

Spark Models

We've been a couple of issues without a Meet the Manufacturers piece, for which apologies. This issue we have had a long chat with the people behind the most prolific manufacturer of 1:43rd scale models around at the moment, Spark.

The company was founded by Frenchman **Hugo Ripert** and our thanks to one of his business partners in the company, **Clive Rigby**, who helped us with the questions and answers.

FSW - How and when did you start modelling?

HR - For me it is the familiar story of plastic kits when I was a child. My father André was also an important influence and he was one of the early makers of resin kits with his Record range in the early 1980s. When I started work I followed into the business, though a slightly different area, and went to work for Quartzo and then Vitesse when they took over. When Vitesse got into difficulties the factory in China took over and this became Ixo. I was responsible for researching and developing new models and also overseeing the production.

FSW - What influenced you to go in the direction that you have?

HR - While I was at Ixo, as a collector I noticed that though there were some kits, there were no die-casts of a lot of the backmarkers such as the Riley & Scotts that make up the richness of the Le Mans race, so I asked if there would be a problem if I started making these in my spare time. Permission was granted and I started making low volume models, using different suppliers for different castings and parts so that I could keep control. The casting was made in China and the decals were from Cartograf, as at the time it was not possible to get good decals in China, though this is changing.

Through a fellow enthusiast and collector, Fernando Pinto who creates Bizarre models, I was introduced to Clive Rigby who shared Fernando's interest in Land Speed Record cars. Clive had already been involved with model manufacturing, commissioning John Shinton to make the model of Thrust SSC. He saw what I was doing and convinced me to start my own factory, agreeing to go into partnership and help with his financial support as well as his experience in promotion, web design and other marketing.

This was still a part time business to start with as I was at Ixo, but six or seven years ago we took the step and made it full time.

FSW - Your models are different to the traditional die-casts. Was there a reason you chose the way of manufacture that you use?

HR - Resin has the advantage that

we can work in smaller quantities and produce models in quantities of a few hundred that would not be possible financially for the existing larger die-cast companies. We try to uphold similar attitudes and values to the traditional European resin and white metal kit makers and pay particular attention to the specific details. It would be very easy to take a basic pattern and just redecorate it.

Because of this flexibility and our relatively fast turnaround times, we are finding more and more work directly for motor manufacturers to create promotional models.

FSW - You make a wide variety of subjects, how do you choose what to make?

HR - Some are obvious to us to make, such as the modern Le Mans subjects and Le Mans is where the range started. Many of the road cars and concepts are items that were asked to make by the manufacturers. For example, the Mercedes subjects start as Mercedes exclusives and then after a year our contract allows us to add them to our own range, maybe as slightly different versions. We are car enthusiasts first and some of the more unusual subjects are made simply because we like them! We have to be careful as sometimes these are not commercially sensible subjects, but allowing a little of our character and personal taste to show through doesn't hurt we don't think. Some of the more random road cars such as the VW Lupo and Suzuki Cappuccino are because we have them in the car park!

FSW - Do you have a favourite subject or a model that you have been particularly proud of?

HR - You'll get a different answer in a different day for this one! The Peugeot 908 LMP was a good one and we're very proud of the 'badly finished' Mercedes Silver Arrows. The 1:24th scale Aston Martin DBR9s were very pleased with as models, though they were a commercial failure. The Ferrari GTOs in the Red Line range are a great project, getting all the small detail changes right and the TVR Sagaris was very difficult to get right, the pattern had to be restarted several times.

FSW - You mention Red Line. What exactly is the relationship between Spark, Red Line & Bizarre?

HR - Red Line is part of Spark. With the cost of the license for the Ferrari models we wanted to offer collectors a little more, so we created a new brand with more expensive packaging etc. In terms of detail, if you compare a Red Line Ferrari 550 and a Spark Aston Martin DBR9 for example, you will find the modelling style is very similar.



left to right, Hugo Ripert, Shirley Ripert & Clive Rigby

The Bizarre range is owned by Fernando Pinto and he researches and creates the patterns and is responsible for the production decisions in terms of materials used etc. Spark then do the actual manufacturing and distribution for him.

FSW - How much time does it take to create a new model and what materials do you use for pattern making.

HR - It depends on the subjects. For many of those that are commissioned by a car maker we are supplied with detailed CAD documentation, so all the research is effectively done for us and we can often create the prototypes using a stereolitho machine with laser setting resin. This is very fast.

For many other subjects we're back to doing things the old fashioned way with reference to photographs and hand modelling using hand carved prototyping resin. Some of the older subjects can take quite a long time.

We are always looking to learn new techniques and have been helped by taking many experienced modellers on board. Benoit & Angel from Le Mans Miniatures are now here much of the time and Benoit has helped us to improve our interiors in particular. Jean-Pierre Viranet, creator of the Tenariv range of kits and one of the pioneers of 1:43rd is also now here and he brings his amazing knowledge of historic F1 cars.

Between us we now manage an average of one new model subject ready per day!

FSW - What would be a typical day?

HR - I start work at 9.30am and the beginning of the morning is usual office type stuff, checking with suppliers and distributors, overseeing new projects, checking with the different teams here in the factory that everything is as it should be. Then there's the occasional bit of 'fire-fighting' when things aren't quite as they should be. The factory employs over 500 and the main factory is managed day to day by one of our Chinese partners, Cecelia. All casting is done in house, as is the building. Most of the casting is still in resin, but subjects that have a standard body, such as some of the Touring Cars, will be cast in Zamac.

At the moment the decals and the photo-etch are out-sourced, but we will bring these in house as soon as we can.

Lunch is taken at a house that we own nearby and is with all of the key office staff, most of whom are European.

We're then back to the office and will often be in until midnight or beyond as we need to talk to European distributors and other contacts when they are open. It makes for a long day with lots of hard work, but we play hard too! In the afternoon/early evening we try to find time to play a little. There is a race track nearby and we get in some track testing and race practice when we can.

FSW - Do you collect and if so what?

HR - Oh yes. Everything! I continue my father's model collection back in France, which is mostly sports racing and speed record cars. I also have my own similar collection here, though this is rather eclectic and includes whatever takes my fancy. I'm not sure of the exact number of models in my collection, it's somewhere around 15,000. Clive also collects, the core collection being speed record cars but there are all sorts of models in there. At the factory we have a museum with an example of every model that we make added.

Away from models, I have a collection of about 40 Honda Monkey Bikes and also a collection of cars. There's no real theme with these, just things that interest and amuse me, so an early Land Rover, a supercharged 160hp classic Mini, Mazda Cosmo, a couple of Lotus Elises that we use on the track, an old Bentley Turbo that has been converted to a pickup, a Countach, some Porsches and a few others. I would really like a collection of microcars, maybe one day...

FSW - So, what's next?

HR - With Jean-Pierre on board there will be a lot more historic F1s. The Can-Am range will also be extended, we aim to do more speed record cars and of course there will be the majority, if not all of the 2009 Le Mans cars. Plus whatever else we like the look of.