



# South London Branch British Horological Institute

Newsletter No. 540 March 2024

## The George Daniels Dinner

As you will no doubt be aware the dinner is to be on the **18th March.**

The Menu/booking forms with payment **must** be returned to Alan Westgate by the next meeting 7th March.

## Epping Forest Horology Club

EFHC are running a number of courses covering all aspects of Horology. Full details available at [shortcourses@efhc.org.uk](mailto:shortcourses@efhc.org.uk) or see attached syllabus .

## FREE ADVERTISING FOR BRANCH MEMBERS.

Is there something you require, an obscure tool or clock/watch part. We can try and help we have had great success in the past. Just contact Bill: -  
01543506195 or [electricwilliam@gmail.com](mailto:electricwilliam@gmail.com)

Meetings are held on the 1st Thursday of each month  
At The White Hart Barn (Godstone Village Hall)  
Godstone Surrey RH9 8DU at 7.30 p.m. for 8 p.m.

"But meanwhile, time flies; it flies never to be regained." – Virgil

INSIDE THIS  
ISSUE

NEXT MEETING

February Meeting

OPEN DAY

2024  
MEMBERSHIP

George  
Daniels  
Dinner

EPPING FOREST  
HOROLOGY CLUB

Free  
advertising for  
Slbbhi members

[www.slbbhi.co.uk](http://www.slbbhi.co.uk)

**Next Month's Meeting at the White Hart barn**  
**7th March 2024.**  
**7:30 pm for an 8 oclock start.**  
**AGM.**

This meeting will be a two stage event. Firstly there will be the AGM where you have the opportunity to find out about the current state of branch affairs. There will be a report by Trevor Keast, finances will be presented by Barnaby Smith, workshop reports and the election of members of the branch committee.

**Followed by**  
**David Rooney**  
**"Sir John Bennet –**  
**His Impact on Horology".**

*John Bennett (1814–1897) was a retail clockmaker, watchmaker and jeweller based in Cheapside, London, from 1846 onwards. He has been remembered for his views on the British horological industry and his use of modern advertising, marketing and publicity methods. Bennett retired in 1889 but the company he founded continued to trade in several London locations until 1963. This talk explores the public face*

continued

*of what became known as the 'House of Bennett', offering a case study in the history of horological retail that might prompt a wider examination of the subject.*

*David Rooney is a writer and curator. He was formerly Curator of Time-keeping at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, and Keeper of Technology and Engineering at the Science Museum*

## **Last Month's Meeting at the White Hart barn**

**1<sup>st</sup> February 2024**

**Jon Clasper**

**'Early Rolex Watches'.**

### **When is an early Rolex really a Rolex?**

Telling a genuine Rolex wristwatch from a fake is not easy particularly when dealing with those made in the early days of the company which became Rolex, South London Branch members were told at their February meeting.

It was possible to find genuine Rolex watches which were not in Rolex cases, or Rolex cases which did not contain Rolex movements, but were also genuine, said retired military orthopaedic surgeon Jon Clasper.

Rolex did not invent the wristwatch - watches then known as 'wristlet watches' were available before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century - but Wilsdorf and Davis, the company which registered the Rolex trademark, and eventually became the Rolex Watch Company, helped popularise them in the early days.

Early watches from the company could be dated as pre-Rolex watches, based on the case number and other marks, Mr Clasper said.

Watches from Wilsdorf and Davis were not initially sold with the 'Rolex' mark - so people added it later on, said Mr Clasper, adding: 'If you want to sell a fake Rolex, you add "Rolex" on to try to convince people.'

Just after the First World War the Rolex Watch Company relocated to Switzerland, and it was from the 1920s onwards that the major innovations of Rolex watches occurred..

Following his talk Mr. Clasper took questions from the members. He was thanked by Duncan and enthusiastically applauded.

Mike Dodd

## **South London Branch**

### **OPEN DAY**

SLBBHI. will be holding an open day on the 5th of October 2024 full details to follow.

## **ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS.**

Branch Membership subscriptions are coming in at a steady rate with around 85% already received. Membership cards have been sent out to members who have paid (check the envelope if you didn't see it). If you received a membership form with this news letter it means I have not received your contribution yet. **If you have paid but not received your card please contact me.**

01543506195 or [electricwilliam@gmail.com](mailto:electricwilliam@gmail.com)

continued

'I think the Rolex watch was born in 1912, as a Rolex marked Rebberg movement from the Rebberg, Final and Rolex Watch Co. factory in Bienne, 'He went on': is it then correct to say, two essentially identical watches, apart from the fact one was sold in 1912 before the factory changed its name, with W & D stamped on the movement, and the other sold in 1913 with Rolex stamped on the barrel wheel, mean that a Rolex is defined by a cheap, easily removable wheel?

The Rolex official history would probably say that this is complete rubbish, and point to the fact in 1910 a Rolex was the first wristwatch in the world to receive the Swiss Certificate of Chronometric Precision from the Official Watch Rating Centre in Bienne.

'However, there is no mention of Rolex in the Rebberg advertising of the time, or in the certificate issued to the watch. On the certificate, the watch was described as a Rebberg movement – so it would appear it was Aegler who submitted the watch which was tested for that award.'

In addition, Hans Wilsdorf himself made no mention of the 1910 certificate in his Vade Mecum, published in 1946, said Mr Clasper.

In fact, Wilsdorf had written 'Another red-letter day in the development of our firm was when a small Rolex wristlet watch, 25mm in diameter, won a class "A" certificate from the famous Kew Observatory. This was on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1914, a day I shall never forget.'

In 1915 Wilsdorf and Davis officially became the Rolex Watch Company in London – most likely a change prompted by the widespread negative attitude during the First World War to anything which sounded German, which also explained why German Shepherd dogs were being called Alsatians and Dachshunds became Sausage Dogs.

In 1915, in order to raise money, the British Government introduced one third import duty, which, said Mr Clasper, was when he believed Wilsdorf started the widespread use of cases made by the Birmingham-based company Dennison.

continued

continued

Before 1912, the name Rolex appeared on few, if any watches – and lots of the movements associated with Rolex did not come from, the company either.

There was a difference, Mr Clasper said, between a Rolex watch and a watch which had come from the Rolex Watch Company – he showed one high quality watch made by the Rolex Watch Company which was in fact trade-marked and sold as a Marconi Chronometer, in a high-quality Rolex case.

There were also watches which could be described as 'almost a Rolex', which made them easy to exploit, Mr Clasper went on.

For example, Admiralty watches, a brand name Rolex registered in 1922, were made by the Rolex factory and some were almost identical to a Rolex – but an 'Admiralty', watch was commonly worth £1,000 less than a Rolex. In some cases the 'Admiralty' watch could be changed into a Rolex by swapping a few parts; it was likely that over the years many watches have become a Rolex, which also made it difficult to trace the company's history.

One of the difficulties distinguishing between watches which were Rolex and those which were not was that the factory which made Rolex also made movements and watches for other companies, such as the Dimier company, which in the early 1900s was probably the largest importer of Swiss watches into the UK and had been keen on wrist-watches for years before Wilsdorf and Davis, the firm behind Rolex, was formed.

The trick was to trace the history of the wristwatch and see where Rolex fitted in.

The British Army was using and wearing wristwatches before Hans Wilsdorf, one of the founders of Wilsdorf and Davis, appeared on the scene, Mr Clasper said.

Wrist-watches were also becoming popular in the UK – but not in America, where they were regarded as being effeminate.

In the early years of the last century, Dimier, Wilsdorf and Davis, Fulda

## Continued

and David and other UK firms were importing Swiss watches and marketing them in different ways to appeal to different people. It was important to realise they were traders, but not makers of watches.

Aegler, a Swiss watchmaking company, was where the Rolex story really needed to start.

Aegler, which was formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and had a factory in the Swiss city of Bienne, advertised a speciality in small pocket watches for women.

It's factory also produced complete watches – not just movements.

Hans Wilsdorf, who was neither a watch or clock-maker but a talented and inspirational businessman, came across Aegler around 1902-1903, and was presumably taken by the quality of that firm's watches, Mr Clasper said.

At that time the 'Rebberg' movement, which was to become synonymous with early Rolexes, was first developed. The name came from the location of the factory, in the Rebberg district.

Mr Clasper warned that the frequent portrayal of Aegler as a simple, provincial ebauche movement factory, which Wilsdorf then brought to fame was not true, as the company was already well-established, and supplying movements as well as complete watches to several companies, by the time Wilsdorf and Davis came along.

Wilsdorf and Davis was formed in 1905, with what was described as 'modest capital', working on Wilsdorf's favoured business model of importing specialty Swiss timepieces, then selling them within the British Empire.

The firm, originally based in London, opened an office in the Swiss city of La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1907, possibly as a result of the enactment that year of Imported Watch Cases Act, which required that imported gold and silver watchcases had to be assayed and hallmarked in a British assay office after being sent there by a Sponsor, who had to have registered a punch – a Sponsor's Mark – with the office.

Wilsdorf and Davis registered their W&D Sponsor's Mark in 1907, and the Rolex trade name in 1908.

Between 1907 and 1912 Wilsdorf and Davies registered a number of other names, including Lusitania, Omigra, Elvira, Marconi Lever, and Marguerite, while in 1914 it registered names referring to the Royal family which included King George Lever, Princess Royal Wristlet, Prince of Wales Lever, and the Sailor King Wristlet.

The Imported Watch Cases Act of 1907 left Wilsdorf facing a number of options on how to adapt his business model. He could no longer import a watch into the UK, and simply sell it on.

The best options were either to import already hallmarked watches, or to bring the movement in with the hands and the dial and fit it all into a hallmarked case which one either acquired within the UK or also imported from Switzerland – and it seemed that Wilsdorf did both, with imported movements being fitted into cases made by the Birmingham firm of Dennison, as well as in cases from the Rebberg factory. As it was possible to send a hallmarked case back to Switzerland, it was not clear if the final assembly of a fully Aegler watch took place in London or the factory in Bienne – Wilsdorf and Davis probably used both options.

So how do we get from Wilsdorf and Davis to Rolex?

Wilsdorf and Davis registered the Rolex mark in Switzerland in 1908, but did not register it in London until 1912 – which was interesting because Wilsdorf's niche market was importing Swiss time-keeping products, getting them hallmarked and distributing them throughout the British Empire.

Working within the biggest empire the world had known gave him access to Canada, Australia and the Far East, and Wilsdorf seemed to exploit that market more than anyone else.

Mr Clasper said he was not convinced that the Rolex mark was used on a UK hallmarked pre-1912, and added: 'I don't think Rolex watches start until about 1912.'

The company closed its office in La Chaux-de-Fonds, and then moved to Bienne in 1913, around the same time as the Rebberg factory changed its name to include Rolex.