

Practising the age-old art of clockmaking

Contributed by Daniel Lillford

My ears were enchanted when I stepped inside David Beckner's watch and clock repair shop on Granville Street in Bridgetown. Chimes, gongs and the chirping of a cuckoo clock as the hour struck created a beautiful cacophony of sound. David is accustomed to it, but for an outsider, it was like walking back in time.

DL: How long have you been repairing watches and clocks?

DB: I started in 1990 (after I graduated in '89 from George Brown College in Toronto. Basically 17 years. It wasn't in the family or anything like that, it was something I had to find. I wanted to find something that I enjoyed.

DL: What was it that made you want to become a clock repairer?

DB: At high school, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I knew I was mechanically inclined. I worked on cars—that wasn't what I really wanted to do, but I did try it. It does help with this, every little life experience does add up and help. There was a YMCA career counselling (program) provided in Toronto. I'm originally from Barrie, Ontario. I took the course and the career counsellor said that I was mechanically inclined, which I already knew. Spent a lot of money to find out what I already knew. I went through the college calendar looking, from carpenter all the way through to welder, near the back was watch maker. That was it.

DL: An intuitive response?

DB: Yes. I made model aeroplanes as a teenager, as a child, and I loved being able to sit down and paint the pilot, paint the eyes and the straps, that was my thing. The patience part. I'd stay up to the wee hours of the morning and do that. Loved it. From the career counsellor I just ran to a jewelry store in Barrie and asked about it. They told me I'd have to go to school. There was a museum 20 minutes from Barrie that did clocks. I was very lucky that they talked to me. When I graduated, everyone asked me to do clocks. Of course, they didn't teach me clocks, so I begged them to take me in at the museum and that was

where I got taught the clock making.

My course closed down right after I graduated, because there wasn't enough interest. There's one school, Trois-Rivières, in Quebec, and that's it in Canada. There's about 10 or 11 schools in the States. From what I read, they're all half-capacity. You just can't attract young people: this is old-world. A lot of it has been passed down. Watch-making is patience, patience, patience. You do need a lot of it. Not everything runs after you repair it, you have to dive back in again and figure out what's going on before you hand it back.

DL: What's the most exciting clock or watch that has come your way?

DB: Recently, I got a Rolex, 1916. One of the earliest ones. It was one of these "Antique Roadshow" moments. The owner gave me a very nice watch that he wanted repaired first, then he gave me this old thing to look at. So I gave an estimate on the one, then I opened up the other, and it wasn't on the face of the dial, but you looked inside, and there it was, Rolex.

DL: What's the average cost of repair, say, for an over-wound watch?

DB: Well, again, it's quite varied, the age of the watch, the condition. The mechanical watches I get in are 30, 40 years old. It's not like I can just wash them, clean them, give them back. It's going to cost more than a hundred to get something done. With a Rolex, a prestige name, it's going to be expensive. I don't want to be too wishy-washy on the cost, but I have to look under the hood, so to speak, before I do it. Every watch or clock is different. I have to look to be sure. Parts can be expensive or hard to find—pieces that are obsolete, and that happens quite a bit. It's not like going down to your Ford dealer.

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