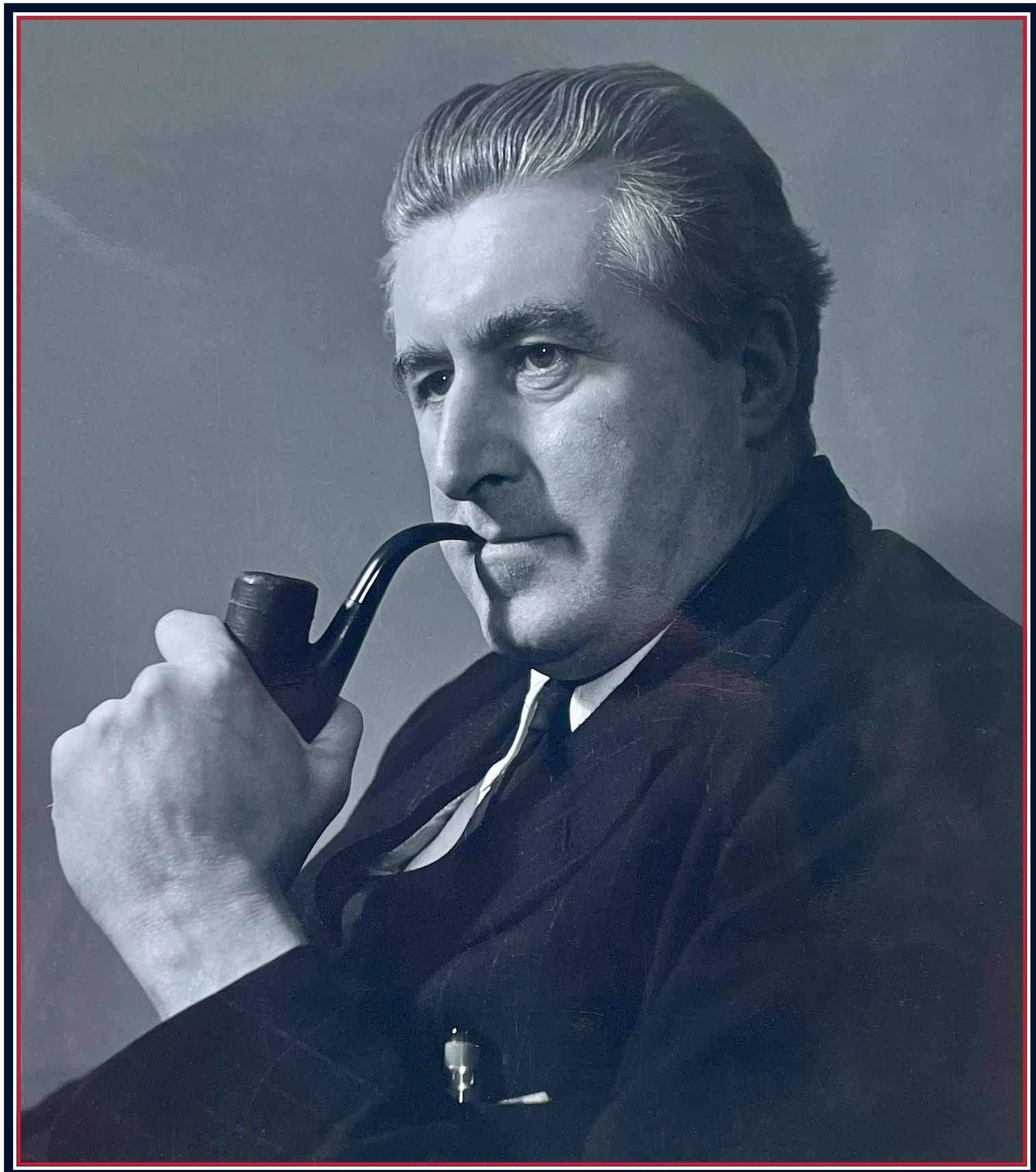


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The Tale of the ‘69’

*Shedding Light on the Not-so Well-Known History
of an IWC Pocket Watch Calibre*

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In the world of watchmaking we are given to talk about icons. Every company and every brand has its own icon; that Holy Grail timepiece that is sought-after by watch collectors worldwide, and on which marketers build their stories. However, for all watch companies, there are also the ‘silent ones’: those watches or movements that the community, by and large, is not aware of. A calibre that is generally not a talking piece among collectors.

Given this, it is therefore of great interest to delve into the details of those specific movements, about which peer groups may say: ‘Well, I’ve heard about it but I’m not sure about the details.’ This account is about such a movement from IWC Schaffhausen that stands in the shadow of its famous brothers and sisters, and which has been, until recently, largely forgotten. The authors wish to unveil the latest research and figures of the manual-wind IWC calibre 69.

IWC in the Late Nineteenth Century – a Background

IWC was founded by the American F. A. Jones. The history of Jones has been intensively researched over the past two decades. Regarding the history of the period spanning the late 1870s, 1880s and 1890, there are primarily two publications that shed light into the business history of the International Watch Company of Schaffhausen¹.

F.A. Jones founded IWC in 1868. His entrepreneurial ideas and concept business plan was ground-breaking and innovative, certainly for the late nineteenth century. With the aid of eminently qualified Swiss watchmaking professionals, state-of-the-art machine technology, and utilising hydro-electric power from the Rhine, his objective was to manufacture high-quality pocket watch movements for the US market. Certainly, his ideas could be fruitful, as, despite his youthfulness (Jones was only 27 at the time), he brought with him a detailed knowledge about the American watch market and a passion to succeed.

The challenge was to be able to secure finance, as ambitious investments were required in infrastructure, personnel and machinery. From day one, Jones was obliged to continuously seek investors. However, unable to meet his shareholders’ high expectations and return on investment, Jones was obliged to return to America in 1875.

Even though Jones had left the company and no longer resided in Schaffhausen, his idea and vision for the International Watch Company remained strongly in the mind of some of his key shareholders. This was the reason why, in about 1880, the Rauschenbach family, a Schaffhausen family of industrialists and former investors in the company, acquired ownership of it based on processes of watch manufacturing implemented by Jones.

A key factor of the restart process initiated by the Rauschenbach family was that the new management team consistently improved the manufacturing process, and new watch movements were designed and brought to market.



Figure 1. Calibre 69 manufactured in 1906.

Under Johannes Rauschenbach-Schenk, in 1884, IWC started producing the first Pallweber pocket watches with digital display for the hours and minutes. Looking at the portfolio of movements of IWC from the late 1870s to around 1900 we see a substantial array of very different construction aspects and designs. IWC was experimenting and constructing to find the best movements in terms of productivity and appeal to customers. Following the death of Johannes Rauschenbach-Schenk, Ernst Jakob Homberger took over at the helm of IWC in 1905.

The ‘69’

As mentioned, IWC launched an array of different movements during the period of 1880–1890. For a better understanding of the history of the calibre 69, we must first take a look into

a specific movement design initially introduced in that era: the calibre 65 *Lépine* (open face) and the calibre 66 *Savonnette* (hunter) – the so-called ‘finger bridge’ movements.

For IWC this design concept was new, given the primary focus since inception had been based on the movement first known as a three-quarter plate movement². So the question arises as to why IWC started to build these ‘finger bridge’ movements.

Investigation shows that presumably this design requirement was caused by demand from the markets for thinner movements. Given that IWC’s manufacturing technology and production skills were successively optimised in the 1880s, IWC was by then able to produce these ‘finger bridge’ movements in significant quantities. From an operational point of view these successes then allowed IWC to expand its range of movements further.

The international market was evolving, and by the late 1880s and early 1890s, consumers were demanding high-quality ‘finger bridge’ movements. Research into the archives and sales figures shows that IWC was, at the time, responding successfully to the new market needs for these Swiss manufactured pocket watches. Thus it’s clear that the sales strategy and cultivation of the Swiss and European markets played a very important role in the introduction in Schaffhausen of these ‘finger bridge’ movements.

The first series of the new calibre 65 ‘finger bridge’ movement, open face, was the 264 series. The IWC Schaffhausen archives show that the first watch of this series was sold to Paris-based IWC wholesaler, Louis Erbeau & Cie, on 23 November 1893. The hunter pocket style version was later produced for the first time with the series 315, with the first watch of that series being sold some twenty months later, on 31 August 1895, to Carl Engelkemper in Münster, Westphalia (German Reich).

During the same period, it is evident that the IWC sales team was also involved in the naming conventions for this movement, and quite explicitly the name given to these movements also refers to the primary sales area of the calibre 65/66-based pocket watches.

From 1898, these movements are marketed under the name LUTETIA (The Gallo-Roman town of Lutetia was the predecessor of the modern-day city of Paris). Accordingly, it’s clear that this marketing was aimed at the French-speaking world and/or connoisseurs of watches from this region.

Demand was high and within another two and a half years, another ‘finger bridge’ movement appeared – the calibre 69. This movement was significantly smaller than the 19 ligne (43.15 mm) Lutetia movements, and calibre 69 produced at 16 ligne had a diameter of just 36.09 mm.

The first sale of a watch based on the calibre 69 took place on 9 February 1898 when six watches, all with 18-carat gold cases and *argente* (silver) dials were sold to London-based IWC wholesaler, Stauffer. The Schaffhausen archives reflect that this movement carried the designation ‘calibre 69’ since its design inception. In addition, the well-known reference publication regarding IWC Pocket watch movements, ‘*CALIBRES DER INT. WATCH. CIE, CA. 1920ER JAHERE BIS 1967*’ lists this movement as a calibre 69.

Remarkably, there is a note in the archives indicating that a hunter pocket watch variant of the movement was also planned as calibre 70. However, as best as can be ascertained, this movement was never manufactured, and no known examples exist.

In 2014 rumours among IWC collectors came up that a first series of calibre 69 movements should have been 18 ligne, but research during 2022 of the archives shows that this was not the case, and all cal. 69 movements were indeed 16 ligne, with some being mounted in larger sized cases using a metal mounting ring.

So, when looking at the IWC 69 layout and design the first impression is that it was ‘downsized’ – being a smaller version of its predecessors, the highly successful calibre 65/66 movements.

Looking at the portfolio and strategy behind IWC pocket watch movements of that time, it seems that there was an objective by IWC management to have, for each pocket movement in their portfolio, a smaller counterpart equivalent movement designed specifically for smaller pocket watches, i.e. for women’s pocket watches. Other than the calibre 69, another clear example of this design concept is the scaled down version of the 19 ligne IWC 52/53, namely watches with calibre 63/64. However, these were smaller 12 ligne movements and not 16.

The authors therefore raise the fact that it is possibly incorrect to adopt an assumption that the calibre 69 would be a ladies’ pocket watch movement, and any such statement may not be correct. Rather, here we can speak of a miniaturisation, and we have to assume that this movement is an idea born out of the spirit of the times: to produce a ‘finger bridge’ movement with a smaller diameter, intended for pocket watches for men. This conjecture arises because the archive resources in Schaffhausen also refer to the calibre 69 movements sometimes as ‘Lutetia’, like the calibre 65/66.

The size of the caliber 69 is described as a ‘16 *Lignes de Paris* diameter/36mm’, with a total movement height of only 4.7 mm. Most probably the diameter of the movement was reduced to keep the ratio between height and diameter correct. This could explain the 16 ligne.

The movement was originally planned in 1896 under the supervision of the then-director Johann Vogel. He started work at IWC on 11 July 1882 and retired on 30 June 1919, holding the position of Technical Director, to which he was appointed in the mid-1880s. His position and status within the company is reflected in the fact that in 1889 he was given collective power of attorney together with Urs Haenggi.

It’s interesting to see in the records that all planned calibre 69 movements were manufactured and sold. The last known calibre 69 sale dates from 29 August 1907, when Stauffer in London bought 21 open face pocket watches in silver cases, **Figures 2 and 3.**

Technical Description, Cases and Size

Given the above findings around the development of the calibre 69, it therefore became important to research and document whether there are other technical differences between the calibre 69 and the earlier mentioned calibre 65, other than size reduction.

Based on this research, we can draw a concrete conclusion as to whether this movement was a completely original development designed from scratch and created by Director Vogel and his team or ‘just’ a miniaturisation of the then-existing calibre 65. From a technical point of view, it can also be said that the calibre 65, which had been in production since 1893, is the forerunner of the calibre 69 (if this comparison is at all permissible).

It is certain that the calibre 69 has more similarities to the first IWC bridge movement, the calibre 65, than for example

159981/6	177461/6	6	Lép. cal. 69-16" or 18K 25 gr. 400 pd. or.	127-	762.-
		42	lentille polies s'ach. av. enbr.		3491.-
			11 376 x fact.		316.20

Figure 2. First known sales of the '69' on 9 February 1898, as shown in the sales records.

1896	69 16	36	4.70	•	•	égl	Antistia
	70 16	36	4.70	•	•	lav	mi ch. au g. f. h. d.

Figure 3. The two versions of the calibre 69 and 70. Note the height is explicitly shown as 4.7 mm.

Calibre No. 69.
Extra plat. Lépine 16 à 18 lignes.

No.	Calibre No. 69. Lépine 16, 17 et 18'''	Prix par pièce fr.
1292	Bâillet doré	—, 70
1293	Ressort de barillet	—, 60
1294	Rochet	—, 40
1295	Couronne	—, 40
1296	Vis pour rochet	—, 15
1297	Arbre de barillet	—, 90
1298	Tige de remontoir	—, 30
1299	Pignon de remontoir	—, 30
1300	Pignon de mise à l'heure	—, 40
1301	Grand renvoi de mise à l'heure	—, 20
1302	Petit renvoi de mise à l'heure	—, 20
1303	Cliquet	—, 30
1304	Porte Cliquet	—, 30
1305	Ressort de cliquet	—, 35
1306	Ressort de mise à l'heure	—, 20
1307	Croix de Malte	—, 20
1308	Doigt d'arrêtage	—, 20
1309	Raquette	—, 50
1310	Coquet serti à chaton et doré	—, 60
1311	Plaque pour piton	—, 30
1312	Chaton de petite moyenne	—, 75
1313	Chaton de champ	—, 75
1314	Chaton d'échappement	—, 75
1315	Roue grande moyenne dorée	1, —
1316	Roue petite moyenne dorée	—, 80
1317	Roue de champ dorée	—, 80
1318	Canon	—, 20
1319	Roue de minuterie	—, 25
1320	Chaussée	—, 25
1321	Roue d'échappement avec pignon pivoté	2, 50
1322	Ancre garni	3, 75
1323	Plateau double avec ellipse	—, 80
1324	Balancier	2, 75
1325	Spiral Breguet avec piton	5, —
1326	Piton	—, 15
1327	Axe de balancier pivoté	2, 50

Figure 4. Catalogue de Fournitures N°2, 1902.

the flatter but larger diameter calibre 73/74, which was first manufactured in 1913/14. Crucial for this consideration is the comparison of the bridge alignment, i.e. the angle between the bridges. This is far more likely to match between the 69 and 65 calibres than the corresponding angle between the 69 calibre and the 73 and 74 calibres.

The calibre 69 watches to be found in the records show that in total 2,100 were planned, and it is estimated that circa 98% of these movements/watches were manufactured and sold:

- Series 391, Lépine cal. 69, 16'''
No. 159901–160200, first sold 9 February 1898, last sold 30 October 1899.
- Series 427, Lépine cal. 69, 16'''
No. 178201–178500, first sold 11 August 1899, last sold 27 August 1901.

- Series 526, Lépine cal. 69, 16'''
No. 236401–236700, first sold 17 September 1901, last sold 30 March 1903.
- Series 584, Lépine cal. 69, 16'''
No. 270901–271200, first sold 15 May 1903, last sold 4 November 1905.
- Series 615, Lépine cal. 69, 16'''
No. 289201–289800, first sold 30 April 1904, last sold 17 December 1906.
- Series 727, Lépine cal. 69, 16'''
No. 351101–351400, first sold: 19 July 1906, last sold 29 August 1907.

The operations department records show that 1,800 pieces were manufactured through to the end of 1903. For these listings there is no indication of the movement height.

In addition, there is a listing of a final 300 pieces being manufactured in 1906 with the height indication ‘H5: 351101–351400 Lép. c. 69-16 lig’. We assume that in all series the overall height of the movements was the same.

From both the description in the *Catalogue de Fournitures N°2*, **Figure 4**, as well as inspection of all known watches in existence, we understand that this movement was exclusively made with a total movement height of 5 mm, which is also expressed in the name ‘*Extra Plat*’.

Furthermore, adding to the mystery of these calibre 69 movements, this catalogue describes the listed spare parts for ‘Lépine 16, 17 & 18 lignes’ movements. However, so far, only movements with a diameter of 16 lignes are known and have been found in the archive records of the production numbers.

Another explanation for the fact that only one size, e.g. 16 ligne, has been produced is that whilst three sizes – 16, 17 and 18 lignes – are mentioned in the *Catalogue de Fournitures N°2* there is only one number for the spare parts. That means that there was only one size, the 16 ligne. If a customer wanted a bigger diameter case for the calibre 69 he had to purchase a casing ring and the same spare parts numbers.

An astonishing fact is that the calibre 69 was the first IWC movement to be designed ‘laterally reversed’ from the outset, in accordance with the theory of optimum fine timing and best possible synchronism developed by Karl-Moritz Grossmann. This new/modified construction is known to have been used by IWC only since 1904 for the Lépine movements, such as the calibre 52 and updated versions of the cal.57 and 65. These movements were produced in large numbers, and, at the same time, with newly patented keyless work.

An interesting fact, and possibly evidence that the calibre 69 was not meant to be continued in the future, is that the last series of the calibre 69, produced in 1906, was not converted and still had central screws in the upper keyless wheels, the construction of which had been in use since 1891. Regarding the mentioned spare parts book No.2 from 1902 and other catalogues, it must be noted that all the illustrated movements still show the old construction and keyless work, **Figure 5**.

Sales and Distribution

During the past few decades, the calibre 69 was always considered a very rare and almost untraceable movement. Many collectors report that the watches were mostly chance finds – often with much doubt as to whether they were genuine IWC or not. The question arises whether this perceived rarity might be related to where or to whom the watches were sold.

Whilst many of the calibre 69 watches were sold to the French and English markets, it is also interesting to discover now that more than half of these were sold into foreign markets, with watches also being sold into Alexandria, Egypt.

Since 1897, the holding company to Stauffer, Son & Co., based in La Chaux de Fonds and London, was the firm Nicolet Fils & Cie, also based in La Chaux de Fonds. They, too, had a presence on the English market through their London based branch and, among other things, marketed IWC watches under the ‘Peerless’ trademark.

Presumably Stauffer/Nicolet exerted considerable influence on IWC’s model policy and quality characteristics simply because they procured significant volumes of watches from Schaffhausen. Whilst no hard evidence to the fact exists, one could assume that possibly these calibre 69 movements/watches were developed specifically for Stauffer/Nicolet’s technically demanding dealers and customers in the British

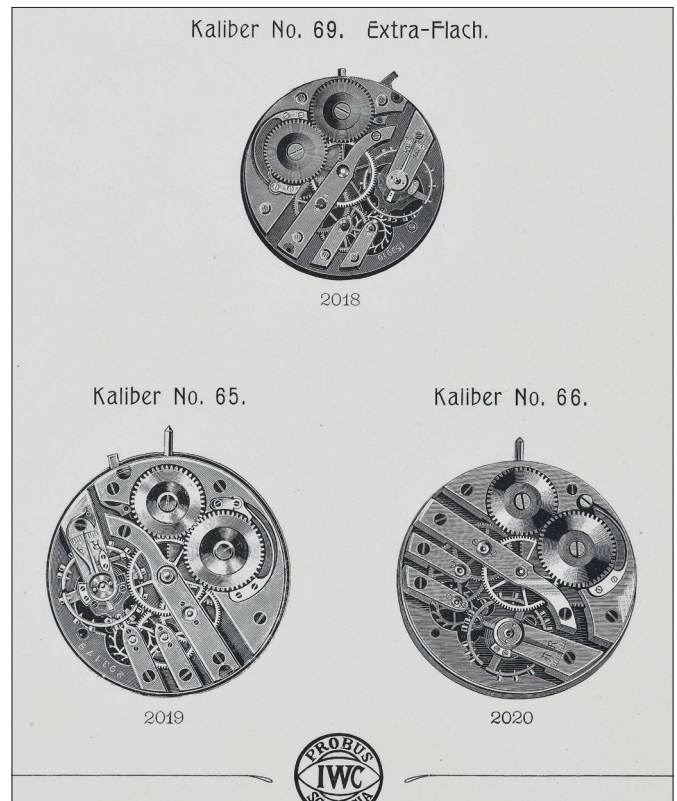


Figure 5. IWC Catalogue (German) c. 1903 to 1905.

Empire for a flat and smaller version of the ‘finger bridge’ movements, as alluded to earlier in this article.

Calibre 69 watches were mainly encased in ‘traditionally’ styled cases. However, there are some known and very nice exceptions, like the watch bearing movement 289627, which was sold in an 18-carat gold IWC case in a half-hunter configuration on 27 January 1906, to Stauffer in London.

In conclusion, it can be said that the 69 calibres held a special position in terms of design and sales within IWC Schaffhausen. This stems from the particularly advanced R&D in existence at the time as well as from the small quantities that were apparently manufactured and produced only after corresponding orders were submitted.

The question remains as to why IWC discontinued or ceased manufacture of this movement. We can only assume that based on decreasing demand from the marketplace by the early 1900s, these ‘finger bridge’ movements were no longer of any particular importance to the management in Schaffhausen, and with the larger calibre 73/74 movements already on the drawing boards, IWC was already moving towards an updated version of this particular design.

REFERENCE

1. A complete overview of the IWC movements from 1868 until the late 1880s can be found in the following titles: Myers, Alan; König, Thomas; Seyffer, David, *F. A. Jones: His Life, Legacy and Watches* (Schaffhausen, 2013), and Myers, Alan; Ehrismann, Ralph; König, Thomas; Mathe, Aron; Lucchetti, Giovanni, *The International Watch Co. From 1875 to 1890: A Company Confronting its Technical and Commercial Challenges* (Oberhausen, 2022).
2. Ibid.

All figures reproduced courtesy of the IWC Corporate Archives.