Time Capsule

The proprietor of Kleanthous Antiques hands me a Rolex wristwatch in a leather-bound box. The watch is fitted with a beautifully stitched leather strap in the darkest blue, the case is gleaming and the gently curving glass protecting a flawless dial marked with crisp numerals is so clear as to be almost invisible. I gently open the hinged caseback and, as I suspected, the story is the same: a spotless movement decorated with pristine, sharp engraving. Anyone who didn't know better could be forgiven for thinking this was a well-cared-for watch of perhaps five or ten years. In reality, it recently celebrated its 90th birthday. *QP* is spellbound by similar offerings at the Notting Hill store.

Words: Simon de Burton
Photos: Alex Doak

(Right) Aladdin's cave: Chris Kleanthous mans the watch counter in his Portobello Road store – open only on Saturdays, when the street positively throngs with tourists and antiques hunters. (Top left) The ever-collectable Rolex 'Prince Brancard', with 'tiger stripe' white-gold case (1930, £19,800). Made between 1929 and 1935, these watches differed from most watches at the time by having the seconds on a separate dial, earning the nickname 'Doctor's Watch', as breathing and pulse rates were easy to time.

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ROLEX
THE
ROLEX
PRINCE

(Left) A black-enamel dial Rolex in yellow gold, dating from 1917 (£4,900). (Above) Two Jaeger-LeCoultre Reversos, both from the legendary model's first year of production, 1931. (Left) Yellow gold, £6,850; (right) steel, £4,750.

Perfect condition is the rule rather than the exception at Kleanthous Antiques – a peaceful shrine to vintage excellence amid the bustling tourist trap that is west London's Portobello Road. Walk into the shop on any Saturday (the one day of the week it opens) and you will find an array of more than 100 pre-1960s watches priced from £1,500-£25,000, mostly by Rolex, Patek Philippe, Cartier and Jaeger-LeCoultre, all in the same correctly restored condition.

Every non-bracelet piece is supplied with a brand new strap, every one has its own fitted case and every one is guaranteed for a full two years. The more 'modern' pieces, such as Jaeger-LeCoultre Memovox alarm watches, are even guaranteed to keep time to within five seconds per day.

The shop at number 144 has become a haven for vintage enthusiasts and has developed a loyal following among clients throughout the world, ever since Chris Kleanthous founded the business with £20 in capital on a market stall across the road back in 1969.

"I had recently graduated with a physics degree and, perhaps strangely, went into the advertising world," recalls Chris, 62, who now runs the business together with his wife, Nana, their daughter, Anna and his brother, Costas. "It began as a general antiques business – something to do on a Saturday. I specialised in commemorative wear, so they used to call me the Coronation King! Anyway, it gradually grew and I began acquiring pocket and wristwatches, mainly because I have always had a fascination for mechanical objects."

Eastender

The first outstanding piece he bought and sold was an immaculate Rolex Prince Brancard, which he managed to secure for around one tenth of its value. "Much of my buying was done at Brick Lane market, where I would go at 4 o'clock on a Sunday morning and meet with the 'knockers' who would bring me the watches and jewellery they had turned-up during the week. It got to the point where I had an office on a windowsill beside a phone box, complete with an acid testing kit and a substantial cash float.

"If, for some reason, I didn't turn up on any particular Sunday, my doorbell would ring at about 7am and I'd open it to a queue of these 'EEBs' (East End Boys) clutching their goods for me to buy!" The horological aspect of the business became dominant during the mid-1970s, and Chris recalls how buyers would come from as far afield as Italy to buy English pocket watches, which he sold in bulk.

"Right up until about 15 years ago we used to sell them in enormous volume. I was a keen smoker of Havana cigars and clearly remember using the empty boxes as repositories for the less valuable pocket watches, which I would sell by the box-full. The better stuff was always presented on a tray."

It was not until 1989, however, that Chris decided to leave his high-powered advertising job in order to devote himself to Kleanthous Antiques full-time, shortly to be joined by his brother. By then, the family had acquired the shop, which was formerly the premises of Sidney Stout, a purveyor of bacon and cheeses that had traded from the site for more than a century. Now, with its dark green walls, calm atmosphere and a few pieces of antique furniture, paintings and some interesting silver and porcelain dotted about to complement the watches, it feels like the sort of place that would have stocked the Pateks, Jaegers and Rolexes of the Twenties and Thirties first time round.

(Left) A curved, step-sided Patek ref. 430 from 1937 in yellow gold (£15,750), complete with Extract from Archives, like all of Kleanthous' Pateks.

(Far left) With its original case and papers from 1928, this unusual lozenge-shaped ladies' Rolex was specially made for a retailer in Bournemouth (£4,350).

Ahead of the game

But the success of Kleanthous, insists Chris, is entirely due to keeping up with the times and not purely looking back on them. "There is no doubt that the antiques trade has been going through a hard time recently," he says, "and I think survival depends on being ahead of the trends, particularly when it comes to wristwatches. What we noticed a few years ago is that many of the modern manufacturers were, essentially, copying the look and style of the 1920s and '30s, albeit in larger sizes. It was this that made us decide to offer original watches - the real thing brought back to as-new condition."

The firm has now accrued such a wealth of expertise, experience and spares that customers enjoy a level of confidence in their purchases more usually associated with buying first-hand. Kleanthous has built up a network of restorers with individual specialisations in cases, movements, dials and so on and insists that every watch is restored to original specification. There are currently around 100 watches awaiting restoration, but among those ready for sale are rarities such as a hexagonal ladies' cocktail watch by Cartier containing its correct European Watch and Clock Company movement; early versions of the Cartier Tortue; four Rolex Princes of various types, including a popular 'tiger stripe' version and an example with the seldom-seen rectangular-shaped seconds dial.

"One of the nicest things about this business is being discovered by people who were considering buying a modern watch because they never knew it was possible to buy an old watch in such beautiful condition that works like new," says Chris. "It is a wonderful feeling to introduce someone to a world that they didn't even know existed." O

Buy with your heart

There is a perception among many buyers of vintage wristwatches (and among buyers of collectables in general) that anything old should be acquired as much for its investment potential as for its quality, aesthetics and charm. Ask any impartial specialist in the art world, however, and the first thing he or she will tell you is that the primary reason for buying an object should be that you have fallen in love with it; if it rises in value, so much the better.

We mention this in relation to the Kleanthous watches because readers will inevitably compare their watch's price with the lower price usually realised by a similar model at auction. However, the two products are entirely different.

Kleanthous wristwatches are intended to be worn and used in just the same way as a brand new watch; as a result, they are restored by specialists to an exceptional standard using only the correct parts and they are sold with a two-year guarantee - longer than the warranty offered by the manufacturers of many contemporary watches.

Do not, therefore, expect to be able to buy a Kleanthous watch, send it to auction a few months later and get your money back; likewise, you are unlikely to be able to buy a similar model at auction in comparable condition - and you will certainly not find one with any sort of guarantee other than that it is 'as stated' in the catalogue description.

Further information: Kleanthous Antiques, 144 Portobello Road, London W11 2DZ. Tel: 020 7727 3649, www.kleanthous.com