

## RULE BRITANNIA

Flying the flag for British watchmaking, Bremont co-founder Giles English tells *Michelle Johnson* about the brand's aviation heritage – and how it's making history

THE NEW HEART of haute horology is Henley-on-Thames. It's here, far from the rolling valleys of Le Brassus, Switzerland, that prestige watchmaking brand Bremont is set to open its new state-of-the-art facility by early 2021, making good on its promise to revitalise the tradition of British watchmaking.

Inspired by their late father's passions for mechanical engineering, aviation and watches, Giles and Nick English founded Bremont in 2002 with the goal of manufacturing fine pilot watches right here in the UK. The brothers, both pilots and engineers themselves, studied Swiss watchmaking while setting up Bremont, and have seen the company grow from a modest chronometer maker to a globally renowned brand, with flagship boutiques now in London, New York, Melbourne and Hong Kong. It also attracts big name partnerships such as Jaguar and Martin-Baker.

"When we were kids, Nick and I restored an old Jaguar with our father," Giles English tells Burlingtons. "So when Jaguar's then-design director approached us in 2010 to design a mechanical clock for their concept car, the Jaguar C-X75, it was a very cool project."

Jaguar Land Rover would later commission Bremont to create a bespoke pocket watch for the Duke of Edinburgh, presented to him at Windsor Castle, as well as collaborate on the Jaguar XJ75 and release a range of watches inspired by the marque's E-Type. Another point of pride for Bremont is its popularity within the Armed Forces. 25% of the brand's business comes from the military, particularly pilots; a clear testament to the accuracy, precision and durability of each stylish chronometer.

Here, Giles English looks back on Bremont's family heritage, shares his passion for aviation and reveals his vision for British watchmaking in the years to come. »



Bremont founders  
Giles and Nick English



The Bremont Supermarine divers watches are inspired by aviation

**Giles, how did your father, Euan, inspire you and Nick to create Bremont?**

My father [Euan English] was an amazing guy. He had a PhD in aeronautical engineering from Cambridge, he was ex-RAF, and he had this incredible talent for building things. Growing up, my brother Nick and I used to spend our time in the workshop with him – we restored old cars, built a plane that we still fly, and a sailboat we went and lived on for six months – but he also had this real passion for clocks and watches, which we inherited.

Our lives changed massively in 1995, when he and Nick were in a plane crash. Nick survived, but Dad sadly didn't make it through. We hit a tipping point in our lives where we thought, "everything could change tomorrow: let's do something we love". We were young and optimistic, maybe naïve, and really felt there was a gap in the market for a contemporary British watch brand. That's where this mad journey began.

**The story behind the brand's name is fascinating...**

Yes, Nick and I met a farmer called Antoine Bremont when we were flying over France in the late 1990s, and had to make an emergency landing on his field in terrible weather. We were lucky the plane didn't tip over! It was an odd one because, in England or America, if that happens you just give the farmer a bottle of whiskey in thanks and take off once the weather clears, but in France they impound your aircraft, which becomes an expensive logistical nightmare. Antoine was a lovely old boy in his late 70s, fixing tractors and having fun in his workshop, and it really struck a chord with us because our father would have been just the same if he had reached that age. Once we got home, we called and asked if we could use Antoine's name [for the brand], because we liked the sound of it and could get a trademark. He said we were crazy Englishmen, but he agreed. [laughs]

**Bremont is very much a family business. What are the advantages of working with your brother?**

For me, one of the most important aspects of any watch brand is the design and ethos. Nick and I were best mates growing up – we share the same loves and passions, the same preferences in planes and cars – and that comes through in our design references. If we had a whole team of designers going off in wildly different directions, it would be a bloody nightmare. I see that with some brands; you can tell when a new designer or team has come on board, and suddenly the aesthetic has changed or there's a collection that's completely different. Nick and I design all our watches and there's a story behind each one. If we're inspired by the F35 fighter jet we get really geeky about that plane. I can work on a 30s style watch, because I can reference the de Havilland DH88 Comet or the style of a 1910 pocket watch.

**Bremont has such strong aviation and military links. Why did you choose to focus on pilot watches?**

We really grew up around aviation – I learnt to fly aged 17 and Nick and I were both sponsored through university by the RAF. So, as a family of watch collectors, we all loved aviation watches. They aren't a sports diving watch or a dress watch, just a middle ground of classic, good-looking watches that you can wear with your suit or up Mount Everest or in your plane. When we started Bremont, we felt that a lot of the aviation watch brands had gone very 'blingy' and lost the core of what they should be. We knew aviation; we knew what pilots want to wear. Then we started working with companies like Martin-Baker on our MB series and began to get increasing requests from the military. It was a perfect fit because, for military squadrons, timing is everything – and if you've flown in an F18 for seven years of your life, you'll be talking about that plane for the rest of your life. It's very special to have a watch that was custom-built for you during that time. It becomes a true family heirloom, and that's what we're trying to achieve.

**Your mission to manufacture in the UK has made Bremont the flagbearer for British watchmaking. What inspired this?**

We were really inspired by the British watchmaking heritage that we'd grown up with. People around the world love and trust British brands but, as a watch company, we're always competing against the tradition of Swiss watches and trying to change the mindset of people who don't know that, just 100 years ago, the UK was making half the world's watches and was at the forefront of modern mechanical watch inventions. However, being British has helped us differentiate ourselves from the majority of mechanical watch brands.

**How did you go about setting this up in the UK?**

We went to Switzerland for about five years before we started making our watches, and then it was a further three years before we managed to bring the manufacturing over to the UK. Watchmaking is quite a challenging business on every level, but we wanted to build a brand that would have longevity. A big part of that challenge was to properly invest in the UK and bring manufacturing home: training people to assemble components and investing in equipment because, as a watch brand, we're machining components to around five microns. In comparison a human hair is about 60-70 microns thick.

We're now set to open our big new facility in Henley-on-Thames, where our customers will be able to see the components being machined and put together. I think when you see what goes into building a watch, you suddenly get the magic of it. We're excited for people to experience that. »



Left: Bremont's watchmaking facility in Henley-on-Thames. Above: the MBII, a collaboration with Martin-Baker

**How much of your collection is now made at Henley?**

There are a lot of components that require a specialist machine or artisan, so we can't make everything in the UK yet, but every year we look to make more components of our own. A big move for us has been to create our bespoke movements, a project we started about four years ago working with local universities. That new movement should come out in the next 12 months and will be a huge step forward for us.

What we lack in the UK, compared to Switzerland, is the infrastructure of expertise. Say I want a dial enamelled or plated along with the hands, in Switzerland there's a workshop over the road that specialises in these processes. We'd love to have that infrastructure in the UK, but it doesn't happen overnight.

**What's next for Bremont?**

We are really ambitious. The UK and America are our core markets, and we've got a store in Hong Kong but we're not in China yet. China accounts for 40% of the global watch market, and so that will be a natural growth area for us as a brand. We also feel that there's a long way to go in the UK to grow our market share, and we want to keep on investing in British watchmaking.

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