



Redesigning Manufacturing- Rebalancing the UK Economy through Making | Case Studies

By **Beverley Nielsen**, Corporate Affairs Director, Birmingham City University

Struthers London

Rebecca and Craig Struthers were married in 2012 having studied together at the Birmingham School of Jewellery four years earlier. Rebecca gained a National Diploma in Jewellery from 2003-2005, 'learning so much about making jewellery, the qualities of the metals and materials and the practical side of making, including traditional hand-making skills'.

From this she moved on to attend the British Horological Institute's course and completed a Higher National Diploma in horology at the Birmingham School of Jewellery from 2005-2008 where she met with Craig, also studying at the same time.

It taught her to appreciate the finer qualities involved in designing and making. As she says, "there is a real pleasure in owning something beautiful, at the very least just to admire the skills that went into making it."

And whilst there have been quite a few changes since she left she keeps in close contact with her the school. "Whilst none of these qualifications exist any longer," she says, "you can only take a BA now. We were very lucky and had a wonderful set of tutors – Paul Thurlby, a very talented watchmaker, Malcolm Wadlow, who subsequently went to Manchester and Justin Jay Koullapis, Editor, the Horological Journal."

The network was very strong and they had a good opportunity to make contacts which have in fact proved to be invaluable.

"I was inspired to join watch making from jewellery because when I was designing jewellery I had always been interested in pieces that moved. I got spotted and asked if I had ever considered horology. As I love science and design this seemed like the ultimate combination. "We finished our HNDs and didn't really know what to do from there. I was working as a specialist with an auction house and Craig was in antique restoration. I kept finding myself getting bored, disagreeing with the way things were being run, but unable to do anything about it.

"I read Karren Brady one day saying that if you find yourself in this position then maybe you should ask yourself if you would be better off working for yourself. This really struck home and I couldn't stop thinking about her words.

Rebecca realised that all she wanted to do was to create her own pieces because in London, "you end up working so many hours and when you do it for someone else it is harder to handle that than when you do it for yourself and you love what you are doing.

"We started off doing what we knew best and that was servicing and restoring antique watches. We realised we couldn't start off a business in London and as I had grown up in Perry Barr in Birmingham, this seemed like the obvious place to be based.

"It's been a fantastic place to start a business and we've had a great deal of support. We rent a designer studio space in the Jewellery Quarter from Birmingham City Council and the rent has been very affordable. We're located in a former Georgian School House on Spencer Street. As it had not been refurbished for some time when we moved into it and were able to do whatever we liked with the space. I know that it is possible to get rent free deals depending on the condition of buildings from landlords. These can, I understand, extend from 3 months – 1 year depending on the condition of properties and the landlords, of course.

"Our clients come to see us and have a chat over a cup of tea where they can relax and think about what they want.

"We always kept in touch with our cohort from university and they have been a great source of support too.

"In fact we won the Lonmin Award for Design Innovation in 2013 thanks to Kelly Hart, then a designer at Dominos (part of WB the Creative Jewellery Group) in the Jewellery quarter, also a School of Jewellery graduate, who recommended our work.

"At the same time we attended the Birmingham Made Me Design Expo last year, 2013, and heard Charles Morgan speaking about their business and approach to design. When we heard the way he was thinking our reaction was, 'wow', well, we're not alone after all!

"Through our introduction to Charles we met the Morgan designer, Jon Wells. We agreed a joint collaboration with Morgan in December 2013, with a brief to produce two watches for Morgan to preview the following March, so we didn't have much of a break over Christmas last year!

"We officially launched these watches in June 2014. They are now selling for over £16,000 each and we had our first delivery at the Harrogate MOG meeting in August. Morgan lent us a car to drive up there. It has been really great working with them.

"Our revenues have grown dramatically since we launched our business in 2012. In our first year we were only doing restoration and we earned about £50k. Last year we had increased our sales 100% moving to £100k in revenues... and this year, well we'll see, but we are hoping to see another big jump forward well ahead of 2013.

"We will be exhibiting at the Salon QP at the Saatchi Gallery in November, and we will be able to sell there, so we hope this will work well for us as this is the biggest specialist and fine watch event in the UK. On top of that 2014 was our first year designing and making our own watches and there is much more money in that.

"With regards to finance we did secure a small business loan when we first started. We have looked at other sources of funding on and off since we started but we have not always found it so easy or the responses we have received to be very constructive.

"In the longterm our goal is to have an apprentice and some assistance with marketing. We are also working with a Master Goldsmith, another BCU graduate, Kristjan Eyjolfsson who graduated in 2005 and is originally from Iceland.

Kristian is a Fellow at the Institute of Professional Goldsmiths and has been working, unbelievably for over 20 years in this area as he started so young.

Rebecca explains, "We are all working together in a unique way that has not been done in this country for over 100 years, representing a heritage collaboration.

"Most watch brands are owned and run by people who are either from a business discipline and don't know much about watch-making or by designers. But none are run by people with a background in designing and making the watches. In the past they used to work closely with master goldsmiths a jewellery-smithing and watchmaker collaboration. This was what happened in the 17th and 18th centuries.

"We are no strangers to this approach having studied and worked in Jewellery Quarter where stone setters can be found next to stone cutters who are next to goldsmiths, who are in turn next to watchmakers and enamellers. It is rather a unique place and certainly a unique experience!

"I am doing my PhD now and I spend quite a lot of time at the British Museum archives where they have 4.5k watches. I am often the only student there. We have this huge resource that we are not really using. I am always shocked how few people know much about our heritage in designing and making in Birmingham. Few people know of Dennison, world's largest watch-case maker based in Handsworth. Now their factory is an empty shell being left to go to rack and ruin with some rolling mills sitting outside to rot.

"We're finding in the watch industry that traditional English companies are being brought out by Swiss – eg George Graham and Ellicott. The Dennison name is owned by an auction house no doubt waiting to sell on the brand at the right price.

"We need more theatre in our retail. The JQ is struggling to do things differently to modernise and adapt to internet and the technologies. They are stuck in their ways and say things like these designs were selling in the 70s, but they need to modernize in a big way," she concludes.

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