

# Supersize me

**Richard Woolff, managing director of Talbot Designs, writes about the larger-than-life creations that his company fabricates**

Problems – what problems? We only have challenges at Talbot Designs.

For some plastics fabricators, one day might be just like any other but our clients seem to relish asking us to tread a path which few, if any, others would. The combination of tight deadlines, the requirement for a perfect finish and the creation of extraordinary shapes and sizes for one-off, bespoke items, means that we are constantly being challenged and challenging ourselves to think of innovative ways in which to work with plastics.

For a small company in north London, we have created some rather larger-than-life items. We are regularly called upon to produce supersize objects – many of them for promotions houses, film, television and marketing campaign. What we manufacture for clients is really limited only by their imagination.

At a time when most British firms outsource manufacturing, especially plastics' manufacturing, overseas, Talbot Designs bucks that trend. Far from outsourcing to other countries as is the case for so many European companies, clients from other countries beat a track to our door as we have become known worldwide for being the only company capable of tackling tricky or giant-sized jobs.

## World record

We have attained an enviable list of record-breaking firsts in thermoplastic fabrication including a number of larger-than-life-sized replicas of products and product packaging. The *Guinness Book of Records* verified the world's largest beer bottle (2.54 metres high) that we built for Kingfisher. For those interested in such thing it held a staggering (pun intended)

1,100 pints of beer.

We created the giant light bulb encasing comedian Lenny Henry for Red Nose Day; and another of our 'big' successes was a giant jar for Argos, recently used to adorn the foyer of the Plastics Design & Moulding event. If you saw a 1.5 metre high wine glass (made in part with one of our domes) for ITV Creative to promote XXL Thursdays, that too was a Talbot production which the client described as "quite amazing". Constructed from 12mm tinted acrylic and measuring over 2.1m in height, it weighed over half a ton and, when filled, held 625 litres (1,100 pints) of beer.

Talbot Designs has been in business for 60 years spanning three generations of the family. Today, the company is run by me and my father Charles Woolff as chairman, leading a team of craftspeople many of whom have been with us for decades. As a team, we have carved something of a reputation as one of the pre-eminent producers of over-sized promotional and theatrical props made of plastic or acrylic and also as leading the way in the manufacture of plastic domes.

## Size matters

Manufacturing the massive items that we do often causes not just manufacturing headaches but also logistical issues. Our factory is reasonably large, but even we ran out of floor space when creating the world's largest mirrors for the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, resulting in us having to beg and borrow floor-space from a nearby synagogue.

We have had numerous overseas commissions. One example of which we are particularly proud is the commission we were particularly proud to produce the balustrades for the Longchamp store in New York.



**Lenny Henry promoted Comic Relief in 2007 aided by a Talbot acrylic "light bulb"**

Here, there is a uniquely surreal staircase that seems to emerge almost organically from the floorboards. The designer, Thomas Heatherwick, called on Talbot Designs to create a balustrade that would enhance, not destroy, the visual effect. This meant that it had to be transparent and simultaneously sustain the free-flowing form of the staircase. Furniture for the Bond film 'Die Another Day', the lectern for the BBC Sports Personality of the Year Awards and work on Dr Who's Daleks... all rely on Talbot's workmanship.

## Spherical domes

Costing some of the work we produce is thus a challenge in itself sometimes especially when the concept has not been tested before and we are required to price up jobs within 24 hours. This means we have to be very open minded when it comes to production techniques and a lot of lateral thinking goes into the initial quote in order to estimate a commercially acceptable price.

However, we do not only produce bespoke work. One group of products

that is easy for us to cost are our plastic and acrylic domes. We have always been known for our ability to produce perfectly spherical domes and spheres and now we have invested in new manufacturing equipment enabling us to carry twenty-seven stock sizes of dome.

We can – and do – produce literally thousands of them for retailers or promotions companies. Orders for domes are often turned around within twenty-four hours and as perhaps the premier manufacturer in the UK of domes of all sizes we find that these are put to an astonishing variety of uses. We know that our domes have been used to house some of the world's smallest objets d'art (statues built on a pinhead and then viewed with microscopes) to being transformed into light fittings for, in one instance, London's Charing Cross Station. At a more pedestrian level (literally) the company produces part of the 'Walk' signage for Pelican crossings. As I said before, we are only limited by the imagination of others.

[www.talbotdesigns.co.uk](http://www.talbotdesigns.co.uk)

# PRW

## Editorial

David Eldridge, Editor

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## Innovation and its support

Two aspects of the future of manufacturing came into focus over the past couple of weeks. The BPF's conference called Plastics the Industry of Tomorrow provided a forum in which speakers underlined the importance of innovation as a means for companies to move ahead. The second point is that, notwithstanding what companies must do for themselves, they also need the support of government for manufacturing as a whole.

At the conference, Lord Battacharyya of Warwick Manufacturing Group, stressed that the plastics industry needs to innovate. Many companies are, of course. But Lord Battacharyya had a warning about Chinese manufacturers, in that they will also go after the high-value work that UK and other European companies are now focusing on.

Countering this point were other speakers who said that the answer is for UK companies to innovate and innovate again in order to stay ahead.

Support for pursuit of innovation could come from the Technology Strategy Board, set up by the government last year and now promising £1bn of investment. On the opposite page are details of an initial funding competition for materials and components that could help reduce energy and water use in buildings.

But after 11 years of Labour government many are sceptical about its desire to help manufacturing. Perhaps this is why Conservative leader David Cameron has announced a manufacturing summit for later this year.

### Editorial

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