

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH HOROLOGICAL INSTITUTE

The Horological Journal



JANUARY 2022
www.bhi.co.uk



The History of Vertex

A Brief Account of Watches for the British Army

David Read



The name Vertex started with Hirst Bros & Co of Oldham, Lancashire. A major jewellery retailer and manufacturer of horological tools that was founded in 1884, this was the first company to use Vertex as the name of a watch. In 1900, Hirst Bros bought a consignment of pocket watches made by the newly founded Lancashire Watch Company and required a name for the new watches which were about to be marketed. The name Vertex was chosen by Alfred Hirst, the company's managing director. A small number of Vertex pocket watches were sold before the Lancashire Watch Company became insolvent in 1910 and the name Vertex, which was not registered, died with it – or so it seemed.

Six years later the name Vertex appeared again when Claude Lyons, a watch retailer in Hatton Garden, London, imported Swiss movements, provided them with dials signed Vertex, and initially fitted them in cases made in England by the Dennison Watch Case Company. The horological historian and author Alan Shenton described these early movements imported by Claude Lyons as 'coming from various sources'¹ and this was confirmed in the *HJ* with the words: 'The first Vertex watches were imported movements of various origins to which the name Vertex was applied.'²

However, importing movements from different makers made it difficult to maintain consistent quality and an agreement was eventually made in which all watches carrying the Vertex name would be manufactured and cased by Thommen A. G., maker of the internationally successful Thommen Revue wristwatch. Thommen then used the Revue movement for the Vertex. In consequence, the Vertex and the Revue became, in all respects, the same watch and the dials and movements are often signed with both names as Vertex Revue.

Today, there is an active interest in military watches and Vertex features strongly in this respect. Between World Wars I and II, Vertex waterproof and shockproof watches in stainless steel cases with dials signed 'Allproof' were imported and retailed by Mappin, marked on the dial and case-back with the broad arrow, **Figure 1**.

During WWII, the Army did not possess wristwatches for general use and the Ministry of Supply had no option but to buy watches that were made by Swiss manufacturers for the civilian retail trade. In the absence of an in-house Army specification, they were classified as Army Trade Pattern (ATP), and issued under the ATP store's reference. Many Swiss companies, including Vertex watchmaker Thommen A. G., supplied ATP watches to the Ministry of Defence. The Vertex name, however, was not used on ATPs.

Inevitably, ATP watches were of variable quality and in cases that were not sufficiently rugged or waterproof. The MoD needed to replace them with a wristwatch made to a standard suited to the Army's requirements and this gave rise to specification R.S./Prov/4373A, known as W.W.W. to



Figure 1. Mappin Vertex Allproof 2.

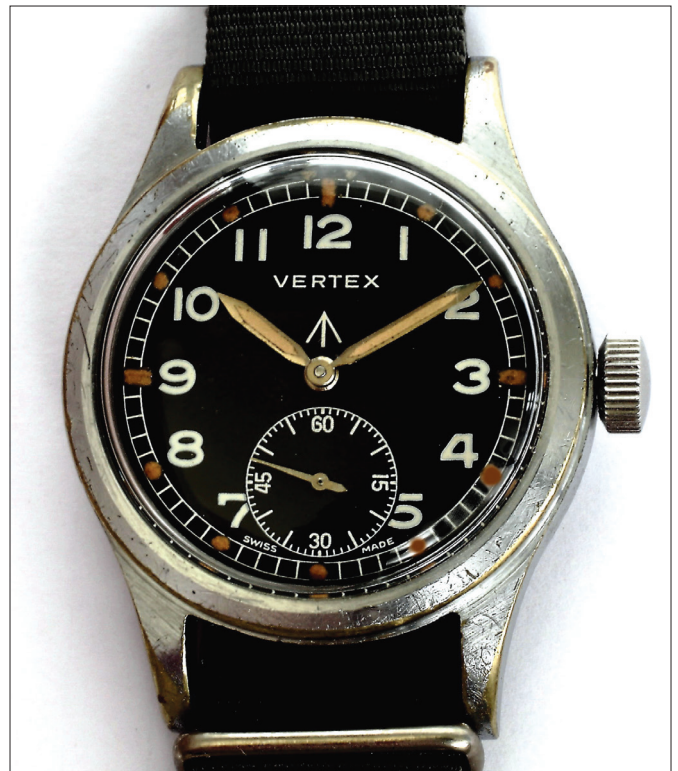


Figure 2. Vertex WWW.

stand for 'watches, wristlet, waterproof'. Watches made to the W.W.W. specification, **Figure 2**, were designed to be used as a normal wristwatch in a general service capacity. Claims on the Internet that they were used in a technical capacity such as navigation are incorrect.

The W.W.W. specification was approved in 1945 and twelve manufacturers were appointed as suppliers: Buren, Cyma, Eterna, Grana, Jaeger-LeCoultre, Lemania, Longines, International Watch Co., Omega, Record, Timor and Vertex. Deliveries started in May 1945 following the unconditional surrender of Germany and, with the war in Europe over, they were mostly issued to the Army in the Far East, which was engaged in supporting the British Military Administration in Malaya that was formed to govern the island following the surrender of the Japanese in September 1945.

The W.W.W. specification called for a movement of the 'non-magnetic lever type embodying not less than 15 jewels, fitted with an overcoil balance spring, and Incabloc or other approved shock-absorbing device. The watch to be tested at 32°C in four specified positions. The daily rate of any two of the four positions not to exceed 40 seconds. Each watch to be engraved on both the outside and inside of the caseback with the letters WWW together with the code letter of contractor, and the serial number of the case.

'The watch shall be of the luminised wristlet type in a stainless steel or other approved metal waterproof case, and shall be capable of withstanding tropical conditions.'

In spite of these words, only the Longines was fitted with shock protection for the balance pivots and, in addition, many suppliers' cases were subject to corrosion. This latter fact was confirmed in the 1954 Ministry of Supply Corrosion Report No. 1309, W.W.W. Vertex, which stated: 'Arising from a series of defect reports from the Director of Military Equipment Far Eastern Land Forces reporting severe corrosion on the back case cover of watches WWW during normal use in Malaya, a typical corroded case back was examined. The sample was Vertex No. A.11872, returned from 1st Battalion, The Somerset Light Infantry and showing pitting and corrosion of considerable severity.'

As with the ATP category, W.W.W. watches supplied to the Army failed to be suitable for service conditions and the specification again needed to be replaced. Therefore, a working party was formed by the Engineering Standards Co-ordinating Committee with the purpose of developing a new General Service specification for a wristwatch that would be common for all three armed forces.

Its first meeting took place on 11 November 1948 and this led to Defence Specification No. 3 (DEF-3), *General Specification for Wrist Watch, General Service* published on 1 September 1951. It marked the end of the W.W.W. category and with it the MoD-sponsored manufacture of the Vertex brand. Today, military watches have a strong following in the collectors' market and the twelve manufacturers of the W.W.W. are known as 'The Dirty Dozen'.

REFERENCES:

1. Alan Shenton, *Pocket Watches of the 19th and 20th Century*, (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 1995), p160.
2. 'Revue Watches for the British Market', *Horological Journal*, vol 93 (March 1951), p164.


More than a century on from the founding of the Vertex name, a re-edition of the watch – the Vertex Redux – is being produced and sold by Don Cochrane, who is a direct descendent of the Lyons family. An interview with Cochrane by Ken Kessler can be found online at <https://revolutionwatch.com/vertex-the-second-coming/>



The Clocks Magazine Expert Library

JUST TWO
OF THE
BESTSELLING
GUIDES IN
OUR POPULAR
EXPERT LIBRARY
SERIES. TO
ORDER AND SEE
WHAT ELSE WE
HAVE VISIT OUR
WEBSITE.

clocksmagazine.com



"Columbia is home to one of the world's only horology museums"

—Smithsonian Magazine

The Smithsonian Magazine ranked Columbia, PA, among the top 20 best small towns to visit in the United States, in part, because of its strength in history.

The National Watch & Clock Museum in Columbia includes 19th-century American clocks and watches and timekeepers from around the world.

National Association of
WATCH&CLOCK
Collectors, Inc.

UPCOMING
EVENTS

2021 NAWCC
National Convention

July 15–18 • Hampton, VA
Chair: Judy Draucker

2021 NAWCC
Ward Francillon
Time Symposium

October 7–9 • Philadelphia, PA
Chair: Bob Frishman

Check out www.museumoftime.org
for more info.