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**Christopher Ward: How Maidenhead is the centre of a watchmaking renaissance**



“Maidenhead is arguably at the centre of the renaissance of British watchmaking, and it probably doesn’t know.”

These are the words of Mike France, CEO of Christopher Ward, who says the British watch sector is ‘having a moment’ and the town is part of that.

His premium brand, co-founded with Peter Ellis and Christopher Ward, was the first online-only luxury watch retailer selling directly to customers when it launched in 2004.

Operating out of a ‘converted chicken shed’ in Cookham Dean, the founders saw early signs of ‘something here with unusual potential’, following the initial reaction to their brand.

Twenty years later, Mike told the Advertiser: “There are 500 Swiss brands alone, so you’ve got to be doing something different to the norm to have a chance of success. This is a very busy marketplace.”

Christopher Ward specialises in mechanical and quartz watches designed in its Maidenhead head office and manufactured in Biel, Switzerland.

The watchmaker operated from a small Park Street office with an iconic yellow door for 12 years before moving into a two-floor modern, 10,800 sqft space – more than double the size – on Bell Street last month.

“Because of the circumstances, you had to become incredibly efficient, and we were getting 30,000 watches out of a solicitor’s office. This is genuinely a new world,” said Mike.

An open-plan logistics space occupies the first floor where watch parts are quality-controlled, assembled and shipped, while the second floor comprises a creative hub, podcast studio, multiple customer-facing showrooms and desk space.

The relocation coincides with the company’s rapid growth and financial success spurred on by what it calls the ‘Bel Canto’ effect – key to doubling its revenue from 2023 to 2024.

Last year, Christopher Ward scooped the ‘Petite Aiguille’ prize at the Grand Prix d’Horlogerie de Genève (GPHG) – the first award win for a British brand at the ‘Oscars of the watch industry’.

This was awarded to the C1 Bel Canto – a watch that chimes every hour – which had 'created a sensation at its debut' in November 2022 and 'transformed the business'.

An initial series of 300 blue timepieces sold out in eight hours and a second limited green series vanished in under two hours.

Christopher Ward responded to this demand by creating a permanent series with four colourways and increasing production from 50 pieces a month in November 2022 to 500 by September 2024.

Last week the company launched a new iteration of the C1 Bel Canto Classic with the new dial texture, retailing from £3,500.

"We mark up [our watches] by three times in an industry that marks up anything from six to...lots," said Mike.

"People have begun to understand ours is a unique model, but it doesn't mean the quality is lower.

"Being online allowed us to create a position in the marketplace where the quality of our watches is equivalent to people selling it for many times more.

"For the last 20 years, we've been consistent. We're very transparent.

"People who were perhaps suspicious to begin with, because it almost sounds too good to be true, have learned the quality of our products does stand up to, and often is better than brands selling it at a more expensive price."



Early retirement wasn't an option after Mike and Peter sold the children's toy company, Early Learning Centre for £63m in 2004, and 'something about the watch industry just grabbed' the horology enthusiasts, keen for a new venture.

"There was a subterranean world of people interested in talking about watches online, so we knew there was a decent-sized business," said Mike. They set out to 'democratise' the premium watch industry by making 'high-quality watches accessible to everyone'.

Christopher Ward is now nominated in the 'Challenge' class at next week's GPHG awards in Geneva for Moonphase – a watch that tracks the moon for 128 years.

"There's no question that the British watch sector is absolutely having a moment and we're part of that and that's fantastic," said Mike.

"It's wonderful that we're able to reignite, to some extent, what's going on in the British watch sector. We were able to punch way above our weight for a while and, hopefully, still do. We'll never lose the challenger mentality.

"No matter how big we become, I think it's important we always retain this underdog mentality. "We've been very lucky as well – timing is everything, no pun intended. This comes down to 'thinking outside the box', said Mike.

Christopher Ward was among the first watch brands to feature in British Airways Highlife magazine, making them 'famous in the world of magazine advertising'.

They also switched to TV advertisements to 'avoid the brand going dark' during the COVID pandemic, which grew the company's market share significantly.

"In April 2020, just two people were making new TV ads in the UK. There was us, and Her Majesty's government," added Mike.

Finding a new UK headquarters for 78 staff members was 'a bit like buying a house', said Mike.

"We drew concentric circles and the ideal place was always going to be the centre of Maidenhead, as opposed to being in a field somewhere. Maidenhead is our spiritual home.

"But still, there are a lot of people in Maidenhead who possibly don't know there's the UK's largest watch brand actually in their midst."

Mike said the new head office is 'beautifully located' and the 'more local talent we can find, the better'.

Unlike their previous single showroom, the new premises comprise three showrooms – named Malone, Hoogstraten and McEwen – offering customers a 'personal tailoring' service for watches by appointment only.



Tasmanian watch expert Dave Malone wrote about 'the best value mechanical watch the world has ever known' on the TimeZone forum which led to Christopher Ward being talked about more than Rolex in Christmas 2005, explained Mike.

Hans van Hoogstraten from the Netherlands voluntarily launched and ran the independent Christopher Ward forum for 10 years before handing the reins to Kip McEwen from the USA, who has been senior moderator for the past 12 years.

"Being first is always an important thing if you can be," said Mike.

"I don't think Peter and I saw it as a risk at the time – it just seemed obvious to us. It was a gap in the market.

"There's a lot of noise in this marketplace. Even when we were tiny, our voice was being heard across the world."

Esquire magazine published an article on Christopher Ward in the October 2024 edition.

<https://www.esquire.com/uk/watches/a62650914/christopher-ward-watches-profile/>

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On 31 October WatchPro awarded Christopher Ward:

**British Watch Brand of the Year**

This award is for brands headquartered in the UK. It is not a requirement to manufacture all or parts of watches in this country. There were some exceptional finalists, but the winner is **Christopher Ward**.

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Gregory Moore Property comment:

It was a pleasure to advise CW on the relocation of their office in Maidenhead. It took a few days under a year from the first inspection of the vacant office premises in November 2023 with Savills who represented the owner, UK Active Value II Nominees 1 and 2, together with their joint agents Knight Frank, to fully open in early November 2024 as the article above refers.

Cogent Building Consultants acted for CW in the Building Surveying and Project Management, and they oversaw Curve Workplaces/Spratley Architects who both designed and "built" the fit-out.

Read more about Christopher Ward here:

<https://www.christopherward.com/home>



On 15 November 2024 the FT reported as follows:

### **Special Report Watches and Jewellery:**

#### **Christopher Ward's growth ticks up as designs chime with buyers**

With a near doubling of revenue and recognition in top industry awards, the UK watchmaker is expanding its operation Peter Ellis and Mike France.



Mike France is pointing out the story wall in Christopher Ward's new headquarters: it will display the receipt for the "very expensive gin and tonics" he bought to celebrate the UK brand's first win at the so-called Oscars of watchmaking. Its C1 Bel Canto was, last year, named the best watch priced at SFr2,000-SFr8,000 (\$2,300-\$9,200) at the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève (GPHG) awards.

France, the brand's co-founder and chief executive, thought there had been a mistake when he was charged SFr68 (\$77) per drink. There hadn't and, when we meet in late October, he jokes that he would be sending someone else to the bar in Geneva after this year's GPHG ceremony, held on Wednesday.

This year, the brand was nominated for its C1 Moonphase in the Challenge category for watches priced at SFr3,000 or less, but the prize ultimately went to Japanese independent brand Otsuka Lotec. Regardless, 2024 has been a fruitful year for Christopher Ward.

France and Peter Ellis, both previously directors at toy retailer Early Learning Centre, founded Christopher Ward together with their friend Chris Ward in July 2004. Following early manufacturing in China, the brand started working with Synergies Horlogères, a watchmaking company in Biel, Switzerland, in 2008, and the two businesses merged in 2014. Today, the watches are manufactured at the Biel atelier, with everything else, from design to aftersales care, handled in the UK.

Last week, the UK team relocated across town in Maidenhead, south-east England, to a larger HQ: two specially equipped floors in an office block. The move comes on the back of rapid growth: in the financial year to March 31 2024, revenue increased more than 80 per cent, from £16.8mn to £30.5mn, while pre-tax profit rose from £222,000 to £3.9mn.





France attributes about 40 per cent of this growth to sales of the C1 Bel Canto, which has a sonnerie au passage complication, meaning it chimes every hour. Two 300-piece limited editions sold out within hours on launch in November 2022, and there was high demand when the model went on general release the following January.

In response, Christopher Ward, which had used small, artisanal suppliers, overhauled its supply chain, taking a 20 per cent stake in Paoluzzo, a specialist in computer numerical control (CNC) machining earlier this year, to aid manufacture of components. The brand can now produce 700 Bel Cantos a month, compared with 50 in November 2022, says France.

He is hoping for “another big spike” in sales, this time for the C1 Bel Canto Classic, released last month. This new design, available in four colours, features a laser-etched guilloché pattern on the platine. The C1 Bel Canto Classic features a laser-etched guilloché pattern.



The brand is not a one-model wonder, however. France says the Twelve integrated sports watch generates more income than the Bel Canto, while the pieces priced at around £700-£1,250 account for most of the volume. He adds that attention on the Bel Canto has prompted a “reappraisal” of the brand’s earlier achievements, such as its jumping-hour module and in-house SH21 mechanical movement.

Christopher Ward sells directly to consumers through its website and two showrooms — its first outside Maidenhead opened in Dallas, Texas, in September. If the latter proves successful, France says there will be a model to roll out across the US, its biggest market. Wholesale is “anathema” to the business, which was founded on the principle of multiplying the cost price by three, he says. France thinks the wholesale distribution model is the biggest challenge facing the watch industry at a time when consumers are “getting savvier”.

“They have access to more and more information and, if you are literally doubling your selling prices because of your distribution model, which at the very least most of them are doing, then that ultimately could be problematic,” he argues.

France anticipates similar growth in the current financial year to last year, bringing sales to £50mn-£55mn against a production volume of about 45,000 watches. He is conscious that, with fast-growing companies, “there is a danger that the tail wags the dog a little bit”. But he says the new HQ provides more space for “a different quality of conversation and then, hopefully, a great execution quality on top”. The company, which predicts its global headcount will increase by 44 to 126 by the end of the current financial year, aims to reach £100mn of revenue by 2027-28.

The brand’s fortunes are in contrast to those of fellow British watchmaker Bremont, whose new-build HQ and manufacturing and technology centre The Wing, in Oxfordshire, was designed by the same architecture practice — Spratley & Partners — that oversaw the refurbishment of Christopher Ward’s new base.

Bremont’s sales dropped from £22.1mn to £20.4mn in the year to June 30 2023 and it recorded a pre-tax loss of £14.3mn.

France, co-founder of the Alliance of British Watch and Clock Makers, a trade body of which Bremont is a member, says he respects what Bremont has achieved and hopes the brand comes out of these tougher times. “I wish Davide [Cerrato, appointed chief executive last year] and Rupert Morley, the chair, every success because, from a British watchmaking perspective, I think anybody would want Bremont to be a huge success, and we’re no different,” he says.

“We have a very different model and it’s quite tough today if you’re not doing something different in what is a very crowded market.” The biggest challenge facing Christopher Ward is complacency, says France. “You’ve got to remain really hungry . . . I like us to think that there’s far more ahead than behind,” he says. He has a “long-held view” that the business, which donates 2 per cent of its annual sales to charity, is “a quarter-of-a-billion-pound brand”. If it reaches that milestone, no doubt there will be more G&Ts.

