \$10,000 watches), much the way it was in the 1800s, when Edward John Dent became known as England's greatest and perhaps most prolific artisan, supplying timepieces to the British military, Russian and Japanese emperors and even Charles Darwin. As a boy, Dent apprenticed as a candlemaker in London before settling on the horology trade. He soon gained a reputation for his expert chronometers, highly accurate clocks relied upon by the Royal Navy and seafaring men to determine longitude at sea.

Dent also racked up hundreds of patents for everything from a fluid compass (he was the first to suspend the directional device in distilled water) and a chronometer function that improved accuracy by taking temperature changes into account to his most enduring invention, the Keyless. Up until the mid-1800s, all watches had to be set and wound with a key, which Dent deemed unnecessary. His invention allowed the wearer to wind his timepiece with the crown. "The crown was just a bit that stuck out the top where you attached [a pocket watch to] your chain," says Moore. Dent made it functional, but as Moore points out, "Probably no one would think twice about who did it [today]."



Setting the time for a single watch is one thing, but Dent also created clocks that determined hours and minutes for entire nations. Chief among them, of course, is Big Ben. With its four faces, each 22.5 feet in diameter, and nine-foot hour hands, the masterpiece took seven years to construct and install, and during the process Dent and Big Ben's designer, Augustus Pugin, passed away. "It was by no means all smiles," says Moore of the process of constructing Big Ben, which began ticking on September 7, 1859. "It was a long and torturous process from start to finish."

Another one of Dent & Co.'s most notable commissions is the Royal Observatory clock in Greenwich, which set Greenwich mean time, or GMT, for 75 years, from 1871 to 1946, until an electric clock was installed. "There were cables attached to this mechanical clock that were linked to wires that literally went [underwater] across the entire Atlantic to America, to the colonies, to India," says Spurrell. "It basically set the clocks for the whole world." In 1924 the house also created the clock that broadcast the six pips over the BBC radio at the beginning of every hour, prior to the major news headlines of the day.

Not surprisingly, such innovation attracted an aristocratic clientele. Beginning with Queen Victoria in 1841, the house received a British Royal Warrant to supply the current ruling family with clocks for its castles, chronometers for its new boats, and gifts for visiting dignitaries and heads of state.

Of course, Dent & Co. has influenced royalty directly and indirectly for years: The first Duke of Wellington used to set his watch by looking at the Dent & Co. clock in the window of its Trafalgar Square shop, and a royal of the modern pop variety, Madonna, has an antique Dent & Co. clock in the tower of her 18th-century estate, Ashcombe House, in Wiltshire, England.

Though Spurrell and Moore will continue to do clocks for private households, they're already thinking about developing their own watch movements and introducing a women's line that will include bejeweled designs. But right now they are focused on completing their first public commission since taking over Dent & Co.: the platform clock at St. Pancras Station in London, which will be unveiled in November. It's rumored that the Queen will be on hand for the ceremony—and perhaps a little watch shopping.

—JAMIE ROSEN

A royal of the modern pop variety, Madonna, has a Dent & Co. clock in the tower of her 18th-century estate, Ashcombe House, in Wiltshire, England.