

Telegraph
TIME

THE CODEBREAKER
HOW WARTIME
SECRETS ENDED UP IN
A NEW WATCH DESIGN -
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FINE JEWELS
LUSTROUS PEARLS,
COCKTAIL RINGS AND
LASHINGS OF GLAMOUR
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WATCH & FINE JEWELLERY REVIEW

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Captain Gronow sounds like a character from Thackeray or Dickens, but in fact he was a diminutive dandy who had been at Eton with Shelley and received an ensign's commission in the Guards at the end of 1812. He eventually became known as a chronicler of 19th-century life, but in the summer of 1815, he was a young man eager to be part of the "great events" that were "about to take place on the Continent".

Fate was kind to Gronow and not long after the decisive dust-up at Waterloo, he found himself in Paris. And if there was one thing that Gronow liked even more than fighting, it was shopping.

Then, as now, the French capital's luxury shops were the best in the world and it seems that any Allied officers with a bit of spare cash headed straight to Abraham-Louis Breguet – not least the Duke of Wellington, who is said to have paid the enormous sum of 300 guineas for a minute-repeater watch.

Tsar Alexander I was a Breguet man, too, which probably accounts for the brand's popularity in the former Soviet Union. As a man of fashion, it was natural that Gronow was soon hanging out with Breguet, having the same sort of conversations that watch lovers are still having two centuries later.

Describing him as "without doubt, the best and most scientific watchmaker known", Gronow writes that Breguet "was not an advocate for flat watches, as he said they impeded the proper action of the wheels and could not be depended upon as timekeepers: he defied anyone to make a watch so good as those made on his own principle."

Gronow was lucky to have met one of the greatest minds ever to tinker with a balance wheel; for his part, Breguet confided that no less an individual than the French emperor was not just a customer, but had sought his advice on military matters. "Napoleon himself, knowing his abilities, frequently went incognito to the workshop and conversed upon the improvements which he was anxious to effect in cannon and firearms." I love the idea that in his spare time Napoleon would don a disguise and nip round to Breguet's to chat over his plans for a new supergun.

But, then, why not? After all, watchmaking was still a branch of scientific enquiry and the late 18th and early 19th centuries were a time when watches combined hi-tech innovation with luxury like no other product – and Breguet was like no other watchmaker. Born in Switzerland, he made his name and reputation in Paris. What is truly remarkable is that by the time Gronow met him, Breguet was about the only French institution to have survived the Revolution, the Terror, the Consulate, the Empire, the return of the Bourbon monarchy, the return of Napoleon and now the Allied occupation. In fact, his first big coup



STYLIST: GAIA GEDDES. SET DESIGN: MARIO MATYSK. ASSISTANT: FERNANDA GUIMARAES. CO-ORDINATOR: CATILINA McDONALD

was when he was commissioned, reputedly by one of her lovers, to make the most complicated watch for Marie Antoinette (unfortunately she went to the guillotine before she could take delivery).

Fearing for his safety, Breguet fled to Switzerland, but by the second half of the 1790s he was back in business and had caught the eye of Napoleon, then one of Revolutionary France's most gifted soldiers. And in April 1798, Boney bought the first modern carriage clock, equipped with a Breguet overcoil balance rather than the pendulum balance, which had militated against portable clocks in the past. Napoleon collected the clock just before he left for the Egyptian campaign; he would also come to own an early self-winding watch and repeater.

It is suggested in the catalogue to a 2009 Louvre exhibition of the Breguet oeuvre that somehow Napoleon disapproved of Breguet inasmuch as he did not give him the *legion d'honneur*, or bestow an order during the coronation year when, so this catalogue states, "money flowed like water" and every luxury business in Paris "was sinking under the weight of an avalanche of commissions". Alas this reading of events doesn't quite support the rather more picturesque Gronow version of Breguet being sought as a military adviser.

But if Napoleon himself was not such an active customer, his family and inner circle more than made up for it. Brother Jérôme Bonaparte, who would serve variously as king of Westphalia and Spain, ordered a dozen pieces. His sister Caroline, married to the dashing and flamboyant General Joachim Murat, King of Naples, wore the now famous wristwatch, one of a collection of 14 Breguets. Louis Bonaparte, King of Holland, and his queen, Hortense (Napoleon's stepdaughter – Europe was run very much as a family business), also joined the Breguet club. Not wanting to be left out, his sisters Pauline and Elisa were enthusiastic clients.

In all, Napoleon's family accounted for around 100 pieces between 1797 and the derailment of the Bonaparte gravy train in 1814, which was the equivalent of more than a year's production.

Of the aftermath, it is known what happened to Napoleon but Breguet seems to have been charmed; even though the Napoleonic elite had been his best clients, the returned monarch Louis XVIII named him Horloger de la Marine Royale – which meant that with some justification Breguet could have described himself as suppliers to the armies of imperial France, the navy of Royalist France and the commander of the Allied forces that vanquished the former and put the latter regime back on the throne.

• Breguet (020 7355 1735), breguet.com. *Dancing into Battle: A Social History of the Battle of Waterloo*, by Nick Foulkes, is published by Phoenix

THE NAPOLEONIC CODE

As watchmaker to both the Duke of Wellington and his foe Bonaparte, Breguet was the horological colossus of the Regency era. Nick Foulkes reflects on his legacy. Photograph by Nato Welton

AFTER BREGUET clockwise from far left: Jaeger-LeCoultre Master Tourbillon, E56,000 (020 7491 6970, jaeger-lecoultre.com); Arnold & Son Tourbillon, E62,000, at Asprey (020 7758 8756, asprey.com); F.P. Journe Octa Automatic Lune W1622, E36,840; F.P. Journe Octa Calendrier W1252, E39,370. Both William & Son (020 7493 8385, williamson.com); Chaumet gold, diamond and rubellite Josephine Tiara ring, E8,302 (020 7495 6303, chaumet.com); Breguet Classique Grande Complication, with tourbillon, 5-day power-reserve indicator, small seconds, balance-spring with over-coil and hand-engraved dial, E88,300 (020 7756 8883, breguet.com); Cartier Tortue XL, with Breguet hands, E17,000 (020 3471 4850, cartier.co.uk). Interiors objects, see Page 2

1860 Edouard Heuer founded his workshop in the Swiss Jura.
1916 First mechanical stopwatch accurate to 1/100th of a second.
1963 Jack Heuer designs the TAG Heuer Carrera Series.
2013 New TAG Heuer Carrera Automatic Chronograph with Calibre 1887 in-house movement.

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