

MEETING OF MINDS

A MOMENTOUS MEETING OF HOROLOGISTS TOOK PLACE LAST MONTH WITH THE AIM OF IDENTIFYING WHAT COMMON GROUND REMAINED AMONG THE WATCH AND CLOCKMAKERS WORKING IN THE UK AND HOW THEY MIGHT WORK TOGETHER FOR THE GOOD OF THE INDUSTRY. WATCHPRO EDITOR **JAMES BUTTERY** TOOK A FRONT ROW SEAT.

One watchmaker described it as the first time his colleagues had gathered in one place for 54 years when, at the beginning of March, the British Watch and Clockmakers Guild (BWCWG) called an extraordinary meeting of around 90 individuals involved in horology in the UK.

The watch and clockmakers gathered at Watford Football Club for a full day's agenda consisting of a range of subjects concerning present day horology in the UK.

Among the delegates were Dudley Giles, chief executive officer of the British Horological Institute (BHI), Roger Smith, Bremont co-founder

Giles English, Simon Michlmayr, Robert Loomes, Patrick Sheehan of HS Walsh, Jeremy Hobbins of the Birmingham School of Jewellery, Christopher Ward and Mike France of Christopher Ward, Watchfinder co-founder Lloyd Amsdon, Justin Koullapis of The Horological Journal and Anthony Cousins of Cousins.

First reported by WatchPro, the conference organised by Guild member Steven Domb, attracted interest both at home and internationally.

STRATEGY

The first topic of conversation looked at what, if any, unified strategy could be applied to the UK watch and clock

industry with an aim to increasing horological manufacturing on these shores. Whilst cheaper foreign labour costs were quickly identified as the main reason behind a lack of volume manufacturing in the UK, it was suggested that modern manufacturing techniques, such as additive manufacturing, could offer one possible way of encouraging companies to make the components they require in the UK.

What quickly became apparent at the conference was the lack of any UK-specific, centralised industry intelligence; something the Swiss, through the likes of the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry, excel at. The closest equivalent in the UK



appears to be the BWCMG's own annual survey into repair costs and watchmakers' salaries, but information relating to production volumes, values and the importation of spare parts was nowhere to be found.

SPARE PARTS

The supply of spare parts to independent watchmakers, a field that is becoming increasingly locked down by the big watch brands, was perhaps the day's most hotly debated subject. Legal action, citing EU competition law, against certain Swiss watch manufacturers was suggested, although the funding required for such action seemed to render the chances of this happening unlikely. Collective buying power and sourcing spare parts from territories such as the US, which has deeply entrenched antitrust legislation, seemed like more practical measures.

Luke Gleave, of Gleave & Co, said that he felt several of the major Swiss watch brands wanted to "sell you the watch, repair the watch and dispose of the watch. They want to own the watch."

For service technicians and watchmakers unable, or unwilling, to make the substantial investment in equipment required to become brand-authorised service centres, the use of generic spare parts seemed to offer the most realistic chance of being able to continue with the service and repair of such watches.

Anthony Cousins pointed out that the quality of such parts has greatly improved over the last 20 years and that the watch brands themselves were stoking the demand for such parts by restricting the supply of their own, official parts. Other delegates suggested that, in some cases, the quality of generic parts actually exceeded that of the original parts and, in the case of generic parts for Rolex movements, prices had overtaken those charged by the brand for official parts.

There was much debate over the end customer's willingness to accept such generic parts being used



in the repair and servicing of their watches but Justin Koullapis, who is also a partner at luxury pre-owned watch retailer Watch Club, added that generic parts were not a bad thing and the industry needed to stop suggesting to consumers that they were.

One delegate suggested that with watch brands increasingly taking the servicing of their watches in-house or requiring that a service centre fulfil an expensive check list of equipment to become authorised, one potential avenue for independent watchmakers was to focus on the maintenance of watches more than five years old. It was also pointed out that while the lists of equipment required by individual watch brands were, by and large, similar in specification, many listed machines from different manufacturers, which means anyone hoping to service multiple brands will have to invest in several, similar machines. The suggestion of a standardised industry list of equipment was proposed, although this would require the co-operation of multiple watch brands.

"Other delegates pointed out that, in some cases, the quality of generic parts actually exceeded that of the original parts"

Roger Smith stated that he thought it was 'impossible' to take on the Swiss in the matter of spare parts, saying: "The Swiss are protecting their brand; it's natural, it's good, sensible business practice."

Dudley Giles, commenting on a personal level rather than speaking for the BHI, suggested that independents needed to seriously consider 'scaling up' and making the investment needed to become authorised service centres; a view supported by Lloyd Amsdon of Watchfinder, who confirmed that his business had made substantial investment in fulfilling the requirements of several major brands and had seen the returns.

EDUCATION

The education of Britain's next generation of watchmakers and service technicians was a subject that few people could agree on during the course of the day. It is next to impossible to ascertain the current level of demand for watchmakers with some delegates suggesting a pressing need while others suggesting an oversupply. Each year 15 watchmaking students graduate from the Birmingham School of Jewellery with a further eight graduates passing out of the British School of Watchmaking in Manchester. The figures for West Dean College's clock courses were not available on the day.

Conflicting reports made for a

1-2

Delegates gathered at Watford Football Club in March to attend a one-day conference hosted by the British Watch and Clock Maker's Guild.



confused picture. One delegate stated that the British School of Watchmaking, the brand-backed WOSTEP programme in Manchester, had recently concluded that a second school was not required, while another cited a recent, fruitless search for watchmakers in Britain by LVMH, who eventually hired Finnish and Portuguese watchmakers.

One area most agreed upon was the discrepancy between the cost of horological education in the UK compared to courses in other countries. The Finnish School of Watchmaking, an institution that boasts Kari Voutilainen and Stepan Sarpaneva as alumni, was cited as an example. One delegate gave the tuition fees at the school as 3,000 Euros for three years with a final work placement at Audemars Piguet.

Dudley Smith announced that the BHI was currently engaged in the government's Trailblazer apprentice scheme and was seeking feedback from the industry on how many apprentices might be required and

what roles they might be asked to fulfil.

BRAND BRITAIN

The final topic of conversation covered what precisely constituted a British brand. The segment was kickstarted by a presentation from Robert Loomes which highlighted the loose, subjective guidelines applied by Trading Standards; that a product must undergo some substantial transformation in Britain before it can be labelled as Made in Britain. The monetary premium

attributable to the Made in Britain stamp at retail was surprisingly low, between three and seven percent.

In reality just about any manufacturing or assembling process could scrape under that threshold, but Loomes pointed out that, on the whole, British companies were more transparent than most about a product's point of origin. Several delegates indicated that they would be interested in working towards a voluntary code of conduct over what constitutes a British watch or clock.

The day came to a close with a far more positive, open attitude than it had begun with. Once the novelty of the gathering had subsided and the initial trepidation, clearly felt by a number of delegates, had worn off, the spirit of debate took over, leading to some useful co-operation, if no real solid conclusions. Much should be read into how long it took to clear the room at the end of the day. Now that the ball has started rolling few want it to stop. ⚡

3

A panel discusses the growing problem of restricted supply of spare watch parts.

“Several delegates indicated that they would be interested in working towards a voluntary code of conduct over what constitutes a British watch or clock”