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Derek Pratt wristwatch Calibre 'DP 07'

*A 'Resolved' Derek Pratt Wristwatch
Now Finally Available*



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Perpétuel Gallery, a watch boutique in the United Arab Emirates, has collaborated with the Italian watchmaker Luca Soprana of 7h38 Studio to release a limited series of seven hand-made watches in the name of Derek Pratt, the English watchmaker who passed away in 2009.

The watch, illustrated on the covers of this *HJ*, has a frosted salmon dial with Eastern-Arabic numerals, in keeping with the background of the commissioning boutique. They have dubbed the calibre 'DP 07'. This is not the first wristwatch in the Derek Pratt wristwatch story, but represents the most current developments.

The technical features of the watch include:

- Train remontoire, activated by a Reuleaux triangle
- Jumping dead-seconds, on a subsidiary dial
- Twin mainsprings

One of Derek's trademark devices was the use of a remontoire. To recap, this is a device inserted within the power flow of the wheel train, breaking the direct connection between the escapement and mainspring. Inevitable variations in torque arising from mainspring development and imperfections in the train are therefore isolated from the escapement. Every so often (Derek favoured once a second), the remontoire is activated and doles out a small and practically constant amount of torque to the escapement-side of the train. This affords a high degree of escapement amplitude stability.

To alternately lock and unlock the remontoire in his watches, Derek mounted a Reuleaux triangle to the escape wheel arbor. This is straddled by a two-tined fork. As the escape wheel turns, the fork gently oscillates left and right, locking and unlocking the adjacent remontoire. His early watches had the triangle out of hardened steel, and in later models, he made them out of sapphire. The difficulty and delicacy of this arrangement cannot be understated. Derek imposed a maximum allowable error of two microns to any aspect of the system; the outcome is fascinating and technically instructive to read!

Derek became so well known for using this system that it has become associated with his name even in Switzerland. He was fascinated by Reuleaux triangles, to the point of buying a Wankel-engined Mazda sports car. In the Derek Pratt wristwatch, train and other wheelwork is consigned to the dial side of the pillar plate, faithfully giving Derek's Reuleaux remontoire prominence in the visible part of the movement.

Derek sometimes used an unusual type of mainspring barrel, called a standing barrel. In this arrangement, the usual roles of the barrel and arbor are reversed. The barrel contains the spring in the normal way, with the outer hooking fixed to this. This barrel does not rotate except during winding.



Figure 1. The dial side of the limited edition watch shown on the covers. Other variations are available.

The eye of the spring is hooked to the arbor as normal, but the arbor rotates during running, and is attached to the great wheel. Power to the train is thus delivered by the arbor. In practise, the arbor has a second upended 'barrel' attached to it carrying the great wheel teeth. This conceals the standing barrel. An advantage of this type of barrel is that in the event of a mainspring breakage, the shock is delivered to the fixed barrel and steel keyless work, rather than to the wheel train.

The system is hinted at by the polished steel cap fastening the great wheel to the arbor by three screws. These are visible on the twin barrels of some of Derek's pocket watches, although it is unclear whether this new wristwatch truly uses this system.

Derek is said to have wanted centre seconds in the wristwatch. However, this has been a constant source of trouble in the watch development, partly related to the movement's high torque relative to an equivalent non-remontoire watch. The prototypes and production models preceding the one now shown in *HJ* had this system, but the perpétuel edition has a small seconds hand, naturally indicating jumping dead-seconds following the remontoire action.

The timeline leading to the realisation of this watch has seen the participation of a number of stakeholders. The prime mover was Derek Pratt himself, working with Stewart

Lesemann, an American watchmaker in Switzerland. Ron DeCorte, watchmaker and veteran of online wristwatch exposition, also declared an early involvement. Lesemann published a detailed account of the wristwatch in 2011 at the BHI's Derek Pratt Memorial Seminar, including this background information: 'In late 2008 I was approached by Derek with the idea of making a wristwatch. Derek was in poor health at the time, and quite busy with his H4 project, and thus needed help if it was to go forth.'

'The basic plan was for Derek to lay out the concept in a detailed manner, and I would then produce drawings and eventually a movement. I was very honoured to have been asked to help, as Derek was well known for working alone. Over several meetings in the following months Derek explained exactly what he wanted and, in early 2009, work began on an initial prototype. Once the first prototype proved satisfactory, a second one was started. This movement would take on the final form of the watch. Here quite a bit of discussion was needed, as I was working from verbal instructions, going to Derek for approval on each stage as work progressed. When the drawings were to Derek's satisfaction work commenced on the actual watch.'

'The watch that has been brought here for this symposium is a third and final prototype... Derek's wish was that this watch might be produced in a limited series, knowing that this would take place after he was gone. I hope that it may happen, but I am very pleased to have worked on a project with someone who was a great mentor and friend for many years.'

Around 2018, Ron DeCorte wrote to the *HJ* in an unpublished note: 'It was only after I had moved to Switzerland in 2008 that we agreed to give the idea a try as long as I agreed to see it through to fruition.'

'My friend and former student Stewart Lesemann was also living in Switzerland long enough to have established a fine little workshop in Nyon and was eager to join our team. The initial designs were taken to Derek in Balm for his input and approval. Unforeseen circumstances moved the project to the back burner until 2015... the current design stage that has proven very stable and will be presented publicly in spring 2018.'

Late prototypes of the Derek Pratt wristwatch were indeed shown in 2018, with the first finished piece, the DP01, in Argentium silver with engine-turned dial by Kees Engelbarts, released in 2020.

Regarding his own involvement, Luca Soprana writes: 'In 2009, Stewart Lesemann, one of the watchmakers working with me today, developed an initial prototype inspired by Derek Pratt's chronometer principles. In 2014, with the approval of Jenny Haller Pratt, Derek's wife, I took over the project and completely redesigned the calibre with the *remontoir d'égalité* and the two flying barrels in the motor barrel configuration, where the barrel axis is integrated with the axis, while the transmission gearing is integrated with the shaft. The philosophical approach is exemplary, philologically faithful to Derek's initial design.'

This description is completely opaque. It also seems to imply that the present watch does not use standing barrels at all in the usual sense. *HJ* has not been able to obtain further information.



Figure 2. Derek Pratt 'Ovale' Tourbillon watch made for Urban Jürgensen.

Derek's wife, Jenny, is quoted as saying: 'As Derek's widow, it is not easy for me to express my own thoughts on watchmaking matters. And now, 13 years after Derek's untimely death, I am proud to be involved in this new and exciting project, which Luca has described much better than I could. Working together with Luca and his team and having had the opportunity to meet Hamdan al Hudaidi and Melika Yazdjerdi [co-founders of Perpétuel] has been most inspiring. I am so impressed by their fervent wish to keep Derek's name alive. And, together with Derek's daughters, Caroline and Mary, I very much look forward to seeing how this project evolves in future years.'

'The prospect of an upcoming series with engine-turned dials is particularly close to my heart as they will echo Derek's own beautiful handmade dials. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude for

the harmonious collaboration which I have experienced over the past few years with the dedicated watchmaker Luca and the Perpétuel team. My sincere thanks on behalf of the Pratt family to everyone involved.'

It should be added that the Perpétuel series of Derek Pratt watches are not the only models available – one may also be able to obtain Pratt wristwatches of the 'classical' series from Ron DeCorte in the USA.

I was personally surprised to see the rather heavy and generic design of the case. The dial also has nothing of the exquisite openness and lightness for which Derek's work is revered. Derek's original watch hands, too, are a masterclass in restraint and elegance. The hands of the present wristwatch have taken their inspiration from elsewhere. On the other hand, the movement design is well within the spirit of the prototypes Derek agreed with Stewart Lesemann, and one must stand in awe at its beautiful finish. Whatever one makes of the design, the launch of this watch certainly helps revitalise the name of Derek Pratt, one of the 20th century's great watchmakers. His story is now being re-told in all the popular outlets. Before the 2011 BHI seminar and book, and the work by Derek's ambassadors such as Charles Frodsham & Co. with their famous completion of Pratt's 'H4', very few people in horology had heard of him. Lesemann, Perpétuel, and all the other stakeholders are to be commended for bringing the project to realisation. At least after such a long gestation, a *resolved* Derek Pratt wristwatch is finally available, even if it is not the one we expected. One supposes, hopes, that future iterations of this watch will enjoy refinements to the design.

The perpétuel edition is 110,000 USD, although all 7 have been sold.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Tim Treffry and to Jim Arnfield for their helpful discussions on the operation of a standing barrel. Also, there is an informative web page at <http://www.pocketwatchrepair.com/how-to/mainspring-barrels.php> (accessed 14 March 2023).

REFERENCES

1. Timothy Treffry (ed.), *Derek Pratt, Watchmaker* (Upton: British Horological Institute, 2012), pp33–36.

The second edition of this book, published in 2018 is expanded to 224 pages from 205 and is still available in limited quantities from the BHI.

