SINGAPORE: When the Swiss watch brand IWC Schaffhausen first produced a large-dial watch in the 1970s - a reworking of its 1939 Portuguese model - it was a complete flop, recalls Hannes Pantli, who joined the company in 1972 and who, although now retired, is still a member of its board.

In 1984, the introduction of the Portofino model, another watch with a large face, also proved a disaster. "Again, it was unsellable. No one wanted to wear a watch of this size," Pantli said in a recent interview, referring to the dial's 46-millimeter, or 1.8-inch, diameter.

Undeterred, the company tried again in 1993 with another version of the Portofino, issued to celebrate the company's 125th anniversary: and this time it was an instant success. The watch set a new trend for larger men's watches, which continues to this day.

Celebrating the 140th anniversary of its foundation in 1868 by Florentine Ariosto Jones, a young Bostonian survivor of the American Civil War, the Swiss watch manufacturer this year is bringing back six of its milestone watches as vintage models or "new interpretations of good old friends."

The six watches revisited in the new collection include the 1936 Pilot's Watch; the 1939 Portuguese; the 1955 Ingénieur - IWC's first automatic, self-winding timepiece; the 1967 Aquatimer diver's watch; the 1969 Da Vinci; and the 1984 Portofino.

Tellingly, all of them, except the Portofino and the Portuguese, have a larger dial than the originals that are their inspiration. With their bigger faces, the watches have been given new personalities, Pantli said.

The 1955 Ingénieur, for example, had an original dial of 36 millimeters, which made it "almost a lady's watch," he said. In the new collection the face has expanded to a more masculine 42.5 millimeters dial.

Fashion and taste aside, the larger dial on sports watches such as the new Aquatimer Automatic, makes reading the time easier, he said.

IWC's reflection on its past not only gives an indication of how fashion has evolved over the last century, but it also tells a story about mechanical advances.

When the first Pilot Watch came out in 1936, possibly suggested by Hans-Ernst and Rudolf Homberger, pilot sons of the company's then owner, Ernst Homberger, it had a black dial with luminescent hands and numerals, and a rotating ring with a luminous triangle to help calculate flight time and fuel consumption. But it did not have antimagnetic parts; nor was it waterproof and scratchproof, and there was no anti-reflective coating on the crystal that covered the face.
The reissued interpretation incorporates all these technological advances, while also equipping the watch with a hand-wound pocket watch movement.

"The Pilot Watches were more delicate in those days and not as reliable; no doubt about it. Technically, there has been a lot of progress," Pantli said.

The IWC Da Vinci was the first quartz watch built in Switzerland, Pantli said, and its name was chosen because IWC wanted to highlight its conversion to the new technology. The watch was a sensation when it premiered at the Basel trade fair in 1970, its movement heralding a revolutionary new standard for accuracy. Yet, it also threatened the very existence of the traditional craftsmanship on which IWC was built and in 1985, the company opted for a return to a mechanical movement. The 2008 version retains a mechanical action with the company saying quartz now would contravene its principles.

Curiously, the Aquatimer homage appears to have a lower performance standard than the original that inspired it. While the 1967 watch could be used by divers descending as deep as 200 meters, or 650 feet, the reissued version is waterproof only to a depth of 120 meters. In preference to maintaining its deep diving capabilities, IWC has chosen to endow it with a see-through back cover.

"We decided that the movement was important and we put the glass at the back for the wearer to be able to admire the technology," Pantli said. "The fact is nobody dives to 200 meters - except professional divers who use completely different equipment."

Most watchmakers dig deep into their history on a regular basis and though this may suggest a certain lack of creativity, buyers like Su JiaXian, a Singapore-based collector, feel that the exercise can be an appealing one for collectors.

"There has been too much creativity in the watch industry in recent years," Su said. "You see lots and lots of overpriced but underwhelming complications, like the multitude of tourbillons. This epidemic of creativity extends to the overuse of 'cutting edge' materials chosen merely because they sound good - ceramic, tungsten, niobium - you name it and it has been used."

"Many collectors have grown tired of such gimmicks and long for something well-made and simple," Su said. "These six watches are exactly that."