

'Model engineering is going to die out. We've lost the skills'

Matchsticks, glue, beards and precision tools were all in abundance at the annual London Model Engineering Exhibition. Ed Cumming joined the enthusiasts



The Spithead Review, Jack Snary's set of around 600 tiny model ships



By [Ed Cumming](#)

This weekend Alexandra Palace was half-filled by the [London Model Engineering Exhibition](#). (The other half was the snooker Masters. The area wasn't exactly awash with babes.)

I had never been to a model engineering exhibition before, but like many men I have a love of models rooted deep in childhood. Lego, [Warhammer](#) and Airfix were pillars of my upbringing, and my grandfather had a workshop where we would sometimes make little stationary traction engines. Glue eventually gave way to video games and guitars, but when an invitation to the exhibition arrived, I was curious. In its 18th year, the London Model Engineering Exhibition sells itself modestly as one of the largest such shows in the country. Your prejudices about the average attendee are probably right. Beards, Thermos flasks and sensible footwear were in ample supply. Men outnumbered women ten to one, clutching pork pies and pints of bitter. The strange feeling that washed over me, I realised, was comfort. Here was a corner of Britain that endless vacuous TV reality shows or Twitter would have you believe had died out, alive and well



One of the model aircraft stands in the exhibition



Ed Cumming with Matilda from Robot Wars

Not that there is anything particularly profound about having a narrow-gauge railway in your garden, or a model of every plane flown in the Second World War. But these are hobbies indulged with great skill, time and dedication. Collectors pored over spare-parts stands and queued to spend small fortunes on new precision tools. "I'm involved in the sport of miniature cannon firing," said a man in a tweed jacket, tantalisingly, before scarpering safe in the knowledge he had delivered the best non-sequitur of the day. There was plenty to grin at: a matchstick HMS Victory; Matilda and

Sir Killalot from [Robot Wars](#); narrow gauge trains that ran on actual steam and became dangerously hot; a Tiger 1 (mid-production, 1943) tank, in the cockpit of which detailed German officers raised binoculars and maps. Jack Snary with his Spithead Review....



The highlight was the Spithead Review, a set of around 600 tiny model ships laid out on a table. They were all made to the same 1:1200 scale, so you could see at a glance how a Viking longboat, say, compared to the Titanic, or a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. The collection has been a 33-year labour of love for Jack Snary, a former engineer and accountant from Cheshunt, Herts. More than a hobbyist's whim, his work is really a visual history of 3,000 years of naval warfare.

"I was always interested in big gunboats," he said, "but I couldn't find a book with them all in. My first model was the submarine monitor M1, which I made in 1980, and it went from there." The collection now includes every vessel in the development of big gun capital ships, and hundreds of others besides. He researches each from scratch, drawing detailed plans before making the boats out of plastic, resin and glue.

"Each ship takes me about 40 hours," he added. "I have always made sure I only do it to relax at nights. You can't be wound up when you're making them, because you'll get it wrong, and people notice. On the other hand, I have had men cry when they see the display, because they see the ship they served on – you forget but for some it was their home for three or four years"



Ships made of matchsticks

Jack was not selling anything. "I suppose I show at these events for ego, really. But if a kid can come up and get interested, than that's great. Model engineering is going to die, I'm afraid. We've lost the skills. I know how to work a lathe, but do children today?" A good number of small children crashed around the hall, but without a dad or granddad to encourage them into the shed, it's hard to see how they could resist the Call of Duty for long enough to be hooked on steam.

"My collection is insured for about £60,000," Jack said, "but the materials for each boat only cost 50p. That's the beauty of all this. It's creativity. You think of something, and then three months later it's there."