



How to collect Smiths watches - the best-value vintage timepieces of them all

Welcome to the collector's watch everyone can collect: S Smith & Sons watches, long on military history, short on the kind of valuations that preclude everyday investments into certain other brands. Better still, affordable hoardables don't come more home-grown....

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It is sad to think that the country that once led the world in watchmaking quality, innovation and accuracy now has only one company that makes the entire watch themselves. And that, for pedants, is only if we stretch the definition of British to include crown dependencies, as I am referring to Roger Smith OBE, based on the Isle of Man.

Once, another Smith gave the Swiss a run for their money, and the rolling Cotswold hills took on the might of the Jura Mountains. Borne of the government's desire for wartime self-sufficiency regarding watches, clocks and timing mechanisms, funding was given to S Smith & Sons, watch and clock makers since 1851, who had since diversified into motor, aviation and marine instruments. This finance came in the form of MoD contracts, which were ongoing from the start of WWII. Fearful of enemy bombing, the high-grade watchmaking facility relocated to Cheltenham in "stealth" factories (single story with grass roofs) and against the odds, in straitened conditions managed to produce, from scratch, pocket watches, and by the end of WWII, wrist watches. The market for them settled at a solid but reasonable price: in 1959 an Imperial Automatic in stainless steel would have been £25 (£550 in 2018 money), the same thing manual-wound would have been £12 (£260). The post-war civilian market was tough, and despite introducing new models and movements, fine watchmaking ended

in Cheltenham in 1971. During this brief period, they produced unique and distinctive watches that make a fascinating study for the fledgling collector.

There are three types of Smiths:

Cheltenham-made These are the ones you really want, as they have the highest grade movements and more effort in the dials and cases. The dials say Smiths, Smiths De Luxe, Smiths Everest, Smiths National, Smiths Astral, Smiths Imperial or some later ones say just Astral. In a few cases they are dialled Benson and some nice 18 jewel movements were made for Garrard.



Welsh-made These are from the Anglo-Celtic watch company in Ystradgynlais. Dials say Smiths Empire or Made in Great Britain. Fun, cheap, some eye-catching dials – but the movements were very basic and are impossible to service. Not worth your time.

Swiss-made or Japanese-made These are from the dying throes of the company. The Swiss movements are generally poor, although some, like the plastic Astrolon, have historic interest. Some of the Japanese Hamazawa movements, on the other hand, are remarkably robust. The watches are larger size and generally Seventies-funky. Fun but not the real thing.

All the ones you want will have ‘Made in England’ on the dial, except for the Imperials which are sometimes unmarked. If it says ‘Made in GB’ it means Wales – avoid...

Size matters

Compared to modern watches, Smiths are small – as small as 31mm for the earliest. If you go for the robust ‘Dennison Case’ De Luxes they tend to be around 33.5mm but look chunky like a lot of the early military pieces. Put a steel or chromed one on a NATO and you will get away with it. Astrals come in at 34.5mm, Imperials and Smiths Military tend to be 35mm.

Condition is everything

Post-war austerity meant there was a lot of plating going on. Whether you go for white or yellow, check the condition of any plating. Solid metal is always better, but you will pay more for gold and steel is rarer. Dials finishes were not the best, so hold out for one with a clean dial. Movements are less problematic as parts are available and specialist repairers can service watches for you.

What to go for



The Smiths De Luxe In its water-resistant case, this was the watch carried by Sir Edmund Hillary on his Everest ascent (and you thought it was all about Rolex?). You can't get the exact model but the A409 is the closest. Smiths De Luxe References A454 and A460 are the 'Antarctic' models, as supplied to the 1957 British Antarctic expedition that Hillary also took part in. These have a central seconds hand and an outer minute track.

Most Popular

The later Smiths Astral With its central seconds, it can be found in a 34.5mm case and has a thin bezel. Fine for a dress watch. A rarer Astral date model does exist but it is not quickset so can be annoying.

Smiths Everest These watches were produced using various cases and movements. The most user-friendly are the later ones with hand-wound 0104 movements and 35mm cases. This watch was also badged as Imperial.



Smiths W10 If you have the budget, try to track one down. With military provenance and rugged good looks, it wears very well. Harder to find are the Everest and Imperial automatics. Only produced for four years, they are worth snapping up whenever they appear.

Benchmark prices

De Luxe (Hillary style): £1,200; De Luxe (Antarctic style): £1,700; Astral steel: £500; Everest Steel manual wind: £600; Imperial Steel manual wind: £800; Imperial Steel Automatic: £2,500; Military W10: £1,700.

Where to buy

Smiths watches are quite common, especially around the Cheltenham area and so crop up in antique shops, junk shops and at auction. eBay is a good source, and you can find watches at half the prices listed above, but it is risky. Prices have climbed sharply in the last few years but some sellers may not realise the increase in interest or know the difference between a cheap 'Empire' and a good 'Made in England'. Happy hunting!

For more information visit www.smithswatches.com