

# 'Try to find your £380,000 watch and you'll die'

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John Maxwell with his wife Odette. He says he is determined to find the watch handed to fraudsters

IT sounds like a plot from a crime thriller, complete with international villains, death threats and the handover of a £380,000 watch to a mystery man at the Ritz hotel.

But the story is all too real for John Hunter Maxwell, a former director-general of the Automobile Association who has fallen victim to a "cleverly executed" fraud that cost him a rare Patek Philippe watch.

Maxwell, 70, a former banker who comes from a Scottish newspaper-owning family, says he has received death threats during his hunt for the watch, one of only 24 in existence, yet remains determined to get it back.

"When it first happened it was a complete shock," said Maxwell, who was away in New York when the watch was handed over to the fraudsters in May last year. "You really can't believe it."



The watch was taken with the help of an identity stolen from a Monaco bank employee

Maxwell, who is recovering from two heart attacks, has so far spent £55,000 on private detectives trying to recover the watch, which he bought as an investment three years ago.

One of the rarest "grande complication" or multifunction watches produced by the legendary Swiss manufacturer, the 5104P boasts a perpetual calendar, moon phases and leap year indication among other features.

Such elaborately crafted timepieces are now almost as highly sought after as Old Masters. Last week another Patek Philippe "super complication" timepiece was sold at auction for a record \$24.4m (£15.6m).

Maxwell was on a foreign sailing trip when he decided to sell his watch through Jacob Tomkins, a London broker, who had been recommended by a friend.

After exchanging emails with a potential buyer, a meeting was set up and it was decided the watch would be handed over when the \$600,000 (£380,000) agreed sale price was deposited. Maxwell used his account at a bank in Monaco because the "purchaser" wanted to make payment into an offshore account.

However, the fraudsters managed to steal the identity of one of the bank staff in Monaco and used it to convince Maxwell that the money had been deposited. He received a phone call confirming the payment as well as emails.

Tomkins then met a man known as "Michael" at the Ritz in London to hand over the watch. Only later did it become clear that the money had not been received by the bank.

"My range of emotions went from shock and disbelief to desperation as to how on earth I could get my watch back," said Maxwell, "I was totally desperate." Private investigators uncovered CCTV coverage that shows "Michael" leaving the Ritz with a holdall containing the watch.

Maxwell believes the watch was taken first to Beirut where it was sold, possibly to a wealthy Russian. He has been sent a photograph purporting to show the watch on the wrist of a man he thinks is Russian.

Maxwell believes the sale of the stolen watch could have been blocked if a police report on the incident had been completed more quickly and sent to Lebanese authorities.

"Six weeks ago I received a death threat," Maxwell said. "My phone rang and a Middle Eastern voice went into a monologue that I couldn't interrupt for about 10 minutes . . . saying that I had to stop pursuing the recovery of my watch, I was chasing the wrong man.

"I had to stop immediately or he would come after my family, my friends, my property and destroy us and kill me." He reported the call at Belgravia police station.

Tomkins, who co-operated with police and was cleared of any wrongdoing, said the theft of the watch had been an "unfortunate incident". He added: "John Maxwell's lawyer had exclusive power of attorney and custody of the watch while Mr Maxwell was away from London. I acted entirely on written instruction from Mr Maxwell and his lawyer.

"Mr Maxwell sent written confirmation to his lawyer and myself that the funds for buying the watch had been received, and then instructed me to collect the watch from his lawyer in order to make the delivery on his behalf to the 'buyer'."