

An overview of how to choose a watch for frequent use

Be aware that this is a very general guide, much simplified and you can get some outstanding watches that are the complete opposite of what is written here but it may help to get your thoughts in order. I can advise on individual watches but it would help if you could give me some broad indication of what you are looking for, after considering this.

Deciding whether a watch is suitable for frequent (say more than twice a week) or daily use is very difficult. It is an inexact science and it also depends a lot on the user's expectations and usage. Taking these points first: -

- How long do you expect the watch to last? My starting point is that we should be husbanding these watches to last for at least another 50 – 100 years (with servicing), although that, to an extent, will be a matter of luck.
- How much care are you able to take of it whilst it is being worn? Carrying it in a trouser pocket, every day, not only increases the risk of accidental damage (particularly if it is not on an Albert or tied on!) but it will also increase the wear. Wearing your watch in a waistcoat or jacket breast pocket is better, making it less vulnerable to damage and motion-induced wear.
- How much risk are you prepared to take? Running a watch occasionally, but regularly, without subjecting it to a lot of movement is good for it, but using it every day is going to increase the wear and the possibility of random failures. If it is a cheap watch, with no sentimental or historical value, then this is probably not an issue but, if it's your pride and joy, perhaps it is.
- Is accuracy within, say, a minute in the waking day sufficient? Substantially all of my watches will do this so it may not be an issue for you, if it is then you will need a particularly good and potentially very expensive watch!
- Probably most importantly – what sort of watch(es) do you wish to own and wear on various occasions?

Considering the above, you may decide that a few years' daily use before the possible retirement of the watch will be fine, with the risk of some damage due to "rough usage" being acceptable, then read no further: just buy what you like the look of. Otherwise, read on.

Many people, who wish to wear a pocket watch every day, balance the issues by having 2 or 3 and rotating them. A possibility would be to have a really nice watch for special days and a cheaper, and possibly more robust, late Swiss watch for the rest of the time. This is my recommendation but, WARNING: pocket watches are addictive! I have a number of customers who started off with this idea and now have collections large enough to permit the wearing of a different high quality watch for every day of the week, with a few more to ring the changes!

I have mentioned that this is an inexact science. Part of the problem is to identify whether the inevitable minor wear or issues in a particular watch, after 70 to 120 years,

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will suddenly get worse or whether a part that looks fine will suddenly break. We don't know, for instance, how much use the watch has had in the past, how it has been kept and how often it has been serviced, so we can't simply extrapolate its present performance into the future. Very detailed analysis of the current condition of a watch can help to mitigate these uncertainties but I'm afraid the amount of time that would take (longer, in itself than a full service) makes it commercially impractical - at least for watches in the price range in which I deal. On the plus side, we do know that modern oils are better than the old ones as they degenerate more slowly; also, we live in a more benign environment having less airborne dust, soot, etc. to contaminate the watch. Indoors, we have more constant temperatures and less dampness.

As well as condition, we need to consider the design and the quality of materials and manufacture of a watch. With time design improved as did materials technology, so it would now be possible to mass manufacture a far better watch than in 1935. In 1935 a better watch could be made than in 1880. BUT, commercial pressures, the cost of labour etc., and what people wanted to pay for a watch drove what was made. So, for instance the "dollar watch" appeared, literally costing a dollar, it was built down to the price using the latest available production techniques and cheap materials - even down to paper dials. These watches were designed in such a way that they could not be serviced, other than applying some oil, and could not be repaired or even have the mainspring replaced and so they were disposable items. This was much like the later "Swatch" watch, although of course that was far superior to the Dollar watch.

Age is tricky for the reasons outlined above, but considers this: pocket watches generally went out of production around about WWII and, on average, would have gone out of regular use sometime between then and the early 1960s. So, on average, a 1935 example will have been used regularly, for between 5 and 30 years whilst a 1905 version will, on average, have been used for between 35 and 60 years. Comparing watches of similar quality or of the same design you will generally be better off with the later version. (Excellent examples of the later are the Omega movement and the Rotherham $\frac{3}{4}$ plate keyless which were both in production for more than 50 years with a limited number of design changes.) Accordingly, if you have no particular desire for an old watch, consider the younger ones and, in particular, a Swiss one from the 1930s.

Country of origin is another factor that may influence choice: we need to consider just three - England, America and Switzerland. Whilst there are always exceptions at the high and low end of the market, in general and with possible over simplification:

- England and America together produced the best watches from the late 1870's until c. 1900;
- American mass production had effectively killed the British industry by WWI and, in terms of price and performance, they were leading in the mid-market from c. 1900 (e.g. the Waltham 1899 & 1908 models);
- Swiss watches came to the fore after WWI.

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Therefore if you want a watch from a particular period and if country of origin is not, in itself, important to you, then get a watch made in the leading country of the period. Alternatively, find a watch from one of the outperforming companies who bucked the trend, at least in quality, such as Rotherham or Omega.

Budget can also be a factor. As discussed on my web site there are many factors that increase or restrain the price of a watch. Of particular importance for this discussion are the number produced and still available and the general desirability of the particular type of watch. This can mean that some watches that are likely to last well can also be relatively inexpensive such as:

- Generic Swiss-made watches from c. 1925 to c. 1945; and
- Waltham 1899 & 1908 models.



Waltham 1908-625

To finish off, here are some general points about watches that you might want to use one frequently:

- Avoid watches that are key set from the front;
- Three quarter plate watches tend to be more robust than full plate watches (Waltham 1883 models and high quality Coventry made keyless watches being possible exceptions);
- Slim movements tend to be more robust than “fat ones” so avoid movements such as the Frères Baume $\frac{3}{4}$ plate from the 1880s / 1890s that looks like an English movement and is of good overall quality but is, in fact, quite thick with a long balance staff that makes them somewhat fragile.