

WatchPro

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The future **OF TIME**

WatchPro talks to the graduates of Britain's first horology degree

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ORIGINAL
PRESIDENT
DISCUSSES NEW
UK PLAN**

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION

LAST MONTH THE FIRST TEN STUDENTS FROM BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY'S **HOROLOGY** DEGREE PROGRAMME GRADUATED AND EXHIBITED THEIR FINAL PROJECTS. *WATCHPRO* EDITOR **JAMES BUTTERY** TALKS TO THE UNIVERSITY'S HEAD OF HOROLOGY JEREMY HOBBS AND TWO OF THE GRADUATES LOOKING TO MAKE A CAREER OUT OF WATCHMAKING.



When it looked as though mechanical watch movements would be completely supplanted by their quartz counterparts, watchmaking looked to be a dying profession.

Mechanical watchmaking seemed to have no future in the face of cheaper, more accurate alternatives and new technologies.

But that was before Nicolas Hayek's visionary repositioning of the mechanical watch; transforming it from everyday necessity into desirable luxury. His plan might have taken decades, but with Swatch Group's annual turnover just south of CHF 10bn and Richemont's just north of the same figure, no-one could argue that Hayek's masterstroke hasn't been a resounding success.

But in the wilderness years, between near collapse and rebirth, how many watchmakers were lost to uncertainty? No-one knows the exact figure, although it is thought around 80 percent of watchmaking jobs disappeared

in Switzerland between 1970 and 1980. Younger generations broke with family tradition in search of more promising, forward-thinking professions and the global average age of watchmakers was pushed ever higher. Today, there is an unquenchable shortage of proficient watchmakers and service technicians fuelled by the need to first make, and then maintain, the millions of mechanical watches sold around the world each year.

Education and training was neglected, or perhaps even forgotten, for too long.

Today there are many courses of renown that seek to create the industry's next generation of watchmakers, with the Swiss WOSTEP (Watchmakers of Switzerland Training and Education Programme) perhaps the most famous. In the UK, the British School of Watchmaking opened its doors to students in Manchester in 2006. The school is one of 14 global affiliates of the WOSTEP programme and was launched with ongoing funding from a consortium of watch brands and retailers including Rolex, Patek

Philippe, Breitling, Signet, Richemont, Houlden Group, Aurum and Swatch Group.

Perhaps unsurprisingly all of these established courses are vocational, seeking to train and prepare a workforce both ready and capable of servicing mechanical watches.

When Birmingham City University's (BCU) world famous School of Jewellery announced that it would be launching a BA Hons degree course in Horology in 2012 it instantly set itself apart from the norm with a course that, while practical, wasn't purely geared towards producing employer-ready watchmakers. As far as *WatchPro* can ascertain it is also unique as the world's only horology degree programme.

WatchPro spoke to Jeremy Hobbins, head of horology at the School of Jewellery.

"We are very fortunate to have very supportive industry contacts who often offer work experience to our horology students, both in the clock and watch worlds." He said. "We have much publicised relationships with Cartier (UK),



1
Rosie Kirk, second left, and Thomas Richardson, second right, receive prizes from Cartier.

2
Visitors gather at the School of Jewellery's exhibition.

3
Jeremy Hobbins, head of horology at BCU.



Christopher Ward and LVMH Watch & Jewellery UK and they all offer very valuable real world experience to our students, as well as supporting us to provide an enhanced learning experience.

“The course trains students with a niche skillset that is in high demand, and we equip them with transferrable skills that create professionalism, organisational ability, team working and the confidence to communicate effectively using a variety of media. All-round professional horologists.”

Last month the first cohort of ten Horology students graduated from the university and exhibited their final projects; clocks which had been designed during the second year of the course and manufactured between September and June.

The fact that the students were set the task of designing and producing their own clocks only served to illustrate the divide between the vocational courses of WOSTEP and the approach taken by BCU.

“There has been a huge gap in provision for training for horologists in the UK that is only just beginning to be recognised,” Hobbins said. “It is exciting to learn of other training

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“There has been a huge gap in provision for training for horologists in the UK that is only just beginning to be recognised”

WatchPro quizzed two of Birmingham City University's most promising new graduates. **Rosie Kirk** came away from the graduation prize-giving evening with no fewer than five awards, including best overall performance during the course, while **James Harris**, displays a keen eye for commercial design, producing a tourbillon mantle clock that would not look out of place in a luxury boutique in London's West End.

Q&A WITH JAMES HARRIS

JAMES HARRIS

Age 23

What led to you joining the Horology degree course at Birmingham?

I had worked in high-street jewellery stores since sixteen, which led to me developing a real interest in watches. After 6th form I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in terms of career; I actually found the School of Jewellery while searching for courses to learn to make fine jewellery. I recognised the word 'horology', read more about it, and almost instantly decided it was the thing for me. I was fortunate to be offered a place and have not looked back since. The course has without a doubt been the best choice I've ever made.

How did you find the course, were there any surprises along the way?

I certainly wasn't expecting the workload. In my final year I was in the workshop 10-12 hours a day, only to go home and continue working. You also don't realise how much watchmaking tools can really add up. The combination of those two things mean that it's not really the course for those wanting to live the stereotypical student lifestyle. In terms of the course content, in a lot of ways every day held a new surprise, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Being the first cohort to complete the course it very much evolved around us, taking into account feedback. The size of the course means that the tutors are able to react to the needs of the students very effectively.

How has the degree course prepared you for a career in horology?

I've learned a large range of skills that would help me in any range of horological roles, whether it be a service centre, clock restoration or even antiques and auctions.

Describe your graduate project.

It's a spring driven mantle-clock featuring a 60 second tourbillon, 'hidden' ceramic hybrid bearings, high-torque worm and wheel winding, and power reserve indicator on the back. It has a chapter ring dial with a skeletonised front plate, as well as glass on all four



sides of the case to make the movement as visible as possible from all angles. The project was a way to show my ability, and I really took that and ran with it, pushing myself wherever possible.

What's next for you? Do you have a position lined up?

I currently don't have anything lined up; I've been concentrating completely on the degree this year, with this last term being particularly busy. I've been sitting the BHI exams alongside the degree, and those don't finish until July so I still have a little time to find work. In the longer term I don't have any solid plans, but let's just say this definitely won't be the last time 'Harris' will be seen on a dial.

Q&A WITH ROSIE KIRK

ROSIE KIRK

Age 26

What led to you joining the Horology degree course at Birmingham?

After discovering horology, I embarked on a mission to find a way of studying it. I found out about the BHI long distance course and the course at Birmingham which was an HND at the time. I also contacted clock makers in the area to try and find an apprenticeship. After having no success with that, I started to save money for the BHI course. I soon realised that without a workshop and the tools, I wasn't going to get far by myself and so went to an open day at the School of Jewellery, where I was thrilled to find that the HND was becoming a degree.

How did you find the course, were there any surprises along the way?

The course has been all that I wanted it to be, giving me a chance to work with both clocks and watches. I came thinking that I would train in watches but was captivated by clocks and have since specialised in this area although the course allows you to continue learning the theory for both and you are constantly surrounded by people working on both so it's a great environment.

How has the degree course prepared you for a career in horology?

The degree teaches the theory of horology, which I now apply to the repair of different types of clocks and

I can use these skills in settings such as commercial restoration or museum conservation. The practical projects I've undertaken have honed my hand skills whilst learning traditional and modern manufacturing techniques will be really useful in restoration and servicing. I have also become proficient in traditional technical drawing and CAD design which means that I could go into creating my own clocks in the future.

Describe your graduate project.

The Horizon Clock is a circular wall clock. Its single hand rotates once a day around a 24 hour dial with engraved and waxed Roman numerals, half hour and quarter hour markers. A cut out centre allows you to glimpse into the mechanism which gears down to two wheels connected to the large wooden cams on the front. These cut out cams slowly rotate controlling the rise and fall of the blued arms which indicate sunrise and sunset times throughout the year, whilst the round, sunburst pointer of the hand represents the sun's path across the sky and the setting below the horizon at night.

What's next for you? Do you have a position lined up?

I feel that horology will be a life time of learning, so I want to go and work for an experienced clock restorer to begin with. I have a bench test in the next month with Richard Higgins who has a very interesting and exciting business restoring unique and rare antique clocks, so we shall see what becomes of that.

Dr James Nye
presents Rosie
Kirk with the AHS
award.





“The appeal of the BCU Course is drawing ever increasing numbers of applications to the only degree level education available in horology”

establishments being developed, apprenticeships schemes and the like. We built on our longstanding reputation for training talented horologists by creating an offer of a unique package of specialist skills training, using traditional and modern approaches to horological service/repair and conservation.”

“I’m delighted to report that the course has been very well received by the students and by all who have come into contact with it,” he said. “We have a strong cohort of students completing the course this year, and typical with any programme there is a spread across the spectrum of achievement. All

are very competent watch or clock repairers, and will make fantastic employees. Some have already been snapped up by the major watch houses, and offers and enquiries are coming in thick and fast now that they have completed their studies.”

WatchPro attended the prize-giving evening during a week-long exhibition of the graduates’ final projects, where their clocks stood side-by-side with final project jewellery from the far more established jewellery programme.

Hobbins’ assertion that there is a demand for the recent horology graduates was supported on the night by the presence on the night

of the likes of Richard Hoptroff and Chris Ward. Ward who, as well as presenting an award his eponymous watch brand had sponsored, was clearly sizing up the suitability of the young horologists as potential future employees.

“The continued development of other horological education programs such as those offered by the BHI and the Epping Forest Horology Centre show the demand for training is there.” Hobbins added. “The appeal of the BCU Course is drawing ever increasing numbers of applications to the only degree level education available in horology. Whilst training is needed at all levels, we know we are filling a need as we are constantly being asked for good watch and clock makers by employers, who are keen to employ BCU graduates.”

As anyone in watchmaking will attest the profession is not for everyone, with a certain focus required. The cohort lost two of its initial 12 students and Hobbins is clear to point out to potential students that the course requires dedication saying, “People’s lives change sometimes and alter their decisions to study full time, and we respect that. Every learner is supported to reach their potential as much as possible, but this is a major commitment in terms of time and money, and all horologists will know that you only get good by working really hard.”

Course fees for the horology degree are £9,000 per year - which the university points out, is on a par with other similar qualifications - with an estimated additional £1,500 per year needed to pay for tools and materials.

But Hobbins is convinced that it is an investment that will see a healthy return, saying: “I always stress to applicants to make sure you can afford it, as the investment is worth it in terms of the skill set you will acquire and the employment opportunities available to successful students.” ↴

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Edward Mason,
whose clock was
awarded best
masterpiece at the
exhibition.