

# SETTING THE PACE

*Greubel Forsey's watches are running fast... to the top of the watchmaking tree. Meet the Briton behind the brand*



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once came across Stephen Forsey at a rally of vintage Bentleys in a Berkshire field, where he was exhibiting an immaculate 1928 saloon. Between judging rounds, he was to be found showing off a couple of his watches (he's often 'double parked' — one on each wrist) to a trio of picnicking ladies. 'How much are they?' one asked, fascinated by the bulbous lumps of gold-cased mysteriousness on display. 'This one's three, and this one's almost five,' Forsey said. 'Goodness me,' she said, 'five thousand pounds, it's an awful lot! But it is beautiful.'

Forsey was too polite to let on, of course, but she was a couple of zeroes short. Outside Bentley rally picnics, if his company Greubel Forsey is famous for one thing, it is the astronomical prices of its watches. Most recently, there was a bit of rib-tickling tabloid froth when a careless LA jeweller was relieved of his \$600,000 Greubel Forsey — a rose gold Double Tourbillon 30° Technique — by a pair of opportunistic hookers in a Manhattan hotel room.

ABOVE: THIS NEW ROSE GOLD VERSION OF GREUBEL FORSEY'S TOURBILLON 24 SECONDES VISION IS A SNIP AT £260,000. OPPOSITE: STEPHEN FORSEY

The prices go significantly higher than that, even without a diamond setting in sight, and the look is suitably extravagant: asymmetric dials with multiple levels of detail, complex movement architecture on full display, exotic tourbillon escapements dancing around at peculiar angles and every part finished to a mirror-like finish. In fact, of its 100-strong workforce, almost a quarter are employed to hand-finish microscopic parts to even more microscopic degrees of polish and radiance.

Whatever one's response to such ostentation and dizzying prices, though, Greubel Forsey's place in the canon of horological greats is assured. The company sits at an axis wherein the things the super-rich demand to shake them out of their glazed ennui — show-off design, fireworks complications, absolute rarity — are set against such a rigorous, almost monkish sense of intellectual enquiry and pure, painstaking excellence that, even in all its mind-blowing lavishness, a Greubel Forsey watch becomes a thing of enlightenment and elevation. In pictures Greubel Forsey watches can look absurd or overwrought; up close, they mesmerise to a degree that outstrips any watchmaker out there.

Late last year the firm scooped the top prize in the watch world's Oscars, the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève, in which a large jury of experts, collectors and luminaries votes for the best recent watches across a range of categories, plus one overall winner. That went to the cryptic-sounding Tourbillon 24 Secondes Vision, repeating the success Greubel Forsey had at the same awards in 2010. For a company just over a decade old and making no more than 100 watches annually, two 'world's best watch' victories in five years is unprecedented.

Interestingly, the 24 Secondes Vision is one of the most modest watches that Greubel Forsey has made to date, with a crisp, unfussy dial, and a single opening on its left side displaying a signature Greubel Forsey tourbillon, tilted at an angle and rotating quickly. Though very much a show-off trope of high-end watchmaking, the tourbillon in Greubel Forsey's hands has been rather more than that — a platform, no less, for research, experimentation and the extending of the boundaries of traditional horology.

Conceived by Abraham-Louis Breguet in the 1790s, the tourbillon — a rotating cage housing the escapement — improved pocket watch accuracy by eliminating the drag of gravity on the escapement, which would upset the regularity of its oscillations; but what worked on a large watch sitting vertically in a pocket holds questionable value in miniaturised form, moving about on the wrist. Whereas this hasn't seemed to bother most brands, who settle for the theatre of the constantly rotating 'whirlwind' mechanism without worrying about its function, Greubel Forsey set out to prove its use in a wristwatch. Overlapping tourbillons, angled tourbillons rotating at unusual speeds, quadruple tourbillons, along with completely rethought and reworked surrounding



mechanics, have been steadily researched, refined and developed over years of painstaking research.

'We always wanted to break away from what others were doing,' says Forsey. 'We knew that there was more to be explored, that there could still be new ideas in watchmaking if you took a blank sheet approach, and the tourbillon has presented tremendous possibilities.'

If any contemporary brand can claim to have advanced the science of watchmaking at its most traditional — there is nothing the firm does that the likes of Breguet, Tompion and Harrison wouldn't

understand, though plenty they never thought of — then Greubel Forsey can. In Forsey's case, it's not a bad level of accomplishment for a St Albans lad who trained as a watchmaker at Hackney Technical College in the 1980s and never planned to start his own watch brand. Even when he and his Swiss colleague Robert Greubel broke away from Renaud & Papi, a horological hothouse supplying complicated movements to high-end brands, they planned to stay resolutely behind the scenes with their own start-up.

But Forsey is an inquisitive chap. After Hackney Tech, instead of following his classmates into servicing watches, he worked in the antique clock restoration department at Asprey's (he eventually ran it), gaining his grounding in serious, *haut de gamme* horology dating back centuries. Searching for the modern equivalent, he headed to Switzerland to train at its most eminent watchmaking school, and was soon hired by Greubel, then a manager at Renaud & Papi, to join what was then the most advanced *haute horlogerie* workshop in the world. His specialism there would be creating tourbillons.

The pair left in the late 1990s and started Compli-time, a business that continues in parallel to Greubel Forsey, creating specialist watch complications for upmarket brands. But Forsey had developed an idea for a radically different kind of tourbillon that involved one tilted tourbillon rotating within another, both turning at different rates — a tourbillon that had true functional value beyond displaying the virtuosity of craftsmanship.

The pair attempted to sell their invention to clients, but with no takers they went it alone, launching Greubel Forsey in 2004. Such was their impact that by 2006 Richemont, the luxury group that owns Cartier and Vacheron Constantin among others, took a 20 per cent stake.

The years since have delivered twenty new movements, seven major 'inventions' in the field of horology, and a lorry-load of patents and awards.

Ironically, as it moves towards its teenage years (and potentially into a tougher climate for top-end watch firms), Greubel Forsey is calming down and simplifying: in January it announced a watch even simpler than the 24 Secondes Vision. The Signature 1 merely tells the time, without even a tourbillon (though the escapement and balance are fully on show), and becomes Greubel Forsey's first watch presented in a steel case. It is, though, as exquisitely presented as ever, even in its simple form packing in considerable workmanship and brilliance.

'It does open up the circle of collectors, and certainly adds something new for us,' says Forsey. 'People have asked for a more accessible piece for many years, so really it's a landmark in our story.'

The picnicking ladies of the Bentley rally would no doubt be delighted. *J*

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