

*With the Bremont brand of pilots'-style watches, British brothers Nick and Giles English are paying tribute to their family's aviation roots.*

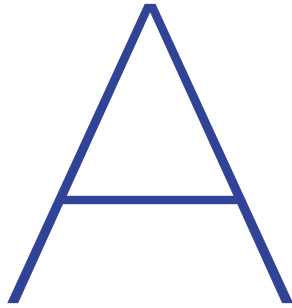


BY MARK BERNARDO

# TRUE BRIT



*Bremont founders Nick (left)  
and Giles English*



As all watch collectors know, getting one's hands on an exclusive, limited-edition timepiece presents challenges. Most often, being well informed, well connected and, above all, extraordinarily wealthy are the keys to acquiring the rarest, most collectible models. But not always. In the case of a watch called the MB1 — produced by the eight-year-old, London-based watch company Bremont — the only way you'll get your hands on it is to be one of the 7,200 human beings who have survived an ejector-seat launch from an airplane. Then there is another Bremont model, the U-2, with a version offered only to airmen who have piloted a Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance plane for the U.S. Air Force or the C.I.A. To Bremont founding brothers Nick and Giles English — yes, they are Brits, and yes, that is their real surname — watches such as these are a way to honor the aviators and aviation technology that have inspired the brand. According to Nick English — who, along with his brother, is himself a pilot — they also help to separate the real flyboys from the poseurs.

"I think these guys are fed up with going down to the bar, playing some pool and seeing five other guys, not in their squadron, wearing the same watch as they are, albeit with a different logo on it," he says of pilots and their watches.

Many watch brands make pilots' models, of course, and many of them have been at it far longer than Bremont, but few if any can boast such an intimate connection to aviation, or such a direct, personal link to the events that inspired the watches. The English brothers inherited an interest in aeronautics and mechanics from their father, an aeronautical engineer who in his spare time built planes — and tinkered with old cars, motorcycles, and musical instruments — in his workshop. The elder English also collected watches and restored antique grandfather clocks, and on weekends displayed his aircraft projects at air shows. His sons, as a result, grew up with many of the same interests, hanging around their dad's workshop, learning about flying and the technology behind it, and honing their own mechanical skills on a vintage clock that their father had acquired at an auction. The brothers established a small aircraft-restoration business, which they maintain to this day, and started helping their father at the weekend air shows.

Both English brothers did stints in the U.K.'s RAF (Royal Air Force) Reserves, and while they remained fascinated by aviation and continued to pursue it as a hobby, their early careers led them in a different direction, to the banking industry in London. "We didn't particularly enjoy it," says Nick English, over afternoon tea at New York's Peninsula Hotel. "But then our lives changed dramatically in 1995."



*The Alti-C with dark gray dial*



*The Alti-Z with cream dial*



*The Alti-P with black dial*

*The Supermarine  
500 divers' watches  
are named for a  
British company  
that makes seaplanes*



It was in March of that year that English and his father, practicing an aerobatic routine for an airshow in a T-6 Harvard, were forced to take evasive action when the other plane in the exercise developed engine trouble. Diving into an inverted spin at a low altitude, English piloted the plane out of the way of the other aircraft, but crashed into the ground while avoiding trees. The son was thrown clear of the wreckage and broke 30 bones. The father was not so fortunate: he died upon impact. “That was a tipping point for us in life,” says English. “We got out [of banking] and ended up doing something we really wanted to do. And while we already had the aircraft restoration company, the next thing we wanted was to set up a watch brand.”

**DESPITE THE FAMILY** tragedy in which Bremont had its genesis, and despite his own love for vintage aircraft and old clocks, English has never been a prisoner to nostalgia. When he and his brother decided to make their own watches, they agreed that they did not want to simply buy an old brand and resurrect it. “Anyone can go out and buy an old Swiss brand name and say, ‘Look, we’ve been at this for 80 years,’ or 150 years, whatever,” he says. “Go to a Tourneau store and you’ll see any number of brands claiming to have this illustrious, 100-year history, when in fact those brands were dormant for the last 80 of those 100 years. And unless you’re buying one with machinery, movement diagrams and so forth, you’re really starting from scratch anyway. We don’t know what the founders of another watch brand would’ve wanted, what their vision would be, because they’re not around anymore. So we decided very early on that we wouldn’t pretend we have this huge history. We would just make some beautifully engineered watches that stand on their own merits.”

That decision, however, didn’t get the English brothers any closer to choosing the all-important brand name. Neither was excited about putting their family name on the dials — “slightly clichéd, and perhaps difficult to trademark,” remarks English — but after nearly three years they still could not settle on the right one. Then one of them recalled a fateful flight that they had made several years earlier, only two years after the death of their father. The brothers were flying an old German Brucker-Jungman biplane, in stormy weather, over northwest France and were forced to land in a pea field, somewhere in the Champagne region. At first, they were worried about the legal implications. As English puts it, “If we’d landed in the U.S. or the U.K., it would not have been a big deal. You apologize to the farmer, have a cup of tea and

*AN ENCOUNTER WITH A  
FRENCH WWII PILOT  
NAMED ANTOINE  
BREMONT GAVE THE  
BRAND ITS NAME.*



A watch from  
Bremont's MB II  
collection

off you go. In France, they can impound the aircraft and take the wings off until it's deemed safe to take off. It can become very bureaucratic and quite expensive." Their fears proved groundless when the landowner — a 70-something former World War II pilot named Antoine Bremont — came out to help them, putting the brothers up for two nights as the worsening weather passed and making sure they avoided the red tape before they could take off back to Britain in their aircraft.

There were other aspects of the old farmer that endeared him to the English brothers. "He just reminded us of our father," English says. "He had a workshop with mechanical things strewn all about — engine parts, clock parts and so forth. And we realized his name would look great on a watch dial. It was the closest we could get to honoring our father without actually using his name." The decision was finally made: the watches would be called "Bremont."

**FROM THE BEGINNING**, the plan was to establish Bremont not as a Swiss brand with British owners and British designs, but an actual British manufacturer, inspired by British watchmaking legends such as John Harrison, Thomas Mudge, George Graham, and George Daniels. However, in the beginning, the brothers had to go where the facilities and the expertise were. They purchased a small workshop in Bienne, where most Bremont watches are still assembled, and purchased parts and movements from Swiss suppliers.

The brothers found an experienced technical director in Peter Roberts, a fellow native of the U.K. Roberts, who trained at the WOSTEP watchmaking school in Neuchâtel, worked for several years at IWC in Schaffhausen before joining Rolex, first as a watchmaker at its main factory in Geneva, then at Rolex's U.K. subsidiary. He subsequently spent 13 years teaching technical horology in Britain, where two of his students included star indie watchmakers Peter Speake-Marin and Stephen Forsey. Among Roberts's contributions to the Bremont brand was its purist design aesthetic, which emphasizes legibility and tradition over complications and embellishments. Roberts believes that a watch should always be in "three shapes: round, round and round" and the English brothers have stuck to that credo. Big, readable numbers; clean dials;

Martin Baker, for whom the MB watches are named, is the world's foremost maker of ejection seats.

The limited-edition MB1 is available only to those who have ejected from an airplane.

**EACH MB1 WATCH  
UNDERGOES AN ACTUAL  
EJECTION SEAT TEST  
STRAPPED TO THE WRIST  
OF A MANNEQUIN.**



*The U-2 collection is inspired by the Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance plane.*

and a simple black-and-white color scheme are other touches that define Bremont watches across the board. All of the aviation models are also resistant to the shocks and magnetism that one might encounter in a cockpit. Visibility is further enhanced by the use of nine layers of nonreflective treatment on each side of the dial's crystal.

According to English, "Pilots' watches are all about multi-tasking. Being a pilot myself, I can tell you that when you're flying an airplane you're doing 15 things at once — checking the airspeed, looking at the manifold pressure, et cetera. You don't have time to look at your watch and wonder if that is or is not the time. A lot of chronographs are very, very difficult to use in the air because you have to take your hands off the stick. Readability is absolutely key, and we felt that a lot of so-called professional aviation watches were getting more and more fancy. We knew from the beginning that we did not want to produce a fashion item. We wanted to make a useable aviation watch."

Designs for all the models are done in Britain, as is much of the finishing on the cases, including the special hardening process the Englishes developed for them. The cases are all designed in what Bremont calls its "Trip-Tick" style, wherein each one has three distinct parts — bezel, middle section and case-back — which allows the use of different materials in the case's construction, different colors in the middle section to identify limited editions, and Bremont's stylized, flowing lugs.

The proprietary hardening process is done by a U.K. company that finishes and treats turbine blades for jet engine manufacturers. It involves heating the case metal to a very high temperature, diffusing it with carbon to make the underlying substrate harder, and then bombarding it with electrons. The result is a finished case that comes in at 2,000 Vickers on the hardness scale, as opposed to 350 Vickers for a standard stainless-steel case, and also, according to English, has superior scratch resistance.

**BREMONT WATCHES** are all COSC-certified chronometers. They are available in seven basic series. The BC series includes entry-level, three-hand automatic models, each with automatic caliber BE-36AE, based on an ETA 2836. Each has an unusual vertical day-date window at 6 o'clock. Prices start at \$3,750.

Then are three chronograph collections: ALT1-C (\$5,650 on a leather strap, \$6,280 on a steel bracelet), powered by Caliber BE-50AE (a modified ETA Valjoux 7750 with a Soprod module), has a vintage look, with large Arabic numerals and a date window at 6 o'clock. Seconds are on a subdial at 9 o'clock and chronograph minutes on a subdial at 3 o'clock.



*Bremont's marine clock was made entirely in its London workshop.*

The ALT1-P series (\$5,250 on strap, \$5,880 on bracelet) has three subdials: seconds at 9 o'clock, 30-minute counter at 3 o'clock and 12-hour counter at 6 o'clock, along with a date window at 4:30. It contains Bremont's caliber BE-53AE, also a modified Valjoux 7750. The ALT1-P models also have a pilot-friendly internal rotating bezel operated by a crown at 8 o'clock.

ALT1-Z watches (\$5,450 on strap, \$6,050 on bracelet) display a second time zone in addition to their chronograph function (the "Z" is for "Zulu Time"). In these watches, which also contain the BE-53AE caliber, the date window is at 3 o'clock, the seconds at 9, 30-minute counter at 12, and 12-hour counter at 6. They also have a red-tipped UTC hand that points to a second time zone on a 24-hour scale that encircles the dial. The BC models and all the chronograph collections feature sapphire viewing windows in their casebacks to show off the movements, all of which have Bremont's special skeletonized rotors.

There are a few limited editions among the chronograph series, most notably the EP120, named after a 1942 Spitfire fighter jet. It has a case of black-DLC-treated steel and titanium and a 30-minute "time of trip" dial. The watch, which is limited to 120 pieces, uses traces of aluminum from an actual Spitfire plane in the case and dial, and sports an unusual, propeller-shaped rotor. Other limited editions include the Bremont Norton (200 pieces), designed as a companion piece to the well-known, British-made Norton motorcycles, and a limited version

of the ALT1-Z that is available only to graduates of the elite U.S. Naval Test Pilot School.

Supermarine 500, introduced last year, is Bremont's first line of divers'-style watches, though even these, English points out, have a direct aviation influence. Supermarine is the company that built the Spitfire aircraft flown by the RAF in the Battle of Britain, as well as numerous "flying boats" and seaplanes. The Supermarine is water-resistant to 500 meters and features a screw-down crown and caseback, a unidirectional rotating bezel made of sapphire, and an automatic helium release valve. The watch uses automatic caliber BE-36AE, with the day and date in a window at 3 o'clock and protected inside an antimagnetic Faraday cage. The movement is also protected by the anti-shock mounting system developed for the MB line (more on which below). Three versions are available, in blue, black, silver or gray color schemes, for \$5,150. This year, a limited-edition model, the Supermarine Descent, made its debut. A tribute to the famous Supermarine S6B Schneider Trophy Seaplane, it will have a black DLC coating and will be limited to 407 pieces (the number comes from that vessel's top speed, achieved in 1931), priced at \$5,450.

**THE ENGLISH BROTHERS** are perhaps most excited about the MB series. The initials stand for Martin Baker, a British company founded in 1934 that is the world's most experienced producer of ejection seats and other aviation safety equipment. The Bremont MBI (the one limited to pilots who have ejected) and MBII (the model available to the general public) are the only timepieces engineered to withstand the rigors of ejection-seat testing. "I don't think that any watch has been tested to such a degree since the Omega Speedmaster went to the moon," English says of the MB. Each watch undergoes vibration testing (equivalent to 40 years' worth of wear and tear in a cockpit), shock testing, severe climate testing (at an altitude of 1,000 feet and down to minus 70 degrees), salt-fog and corrosion testing, and even an actual high-speed ejection seat test with the watch strapped to the wrist of a mannequin.

To ensure the watches survived these ordeals, Bremont developed a proprietary system for protecting the movements. Unlike the traditional metal movement holder rings in most watches, the rubberized, shock-resistant case mountings in MB watches absorb impacts on the case while securing the movement.

To be eligible to purchase the exclusive MB1, a prospective buyer confirms his ejection number — one of around 7,200 that have been assigned over the 60-plus-year history of ejection seats — with Martin Baker. The watch differs from the MBII visually only in its red middle section and yellow seconds hand; the MBII has a black seconds hand and a choice of black, green, gray or orange case barrel. MB watches contain caliber BE-36AE, providing hours, minutes, central seconds, and the day and date at 3 o'clock. They have the hardened, 43-mm "Trip-Tick" case, with an inner rotating bezel operated by a crown at 4 o'clock. The MBII costs \$4,950; prices for the MB1 are available on request.

The U-2 models are also based on the MB. The U-2 Squadron model, with black DLC coating, is limited to 150 pieces and of-



*Bremont cases are made in the company's so-called "Trip-Tick" style and undergo a patented hardening process.*

ferred exclusively to the pilots of the 9th Reconnaissance Wing based at Beale Air Force base in California. Another 150 pieces, with a Lockheed U-2 silhouette on the dial, will be available at retail. So will two other "standard" U-2 models, one with DLC and one in stainless steel. The U-2 watches cost \$5,350.

The other aspect of the MB range of watches in which the Englishes take great pride is the fact that final assembly on them takes place at the company's workshop in London rather than in

**BREMONT EMPLOYS  
20 WATCHMAKERS AT  
WORKSHOPS IN  
BIENNE AND LONDON.**

Bienne, a fact trumpeted by the presence of "London" on the dials. The plan is to become, in time, more British than Swiss. "The Germans did it with A. Lange & Söhne and Glashütte Original, so there is no reason why the British can't do it," English says. "There are already great British watchmakers like

Roger Smith, but he's making about 20 watches a year. We're at mass production compared to him; we'll probably make 3,000 watches this year. Eight years ago, we didn't have the experience to find the talent we needed in the U.K., but we do now."

To that end, Bremont plans to slowly expand the production capacity of its London atelier (between its two workshops, Bremont employs about 20 watchmakers), develop new in-house modules that add some classically British adaptations to its movements (to be introduced at next year's Baselworld watch fair), and eventually, of course, introduce an in-house caliber made in Britain. Perhaps to prove it is serious about this last goal, the company recently built a marine clock, inspired by John Harrison's original ship's chronometer and made at the London workshop, with an in-house movement incorporating a twin-fusee system and a classical English escapement. The dial indicates two additional time zones, the date, a 30-day power-reserve and a 90-day chronograph in addition to the local hours, minutes and seconds, and the case is water-resistant. It will sell for \$58,000 and only 10-15 pieces will be made per year.

As it enters only its ninth year, Bremont has made its presence known in the luxury watch world, and its marketing and promotions have emphasized its British connections. In 2008, the brand was named "Best Emerging British Luxury Brand" by the prestigious Walpole organization. It has become a timing partner to British sporting events like the Goodwood Festival of Speed, the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race and the Epsom Derby. Celebrities from the U.K. have been spotted sporting Bremonts on their wrists, like actors Orlando Bloom and Ewan McGregor, and adventurers Bear Grylls (TV's "Man vs. Wild") and Charley Boorman. Nevertheless, it appears Nick and Giles English will be satisfied only when their "Anglo-Swiss" brand goes all-Anglo. "In the 1920s, the Swiss used to put 'London' on watch dials because they knew those would sell better in the Far East. That just shows you how things were and where they've gotten. Right now, 90 percent of our watch is from Switzerland and the rest is from England. Eventually, we'd like to reverse that. We'd love to see 'London' on the dial of every watch." ○