

How I Found the Original James Bond Watch

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The literary, or original, watch of personal choice for the James Bond character is a Rolex 1016 Explorer. Details related to my making this first definitive identification were published in the February 2009 issue of *WatchTime* magazine. So this is not an article about “what” Agent 007 wore, but, rather, it’s a piece more functionally relevant to BULLETIN readers: “How was it found?”

Yes, “Rolex” is the only James Bond watch specifically named by creator Ian Fleming. But watch collectors who read Fleming’s books after hearing about “the James Bond Rolex” are often surprised at how little attention the brand is actually given in those pages. In fact, Rolex is ascribed to Bond in only two novels. It appears one time during the plot of *Live and Let Die* (1954). Nine years later, Rolex is mentioned an unprecedented seven times as Bond’s own purchase in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* (1963).

Although James Bond is a fictional figure, Ian Fleming invariably looked to reality for details. He gave a trade name for 007’s shirts. Aston Martin is an actual car. Authentic brand references helped him sweep readers along through fantastic situations by hooking them to the real world with citations his audience was likely to know through advertising.

For me, “Bond” serves as a creative theme for the watches I collect; the literary James Bond watch is where I start.

Dating Watches through Fleming’s Writing Routine

Ian Fleming wrote his James Bond stories between January 1952 and August 1964, following a strict, self-imposed cycle to produce one book per year, resulting in a total of 14.

With his second novel, *Live and Let Die*, he established a routine that all but the last two books would follow to publication. His preliminary research and notes organization began some 18 months out. Individual manuscripts were then written, start-to-finish, during the initial two months of the year prior to publication. Over the course of the next 12 months, those complete drafts were revised, fact-checked, and edited to final form.

Understanding this history is critical in accurately dating references to physical wristwatches. So the sequencing above, for example, at least initially suggested to me that the Bond Rolex in *Live and Let Die* would have had to be based on something from the fourth quarter of 1952.

This is consistent with my review of the typed *Live and Let Die* manuscript archived in the Lilly Library on the campus of Indiana University at Bloomington. The word “Rolex” in Fleming’s own bound edition there appears on page 111.



COURTESY IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM AND GETTY IMAGES.

Ian Fleming, January 18, 1964, wearing his Rolex Explorer.

The larger context of the *Live and Let Die* plot makes that watch mission-specific. In other words, Fleming didn’t intend to define Bond’s personal watch choice, but, rather, deliberately used the Rolex name to validate a tool watch among a larger inventory of diving gear and weaponry he described as having been received by 007 from his quartermaster (“Q-Branch”) in London. “Rolex” merely enhances plot credibility, in this case, giving his protagonist the ability to check the time while submerged. It’s on par with “Champion,” maker of the *Live and Let Die* harpoon gun, also sourced from Q-Branch.

In an earlier chapter that describes preparations for the dive, Jacques Cousteau is named more than once as a source from which Bond was learning through books he’d borrowed. This mirrors Fleming’s own real-life research technique. He had just struck up a friendship with Cousteau at that time and even visited with him during his work surrounding discovery of the 2,200-year-old Marcus Sestius wine ship off the Bay of Marseilles.

All the evidence I’ve seen points to a high likelihood that Captain Cousteau provided quite a bit of technical detail, if not motivation, for sequences related to Bond’s climactic 300-yard swim in *Live and Let Die*. Exciting as this association may be, however, I would not connect it to a specific watch nor to any particular Rolex model.

Ian Fleming thought no more of that Rolex than as an efficient shorthand to substantiate a wristwatch that could perform as required on a commando mission to mine an enemy ship, moored at an anchorage of about 30 feet. His writing shows not the slightest trace of his otherwise characteristic attention to detail when describing physical pieces he’d seen. (e.g., Where is the dial luminescence and rotating bezel—obvious and extremely relevant, if these had been features of a developmental Submariner that had served as its basis?)

Responsible research requires that I draw this line as well. Editors at *WatchTime* felt the same way, deleting a discussion of Jacques Cousteau from the earliest draft of my feature article.

Further reason to avoid overreaching here comes from evidence of just how effective Fleming otherwise could be in using horology as a means of carefully defining characters and enriching plotlines.

His first novel, *Casino Royale* (1953), features a shadowy Swiss figure who is “a traveller in watches.” Fleming’s first script treatment (1959) for a proposed 007 motion picture provides the heroine with a cover story of working for customs in search of stolen Swiss watches. He gave other high-profile characters important timepieces by Patek Philippe in 1955, Cartier in 1956, and Girard-Perregaux in 1957. One story published in 1961 even used a radium-painted watch dial to test a geiger counter.

Photos from the 1950s clearly show that Fleming wore a variety of different watches into his Bond era. These were alternatively on bracelets and straps. He seemed to favor lower-profile cases and dark dials, simply decorated, with no complications of any sort.

So I concluded many years ago that it was not due to oversight, nor for any lack of interest or knowledge that Ian Fleming had chosen to be so oblique in defining the James Bond watch. Nor was it out of any reluctance to get into the particulars of Bond’s individual tastes, since Fleming otherwise routinely explored the minutiae of Agent 007’s preferences in food and women.

Naming James Bond watch brands throughout the series would have perfectly, intimately served Fleming, then. But that’s not what he did.

Why not? Because, purposefully, Bond’s watch needed to be a commodity due to the nature of his work. This is confirmed by the copy of a letter provided to me by Lucy Fleming, the author’s niece. In correspondence dated June 5, 1958, Ian Fleming responded to a fan by the name of B. W. Goodden, stating that the practice of James Bond, “in fact, is to use fairly cheap, expendable wrist watches on expanding metal bracelets...”

Thus, not only is the reference to Rolex in *Live and Let Die* an anomaly, but, as I wrote above, it is an exception that had to be allowed to credibly have a wrist-watch available to function underwater. Otherwise, it was Fleming’s clear intent for all James Bond watch choices to be generics, through *Goldfinger* (1959). In no case before 1961 was there an actual watch he referenced from the real world. So long as watches meet the criteria of “cheap” and “expendable,” worn on “expanding metal bracelets,” any number of timekeepers fit the bill as James Bond watches in books one through ten.

And this is how the earliest James Bond watch was presented on the wrist of an actor. See Barry Nelson in the Chrysler Climax Mystery Theater version of *Casino Royale* for CBS television, October 21, 1954. That show aired less than six months after the May 5 publication of *Live and Let Die*.

Literary-Bond versus Movie-Bond

Things were different when EON Productions began shooting scenes on location for its first James Bond film, *Dr. No*, on January 16, 1962. Harry Saltzman and Albert R. “Cubby” Broccoli were the producers; Terence Young directed. Actor Sean Connery was James Bond. His movie-Bond was wearing a Rolex Submariner

when Ian Fleming famously visited those sets and interacted with the cast that January.

For decades, many have cited this to justify arguments favoring a Sub model as the original James Bond watch: Fleming was there. He wouldn’t have missed noting the details of the watch Connery was wearing in character. Fleming’s style and number of references vis-à-vis the literary-Bond watch significantly changed in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* — unquestionably written after having seen the movie-Bond watch.

A close read actually shows that Ian Fleming resoundingly rejected the Sean Connery Rolex when giving specifics for his own literary-Bond in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*. For that book, he gave Agent 007 the same metal bracelet discussed in his B. W. Goodden letter; in the Connery film, the watch is obviously worn on a dark, textured strap with a buckle. The Submariner in *Dr. No* has only markers, not numbers, like the Rolex in Chapter 14 of *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service*.

Much later in 1962, *Playboy* magazine asked Fleming for a “description of James Bond,” and he responded on December 11. This letter is quite consistent with his then-unpublished manuscript of *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* and strikingly dissimilar to Connery’s Bond. Fleming favored for Bond his own, personal traits of “blue-grey” eyes and short-sleeved shirts (even with a suit).

He also wrote: “Wears Rolex Oyster Perpetual watch.”

However, there’s no evidence that this might somehow have been a personal rejection of Connery, himself, in the role of Bond. In fact, Fleming’s stepdaughter Fionn Morgan was present at one of the first meetings between the Bond-creator and Bond-actor; she remembers an immediate acceptance and a good rapport. Nor was Ian Fleming adverse to having EON Productions influence his novel in progress. Note his mention in *On Her Majesty’s Secret Service* of the virtually unknown Ursula Andress, who played female lead in *Dr. No*. Fleming simply wanted to hold some elements of the literary Bond’s choices to himself. This included giving 007 his Rolex Explorer.

Among those less sure that a Submariner must have been the original intent of Fleming, there have been a variety of curious attempts to guess the true Rolex type. From a snapshot by Mary Slater to the professional session done by Harry Benson, period photographs have been examined in search of clues. An excellent history titled *James Bond: The Man and His World*, by Henry Chancellor, features one stock image of a Rolex Oyster Perpetual that caused some to erroneously claim “Mystery Solved!” in 2005.

I have long been convinced that the answer was to find an actual Rolex, or perhaps a number of Rolex wristwatches, that were worn by Ian Fleming himself. My approach, then, had been to make direct inquiries

over the years to the Ian Fleming Will Trust, biographers, and surviving contemporaries of Fleming.

Initially, the clearest answers I'd gotten were most discouraging: Very few personal effects of this nature survived the author. Ironically, it was a particular Omega Seamaster Planet Ocean that led me to identify the original James Bond Rolex of Fleming's time.

On March 8, 2006, amidst all sorts of secrecy surrounding the newly cast Daniel Craig, I became the first to identify the wristwatch he'd wear as Agent 007 in the so-called franchise reboot, *Casino Royale*. Although I'd been studying Bond watches since the 1970s, it was this Omega Planet Ocean that made my name synonymous with James Bond watches.

Following the unprecedented public acclaim with which *Casino Royale* was received, attention slowly shifted to preparations for the Ian Fleming Centenary, timed to what would have been his 100th birthday, on May 28, 2008. As part of this, the Imperial War Museum in London was planning to open a special exhibit on April 17, 2008, titled, *For Your Eyes Only: Ian Fleming and James Bond*.

Family members were approached for artifacts, and Fionn Morgan supplied items never before displayed in public: a pair of her stepfather's cuff links and his only surviving wristwatch—a Rolex Explorer I (according to her clear recollection, the only Rolex he'd ever owned). That's where I came in. I specifically identified this illusive "Oyster Perpetual" for the first time in detail and provided historical context.

To revisit and expand a bit on my *WatchTime* feature, the Ian Fleming Rolex is a model 1016 Explorer, case number 596851. It still has the factory-delivered 7206 riveted, hollow-link (nonexpanding) bracelet with the number "58" on its endpieces. The mechanism is a Rolex 1560 caliber.

James Bond's Radioactive Watch Dial

The original dial under the "superdome" crystal of this wristwatch is what fascinates me the most. It had indices painted with radium-226, no doubt providing the referent for Fleming when he wrote of Bond's watch on page 154 of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, first edition: "The big luminous numerals said midnight."

Debate surrounding luminescent material containing a radioactive isotope of the element radium has received excellent technical coverage in previous BULLETIN issues. I wasn't in London when the Fleming watch decision was made, but I'm told that concerns related to radium exposure came down to a decision that its dial be replaced prior to showing it at the Imperial War Museum.

The photograph of the watch that appears on page 89 of the February 2009 *WatchTime* was taken after that change.

So, in addition to being aged, the original dial would have only had the word "SWISS" below its 6 o'clock position, as opposed to "SWISS - T < 25," as seen in *WatchTime*. It also had a minute-track insert. Finally, the word "Rolex" was in a slab serif typeface, and the crown logo had a more squared proportion than later versions of the 1016.

I've been able to access a similar Rolex Explorer with a 596,xxx serial number for comparison and analysis by the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Its caseback markings date its production to the fourth quarter of 1960, placing it—and the original Bond watch, with an identical caseback—nicely into the retail window I wrote about in *WatchTime*.

This virtually identical watch, which still has its original dial, will be on display at the 2009 NAWCC National Convention in Grand Rapids, MI.

Manufacture date, markings, and other important Fleming-Bond watch configurations described in this BULLETIN article have been confirmed by Rolex UK.

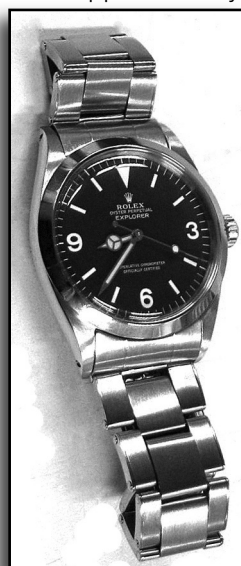
Last May 28 I was at the Lilly Library in conjunction with Ian Fleming Centenary commemorations. While there, I took time to pull from their archive an original *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* uncorrected proof, which would have been printed shortly before that novel was first published on April 1, 1963—almost six months after the October 5, 1962, premier of *Dr. No* starring Sean Connery. I found that Ian Fleming had not only continued to make changes to *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* well into spring 1963, but among those he'd made a key correction in reference to the James Bond watch.

But there was no effort to reconcile a consistency with the movie-Bond wristwatch. The singular "Oyster Perpetual" wording in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* could have easily been changed to "Submariner" at that late date. It wasn't.

This was a period of unique challenges for Ian Fleming, intimately, as the creative force behind 007. Litigation stemming from an earlier attempt at a movie deal sought to wrest credit from him for various successes of the James Bond icon. A massive heart attack in 1961 mandated radical changes to his active lifestyle. *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1962) was an experimental departure from the popular formula that Fleming had established for the book series, and it was resoundingly panned by critics.

Then, with the *Dr. No* movie, the world of Tinsel Town got him caught up in a measure of playacting choreographed to blur the lines between his actual service with the Department of Naval Intelligence during World War II and the fictional exploits of his fantasy secret agent.

Ian Fleming's Rolex Explorer, as it appears today.



COURTESY IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Continued on Page 312.

set that Waltham used exaggerated dial signatures on many of their illustrations. This is so the signatures would show up better in the catalog; they aren't really that big on the actual watches. There were now 14 distinct types of cases. In the 7-1/4 ligne sizes, there are two models specifically marked as ladies.

The referencing system was again modified, with a rather confusing system of a 2-digit number, followed by subnumber indicating a certain style within that 2-digit number. The case styles are still somewhat limited, due to Waltham using only round movements for men's wristwatches. Baguette movements for men's watches, which will eventually allow for more streamlined case designs, are still a few years away.

The enameled watches have become very popular with collectors. This is especially true of Number 90, Style Number 4 (Figure 5). With hinged lugs, it is listed in the 1930 catalog in either white or yellow gold; I have also seen it in green gold. It was introduced, I believe, to compete against the Hamilton Piping Rock, which had been introduced a year earlier in 1929. By this time, Hamilton had caught up with—and many would say surpassed—Waltham in case styling.



Figure 5. The "No. 90" from the 1930 catalog features a solid gold case with enameling.



Figure 6. This is the "No. 80" with a 17-jewel movement, that could also be ordered as the "No. 70" with a 15-jewel movement. Smaller movements (6/0 size) fitted into most men's watches by this time, including the 70, 80, and 90, and allowed for more streamlined case designs.

Waltham's Number 80 and 70 are also highly desirable among collectors (Figure 6). While not an enamel watch, per se, Number 65, Style Number 5, is also a very handsome watch, one that I've recently had in inventory. It has a very pleasing art deco motif engraved into the bezel, which is painted (or inked) black.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. *Minutes*, Waltham Co. Newsletter, January 1921.
2. Bryan Girouard and Will Roseman, "The 0-Size Wristwatch, Hamilton's First Wristwatch for Men," *NAWCC BULLETIN* (April 2006): pp. 167-173.
3. *Minutes*, Waltham Co. Newsletter, January 1921.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Fredric J. Friedberg, *The Illinois Watch* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2004): p. 20.

How I Found the Original James Bond Watch . . .continued from Page 309.

In my *WatchTime* article, I wrote that it was "hard to imagine that Ian Fleming would have let the last detail of Bond's Rolex model be determined by someone else." My research leads me to conclude that that "someone" was three-time 007 film director Terence Young. In an interview published in 1981, Young described the nature of his rivalry with Fleming at that time over how the James Bond character would be presented going forward.

I'm confident that the Bond creator held fast to key details of the character as reminders that it would always be "Ian Fleming's James Bond 007" (as, in fact, the lead to each new movie states even to this day).

In *You Only Live Twice* (1964), Fleming made what I read as yet another insider passage for which he is famous—this time, to horologists. In defense of the post-World War II greatness of England, James Bond gives only one specific: "...we still climb Everest..." Here again is implication of Ian Fleming's propensity to keep almost any scrap of information he came across and to use it however he could in his stories. Period Rolex documents connected his Explorer to the climb he had Bond reference. I don't think that is coincidence.

In my opinion, there is indeed one specific brand, model, and configuration for James Bond's first watch—just one. That's what I've written about here.

It's hardly a surprise to prove that Ian Fleming first wore the original James Bond watch (and I suspect that Sean Connery would be among those most happy to agree). But the question for this *BULLETIN* article was not "Where—?" but, rather, "How was it found?"

That answer required discussions with those who actually knew Ian Fleming, professional examination of his Rolex, physical contact with the author's own James Bond writings, and a geiger counter. Even then, my proposal draft to *WatchTime* was substantiated by some 168 footnotes before going forward—a field assignment quite worthy of Agent 007 himself.

This is how I found the original James Bond watch.

About the Author

Dell Deaton is an expert on Ian Fleming and James Bond, founder of www.jamesbondwatches.com, and guest curator for the National Watch & Clock Museum exhibit, "Bond Watches, James Bond Watches," opening in June 2010.