



Keeping things ticking

The British School of Watchmaking is attempting to revive interest in the centuries-old craft in order to keep up with ever-growing demand

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Drill into the statistics and the Swiss watch industry is in good, if not cautious, health. Last year the country exported 23.7 million wristwatches – amounting to SFr 19.9 billion in value, an increase of 6.1 per cent on 2017. Yet while demand remains steady, below the skin lies an issue that continues to threaten the industry: a lack of watchmakers, not only for making timepieces, but servicing the ever-increasing number entering the market each year.

The problem was so acute in the UK that back in 2004 several high-ranking people in watchmaking got their heads together to find an urgent solution. The result was the establishing of the British School of Watchmaking on the outskirts of Manchester, a non-profit organisation made possible with the support of some of the biggest names in horology. Among the nine original founding brands were the likes of Patek Philippe, the Richemont Group and Rolex, while others have come on board in the years since. As the school is a non-profit organisation that receives no government funding, these partners are vital to its continuation and success. 'Without them the school wouldn't exist,' says Jon Weston, a director at the British School of Watchmaking. 'Without their support, there would be fewer watchmakers in the UK.'

Each year the school puts a select group of budding watchmakers through a rigorous two-year, 3,000-hour programme from WOSTEP – the gold standard of watchmaking training – equipping students with the practical and theoretical knowledge to move straight into a role as a qualified watchmaker. In over a decade the school has now put 64 graduates through their paces, with every one finding employment within the industry; a 100-per-cent employment rate

that would be unusual in most other sectors.

As Jon Weston, a director at the British School of Watchmaking, notes, being a watchmaker is not the most obvious of career choices. 'Since the decades have gone on people have been attracted to different careers and I think watchmaking, although it was very strong 30 years ago, has fallen by the wayside in terms of priorities to people. So therefore you attract fewer people into it,' he says. 'I know that the brands out there have different programmes of their own but even that wasn't enough. So this is highlighting the need for the talent.'

Applicants come from diverse backgrounds: some are already working in the industry or are put forward by a watch house or retailer, while others are independent students. 'Really you are looking for people that have some kind of engineering background, or just an engineering mind sometimes helps, but it's not always absolute,' explains Weston. 'There is no point in them being academically qualified if their heart isn't in it.'

Applications now far exceed places and recently the school has expanded its offering with a new, one-year 1,800-hour WOSTEP programme specifically geared towards the service environment. 'The reason we brought it in is because we recognised that in the industry there was a need for it. We had done a certain amount of research before we considered it seriously. For some of the partners and sponsors that we work with, the appeal of having a service watchmaker within a year, rather than from a two-year course, was quite dramatic for them,' says Weston. 'Some manufacturers work under more detailed circumstances, should we say, whereas for others it is more of a sequential line. For some it might

be quartz movements that they need to exchange and to have a watchmaker that can do that within a year is a great advantage.'

The British School of Watchmaking is the first institution to run the slimmed-down course, with the first set of students having graduated this year. 'I know that all of the eyes of the industry are on us, as they want to know how it worked out. They will want to know how the students see it, how they are progressing and how they feel. And because they are all employed when they graduated the employers will also want to know what is next for the school,' says Weston. 'It is a development that is hugely required, because globally the number of watchmakers has diminished and we are only scratching the surface. I wish that we could do something on four-times the scale. Maybe one day.'

