

Blind Man's Watches

General remarks about blind man's watches:

Before 1900 blind people usually were very poor people, mostly beggars or basket makers at best. Hence they couldn't afford a watch. It's no wonder, no Swiss watch museum I know has a blind mans watch with a verge escapement in it's collection (period 1850 or older). Though the first watch I'm introducing here is an example from 1800, made by the famous Swiss watchmaker Louis Breguet, called "montre a tact". According to contemporary advertisements, it was not intended as a blind man's watch, but as a "night watch", though it would have been very suitable for blind persons, too.

It allowed to read the time at night by feeling the arrow, guided by twelve diamonds along the rim of the watch case.

Admittedly, there were allways some rich blind beople; people who became blind e.g. due to old age. To those it was common to use repeating watches; - watches which rang the actual time on demand by pressing the pendant.



Fig. 1:

This watch was sold as a "night-watch" by the famous Swiss watchmaker Breguet who had his workshop in Paris. Certainly this watch (montre a tact) would have been suitable for a blind person, but was actually intended to be read in the dark by feeling with fingers.

(Photo courtesy of Watch Museum La Chaux de Fonds, Switzerland)

It was not before 1900, that blind people got support from the public welfare and from charity groups. As a rule, their watches were cheap, sturdy watches that allowed to feel the position of the hands in relation to digit marks on the dial (as the next example shows), or Baille numerals as an alternative. Usually all watches were additionally equipped with regular numerals, so they could be set and read also by seeing people. As a rule, blind man's watches are allways hunter case watches, since these watches miss watchglasses and were to be protected by a jump off cover.

Example 1: An early, real Blind Man's watch

System Roskopf, ca. 1910, manufactured probably by Cortebert.

Dimensions:

Watch diameter52.2 mm
Movement, Dia.43.0 mm
Thickness.....15.9 mm
Weight102 gram

Indications: Hours, Minutes

Movement: (No serial #, no hallmark but "Swiss"). It's an exact copy of an original Roskopf movement, 8 jewels, anchor wheel from steel, screwless balance from brass and a yellow, flat hairspring. The purpose of the latter is to make the watch antimagnetic. Tangential pin pallet anchor as usual. Cogwheels from gilded brass. Crown wound. Setting of the hands by a push piece.

Dial: Enamel on copper plate with two dial feet, fixed by dog screws. Two types of numerals: Arab numerals for people with normal vision. Raised knobs to be read by touch for the blind user. Minute and hour hands from sturdy, gilded brass (1 millimeter thick) and fixed by a screw on the minute pinion. The minute and hour pinions are sturdier than on regular Roskopf watches.

Case: (No serial #) German silver. Hunter case to be opened by pushing down the winding crown. Dust cover and cuvette snapp on. The bezel seems to be manufactured specially for blind man watches. There is no rim on the bezel that would allow an insert of glass.



Fig. 2: Face with sturdy hands, suitable for feeling the time with fingers.



Fig. 3: A typical Roskopf movement. But not a trace of Roskopfs trademark. On the plate of the face-side stamped "Swiss".

Watchmaker marks: None. The watch looks like it was never used.

Bought: From a watch collector friend for SFr. 200.- in 1998. He originally had bought it at a flea market for SFr. 140.- ten years earlier.

Example 2: An upper class blind man's watch

This watch I'm going to introduce to you shows an inscription on the inner side of the flip up cover:

"Gottes Gnade soll nicht von Dir weichen"
Gewidmet von: Willh. Stünzi, Horgen, 1918

So this lucky blind man had a benefactor who donated this watch to him. The inscriptions meaning is: "The grace of God shall never abandon you". I didn't find out, who Wilhelm Stünzi was and what role he played in this particular blind man's life. But the Stünzi-Family is well known as aborigines of Horgen (a village about 15 km from Zurich, situated at the southern shore of the lake), having lived there for at least 600 years.

Accordingly, this donated watch was a rather expensive pocket watch. Inside the case, made from argentane, beats a high quality movement with 15 jewels, a balance not temperature compensated, with a breguet hairspring. The cannon pinion and hour pinion (carriers of the minute and hour hand) are extra

sturdy, so that the positions of the hands may be safely felt with the fingers without bending them.

Dimensions:

Manufacturer:Cyma Watch Co, La-Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland

Watch diameter: 50.5 mm

Thickness:..... 13.5 mm

Weight:..... ..90 gram

Serial #none



Fig. 4 + 5: The Cyma watch with argentan case, silver dial with Braille numerals and gold-plated hands from brass. The pendant shows significant wear by the watch chain, indicating extended use. The watch was overhauled by the author and is in good shape. Watch shown on a 10 millimeter grid.

Movement: Swiss club tooth lever escapement. Breguet hairspring. Balance is not temperature compensated. Three quarter bridge. 15 jewels. Plates and bridges from silver plated brass.

Dial: From silver. Arab numerals and Braille numerals. Hands from sturdy brass.

Case: A hunter case from german silver (A nickel, copper, Zinc alloy). Cover opened by pressing the winding crown. Manufacturer unknown.

Remarks: This watch shows significant wear and water damage. Apparently it was used life long by the blind man.

Example 3: One of the last sold blind man's pocket watches

Dimensions:

Manufacturer:Gebr. Junghans Uhrenfabrik, Schramberg (Germany)
Watch diameter: 51 mm
Thickness:.....12.8 mm
Weight:.....88 gram
Serial #186227 and J47 a/1

This watch left the manufacturer in Schramberg (situated in the Black Forest, Germany) in 1947. So it was one of the last blind man's pocket watches manufactured at all. Maybe, this was the reason why this watch was never sold and came from the retailer directly to a flea market. From about 1945 on, blind people preferred blind man's wrist watches.

In 1949, as a fourth grade grammar school student, I had a blind teacher. He was usually guided by his wife, who also watched us kids, so we had to behave decently, though our teacher couldn't see us. I remember very well this teacher, frequently flipping open his wrist watch and feeling the time.



Fig. 6 + 7:

The German Junghans watch with digit marks to be felt with fingers and arabic numerals to be read by seeing people. Note, the numeral 12 is aligned with the pendant!

Club tooth movement with 17 jewels in a hunter steel case. The steel is badly rust-protected with black paint.

Watch shown on a 10 millimeter grid.

Dial:

Made from white plastic with position marks for the blind people and arabic numerals for the seeing people. The Numeral 12 is aligned with the pendant, which is unusual for a hunter's watch. Usually a hunter's watch sports the numeral 12 at the 9 o'clock position. Hands are made from blued spring steel.

Movement:

A good quality club tooth lever escapement with a yellow, flat hairspring and an invar balance. Bridges construction with 17 jewels.

Watch case:

Hunter case from regular steel (no stainless steel!). This might have been due to shortages right after the end of the second world war. Case opened by pressing a push button centered inside the winding crown. The case is painted black, may be to provide minimal rust protection or to fake a gun metal case.

On reading the time on a blind man's watch:

On regular hunter case watches used by seeing people, the 12 hr numeral is usually found at the nine o' clock position of an open face watch. This way the time is easier to read, since the open cover doesn't hinder the reading.

While watch examples 1 (Roskopf) and 2 (Cyma) follow this rule, the Junghans watch breaks with this rule.

I dare say:, since the open cover of the watch doesn't hinder a blind man's vision by definition, it might facilitate finding the 12 hr position when this is aligned with the pendant, especially when no Braille numerals are used.

Example 4: A modern blind man's wrist watch

I don't collect wrist watches and rarely repair them . So I don't possess an example of a blind man's mechanical wrist watch either. After a watchmaker friend took notice of my homepage project about blind man's watches, he lent me an example from his shop, so I'm able to introduce you to the most recent development of time keeping for blind people.



Fig. 8:

Electronic blind man's wrist watch, displayed on a 10 millimeter grid. Note the (relatively) large loud speaker grid, that provides a clear and loud announcement of the time when the green button is pushed. Then a woman's voice tells you, "It is 14 hours and fifty minutes" in any language you desire.

Manufacturer: ..

Dial: Digital LED-Display for the seeing people. Announcement of the actual time by a female voice when the green button is pushed.

Time setting: After pushing a little mode-button, the hours and minutes can be set separately. While you are doing this, the loud speaker informs you about the progress of the setting.

Alarm-clock setting: Similar to the procedure of the time setting. The alarm rings for one minute, unless you interrupt it by pushing the green button.

Costs: SFr. 57.- (ca. US\$ 40.-)

My conclusion: A very practical and helpful watch, suitable for blind people. It beats every traditional blind man's watch described above. Very inexpensive. Not a beauty!