

CLASSIC DRIVER

Why the 'Royal Oak'? Audemars Piguet's prototype explored

Lead

Although bearing a name inspired by events that took place more than 300 years before, the story of one of the world's most famous watches begins in 1970. At four o'clock one afternoon, the famous designer Gérald Genta received a call from Georges Golay, the Managing Director of Audemars Piguet.

"Mr Genta," he said, "I need a steel sports watch that has never been done before: I want it to be something totally new and waterproof." And, as if this challenge weren't hard enough, draft sketches had to be submitted early the following day. Having completed an all-nighter at the drawing board, Genta presented what was to become the famous 'Royal Oak' first thing the next morning.

'Monsieur le Directeur Général' was impressed by the bold design of the steel watch, with its octagonal case, 'portholes' and visible screw heads. So impressed, in fact, that he gave Genta the green light for the project and a prototype was made in white gold (as the expensive tooling required for the far-harder-to-machine high-grade stainless steel needed time to buy and set up).

A seemingly huge (38mm) and expensive (3,750 Swiss Francs vs. a more usual 850 Swiss Francs for a quality steel timepiece) new watch was shown at the 1972 Basle watch fair: the Audemars Piguet 'Royal Oak'.



And the unusual name?

Opinions differ, however most experts attribute it to a reference to the famous series of British warships that bore the name 'Royal Oak'. The term refers to the tree in which King Charles II hid during his flight from Oliver Cromwell's Roundheads in the English Civil War. The first *Royal Oak* ship was a 76-gun launched in 1664 and burnt by the Dutch in 1667. The last was a Revenge-class battleship launched in 1914 and sunk when at anchor by a U-boat at Scapa Flow, Scotland, in 1939.

In total, eight ships of the Royal Navy have carried the name *Royal Oak*. Since its debut in 1972, the watch of the same name has been an international success, selling many thousands of examples in a variety of designs.

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Further information about the Royal Oak can be found at www.audemarspiguet.com

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