

AHS London Lecture Thursday 20 November 2025

Justin Koullapis, *Self-Perpetuating: The Automatic Watch and the Legacy of John Harwood*

The rise of the wristwatch coincided with a dramatic quickening of everyday life around the world. For this new form of timepiece to take root in the cultural landscape, it had to be not only accurate, but also reliable and convenient – the latter factors perhaps even more important than precise timekeeping itself. Yet the wristwatch was exposed to mechanical stresses and environmental conditions not imposed upon its predecessors.

The English watchmaker John Harwood (1893–1964) identified two principal culprits in the unreliability of early wristlets (as wristwatches were then known): dust and moisture. If the case could be sealed, he reasoned, these weaknesses could be kept at bay. In developing a hermetically sealed design, he resolved to remove its most vulnerable element – the winding crown. The result was the world's first industrially produced self-winding wristwatch.

Although Harwood's sealing method was soon overtaken by more watertight systems, his work – together with that of companies such as Rolex – achieved the first requirement for the permanent adoption of the wristwatch: reliability.

The second requirement, convenience, was also advanced by Harwood's invention. A watch that could wind itself brought its wearer closer to a semi-automated life free from small but regular manual tasks – a vision we have, for better or worse, largely realised today.

Harwood's business, however, did not prosper, hindered by a host of factors, not least the global economic climate – an analysis thoroughly explored by fellow commentator James Dowling.



John Harwood. Image © Justin Koullapis FBHI.

Yet the principles Harwood established set in motion the dominance of the self-winding wristwatch, first as a practical tool and, since the 1990s, as a luxury object, status symbol, and investment.

In the 1950s, the *Horological Journal* began campaigning for formal recognition of Harwood's achievements. This effort culminated in 1957, when he was awarded the coveted Gold Medal of the British Horological Institute – at that time

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