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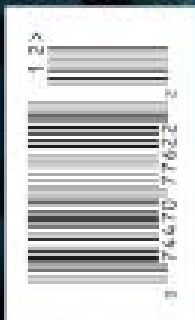
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Towering Plans

BY KEN KESSLER

Dent & Co., the maker of London's Big Ben, has big plans for this prominent name in British chronometry, including developing its own movement

If ever the watch industry begged for a neologism, one horological practice needing a fresh tag is the often-dubious ploy of breathing life into dead or dormant brands. “Chronovivification”? “Chronosuscitation”? You get the idea: this technique has been used and abused for a couple of decades, with some of the reappearances so spurious that you have to marvel at Swiss chutzpah. It deserves a name.

One comeback brand that won't suffer accusations of bogus heritage is Dent & Co. Unlike most of the (for lack of a better word) zombies currently selling faux legacies—Dent has never been out of business. The new regime is simply a change of own-

ership, and the new owners have every intention of restoring Dent's undeniable prestige. One of them put it succinctly: “Dent will reinforce its position as part of the fabric of the establishment. Ermine of course.”

Although things have been quiet on the Dent front, it's been here all along, but as a well-kept secret since WWII, producing only a few highly desirable clocks for well-heeled collectors. That is about to change.

Although less famous than John Harrison or other British names, Dent is probably the most important and certainly the most prestigious. If for no other reason than one of its commissions, Dent is known to many because the

company built the most famous clock on the planet: Big Ben.

History lesson

Big Ben's status—a true icon representing the British Empire—is so profound that it has all-but-obscured Dent's role. But secure in a history full of such achievements, and possessing a reputation placing it amongst the greatest of all watch and clockmakers, Dent & Co doesn't even need its name on the dial. That its place in the pantheon of the great houses should be defined by a single clock is a mere twist of fate.

Edward John Dent, the founder of the dynasty, was born in 1790 and as a youth was apprenticed to a tallow-chandler, a pursuit

he hated. He remedied this by studying watchmaking while living with a married couple. The husband, Richard Rippon was a watchmaker, and upon his death, Dent married his widow; Dent's two stepsons took his surname.

During this period, Dent learned about repeaters and chronometers, excelling during the period of 1815 to 1829, when he worked for Vulliamy & Son. In 1829, he further demonstrated his proficiency by creating a chronometer action that incorporated an improved method of reducing the timing errors caused by fluctuations in temperature.

A year later, Dent gladly entered into a partnership with another legend, John Roger Arnold, one of London's leading chronometer-makers; the pair called this venture Arnold & Dent. Now Dent could realize the production

of some of his designs for unusual chronometers, their novel details the result of his experiments with balances and glass hairsprings, as well as a number of astronomical clocks incorporating the ideas of Sir George Biddell Airy, the Astronomer Royal. (Dent would later be involved with Airy during the production of Big Ben.)

In February 1852, E. J. Dent had been given the order to manufacture the great clock for the Houses of Parliament, designed by Edmund Becket Denison (later Lord Grimthorpe), which would be known, erroneously, as "Big Ben" by future generations. A prototype of its Denison-devised gravity escapement had been built and tried successfully in a trial clock that is now believed to be in use as the church clock at St. Dunstan's in Cranbrook, Kent. Unfortunately, E.J. Dent passed away in 1853, so



it was left to his successors, stepsons Frederick William Dent and Richard Edward Dent, to complete the project. The business was left to both his stepsons on condition that the business continued with the same name.

Frederick (allegedly not an enthusiastic clockmaker) took over the Strand & Royal Exchange shops, and the Clock and Compass factory in Savoy Street. He also succeeded to E.J. Dent's Royal Appointment. His acquisition of the Big Ben contract was neither straightforward nor automatic: although the manufacture of the clock had been under way for some time, it was only after both legal and technical dispute that he was eventually allowed to proceed.

Without wishing to suggest that the development of Big Ben was cursed, neither E.J. Dent nor architect Augustus Pugin lived to see it in situ, and Frederick only succeeded the clock's debut by a year. It had been completed in 1854, but ran under test in the Dent workshops until the Tower at Westminster was able to accept it in May 1859.

Richard took over the Cockspur Street shop and received £10,000 towards stock. He married Marianna Fredericka Cowslade in 1850, whose initials were applied to that branch of the company, known as M.F. Dent. Meanwhile, Frederick Dent and his wife prospered until 1858, when she suddenly became ill, dying at the age of only 46. Frederick, mourning his wife and beset with the troubles involving the



Big Ben, seen from inside its tower, is one of numerous Dent public clocks.

manufacture of the Great Clock at Westminster, slid into alcoholism, dying on April 25, 1860.

Several lawsuits followed. Elizabeth Dent took over the business and she, too, inherited the Royal Appointment, although it was still legally in the name of Frederick and was so published in official journals. In 1864, the firm adopted her initials into its business style, becoming "E. Dent & Co. Watch & Chronometer Makers, To Her Majesty and H.R.H. The Prince of Wales."

Frederick Dent, in addition to completing the work on Big Ben, also constructed a special design of chronograph, used to determine the time of Transits, for the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, as well as the Standard Astronomical Clock for the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh. Frederick also made a turret clock for the Palace of Balmoral in 1857 that indicated time on four dials, each 6 feet in diameter.

Elizabeth Dent was granted the contract to maintain Big

Frank Spurrell and Twysden Moore bought Dent in 2006. Below are several new Dent designs, set for debut this fall.



cial Times, Frank has also worked with watch brands as diverse as Bell & Ross, Ulysse Nardin, Roger Dubuis, Jorg Hysek, BRM, and Victorinox Swiss Army.

As the best tales always go, he learned of Dent by accident. Relaxing one weekend with a dusty, century-old tome about the landed gentry, he happened upon an adver-

Ben, which continued until 1971. This bestowed upon her the title of “The Queen’s Most Excellent Majesty, The First Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Public Works and Buildings and Elizabeth Dent,” a major achievement for a woman in a male-dominated field and society.

Into the 20th Century, Dent continued to service the running of Big Ben, and its Marine Chronometers, deck and hack watches commissioned to serve with the Royal Navy did so until 1920, when those that had not been lost at sea were decommissioned or sold. Additionally, the British Army commissioned Dent to make the British Army watch, which became the template by which all other British Army watches should be made.

Newest Dent

During the last quarter of the Twentieth Century, with mechanical watches subject to a come-

back, the watch industry turned to reviving countless prestigious but dormant names. One of the richest veins has been that of the British makers, most of which had contributed developments in watchmaking’s early days on a scale unmatched by any other nation’s. And yet the greatest of them all, Dent, had resisted rebirth until a wholly sympathetic proprietor could be found.

Frank Spurrell, sales & marketing director of the new Dent & Co., has started the ball rolling. He has specialized in media and marketing in the luxury goods and sports sectors, both globally and in the UK, but for the last six years, he has focused on the watch industry. A founding director of Watch magazine and a writer and trend commentator for GQ and Finan-



tisement for Dent watches in the back of the volume. Because the ad attested to a range of remarkable achievements, he was baffled that this brand hadn’t been revived—or was so low key—given that there had been a rush to resuscitate far less worthy houses.

Learning of its then-current status, Frank discovered that Dent’s owner wanted to ensure that the ethos of the company was maintained. As a result of this desire to ensure the Dent name

would be honored, he turned down all offers from other prospective buyers. Surviving the scrutiny, Frank and his friend, fellow watch enthusiast Twysden Moore, bought the company in 2006, after a protracted but enjoyable three years of negotiating over tea with the previous owner, who kept the name alive with a series of rare, bespoke clocks.

They immediately engaged the services of Derek Salter, former managing director of Swatch Group UK and now CEO of Dent, to assist in developing the watch side of the business, while Cedric Astor—ex-Polo Ralph Lauren—oversees the financial side of the business. And almost immediately, Dent & Co's new management team consolidated its position as maker of historically significant pieces by securing the commission to build the new platform clock at London's St. Pancras Station, the diameter of which is only three feet smaller than Big Ben's.

New wristwatches

For the wrist, however, this autumn the firm will release its first new range of gentleman's wristwatches in over forty years. Look for a series of COSC-certified chronometers that use modified ETA movements and with dials and cases based on precedents set by Dent models from the past.

Clearly, the flagship model will be the square dress watch styled after Big Ben. As Dent is manufacturing, among other aspects of the movement, its own rotors, it has opted for a design



With an ETA base, Dent will add a power reserve module made by Soprod.

that will elicit a smile from Big Ben enthusiasts: the design is that of an old English penny—the coin still used to regulate the clock.

Derek Salter points out that, “All the movements fitted to Dent watches are certified chronometers as standard, and the cases ensure the minimum water resistance of 50 meters. And all of the movements are hand-finished.” Among the “tried and tested movements” that Dent has elected to use for the debut ranges are the Sellita SW200 with engraved gold rotor for the Big Ben model. All power reserve models will employ the Soprod 9035 module on an ETA base, the “Keyless” will also use the Sellita SW200, and the ultra-dependable Valjoux 7750 will serve the chronographs.

Acutely aware of watch enthusiasts' obsession with manufacture, Spurrell adds that, “Dent already started to develop our movements, which will be launched in 2009. Our main objective for Dent is to invest in the continued long-term future of the brand, so that the firm's near-200-year legacy is maintained. The company will continue to invest in new movements and complications, striving—like E.J. Dent—to achieve perfection.”

Even before the first watch had been delivered, Dent & Co. commenced talks with some of the finest movement designers in the industry for future projects, and they're considering a series of limited editions created by individual artisans. But any collaboration—the precedent being Arnold & Dent, founded exactly 175 years ago—will adhere to core values including strong case and dial designs, peerless craftsmanship, dependability, and innovation. Beyond that, on an historical as much as an horological basis, all Dent watches must and will exude Britishness.

Moore readily acknowledges that, even with limited word of mouth preceding the brand launch, Dent's latest incarnation has been welcomed by, “... connoisseurs who already know Dent. That's the reason why the first year's production is already sold out.” Which means that a waiting list has already formed. But that's perfectly in keeping with the brand's Britishness. After all, was it not the British who perfected the orderly queue? C