

Mr Reg Whitten in his Civic premises with Ms Judith Hughes, of the Royal Blind Society.

# Keeping in touch with time has its reward

By PAUL GARWOOD  
Staff Reporter

REPAIRING timepieces is more than a job for Newcastle watch repairer Mr Reginald Frank Whitten: it is his love.

Mr Whitten has spent much of his life studying horology (the science of watchmaking) and 36 years helping those with sight impairments to be able to keep a track on the time.

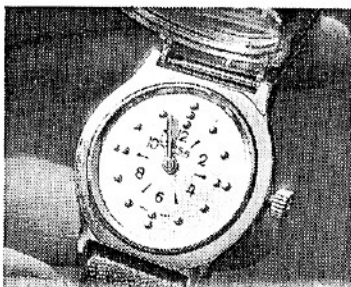
The Royal Blind Society will present him today with a plaque recognising his work repairing visually impaired people's braille and large-print watches for free.

Mr Whitten, who worked the 36 years in the Newcastle Civic area, said yesterday that he was very proud to be recognised for his work in helping the blind but admitted that it was totally unexpected.

'I'm in a job where if you didn't have good eyesight you would be in trouble,' he said.

'That is why I want to help people with defective sight because I know how important your sight is.

'If they wake up at all hours of the night, they are able to rely on a watch which will tell them the cor-



A braille watch . . . Mr Whitten has repaired thousands.

rect time . . . it is very rewarding.

'And the people who come to have their watches repaired are very appreciative too, they are pleased to see that somebody understands them and they need help.

'It's something that I take as a personal project; I never consider it as charity work.'

Mr Whitten's interest has led him to all parts of the world.

'You have to be wrapped up in your job if you are to be any good at it,' he said.

'Some people build pools on the weekend and others play golf but I spend most of my holidays in Switzerland working at watch factories.'

Mr Whitten had the distinction of being the first Novacastrian to be awarded a Churchill Fellowship, in 1968, which enabled him to travel, study and work for six months in England, Switzerland, Germany, the United States and Japan.

He has the honour of being the only foreigner to have been allowed to work in the US Navy Chronometry facility (where precision marine timepieces are made) in Portsmouth, Virginia.

Mr Whitten is a member of various international watch institutes and associations and is a past president and federal secretary of the Horological Guild of Australasia.

'Ninety-five per cent of all ships in Sydney are built with clocks and systems supplied by me,' he said.

'I supply all the Sydney ferries, for example, with their equipment.

'I've cornered the market.'

Mr Whitten said the major marine timing manufacturers from all over the world supplied him with the equipment, which he then sold.

He also finds time for his involvement in the Salvation Army as its regional coordinator for emergency services in the central NSW division, as well as being the Mayfield branch's band secretary.

The father of four from Mayfield could not put a figure on the number of braille watches he had repaired but a Royal Blind Society media officer, Ms Judith Hughes, said he had helped more than 2100 people affected by sight loss.

'We feel he has contributed very much to the work we do, he has assisted us by supporting us in keeping people's equipment in good condition,' Ms Hughes said.

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Judith Hughes presents the award to Reg Whitten.

## Blind Society gives reward

**GRATITUDE** is probably the best way to describe the Royal Blind Society's attitude to Reginald Frank Whitten.

Mr Whitten has earned this gratitude by repairing braille and large print watches free of charge for the society for more than 36 years.

Society representative Judith Hughes said a braille or large print watch was important to people who had little or no sight because of the independence it gave them.

From a distance the braille watch looks like a nor-

mal watch because it has a hinged glass panel allowing the blind person to feel the position of the specially strengthened hands.

Instead of numerals, the face has embossed dots to indicate the time.

Large print watches are for people with some remaining vision and as the name suggests, the numerals are larger than normal and are designed to offer the greatest contrast.

As thanks for Mr Whitten's services the Royal Blind Society presented him with an engraved plaque.