

# Bright ideas

From bike lights like searchlights to seatposts, chainrings, bars and more, USE is thriving – in West Sussex.

**Dominic Bliss** dropped in

**I**t's dark in the mornings and the evenings are still drawing in. But Roger Sparrow (above), boss of bike parts manufacturer USE (Ultimate Sports Engineering), is looking on the bright side. Winter means he can sell thousands of his British-made Exposure bike lights.

These award-winning lights are

the latest in a long line of British-designed and British-manufactured bike parts to come out of the USE workshop in West Sussex.

Housed in four units across a fairly non-descript industrial estate in Petworth, 20 miles from Gatwick Airport, the company's 25 or so staff made and sold 16,000 bike lights last year, as well as around 10,000 USE seatposts, handlebars, stems, chainrings, wheel skewers and bottle cages. Business is booming. This year they're expecting to shift as many as 25,000 lights. Sparrow says that since he first diversified into bike lights, back in 2005, he has tripled annual turnover from under £1 million to nearly £3 million.

## Business cycles

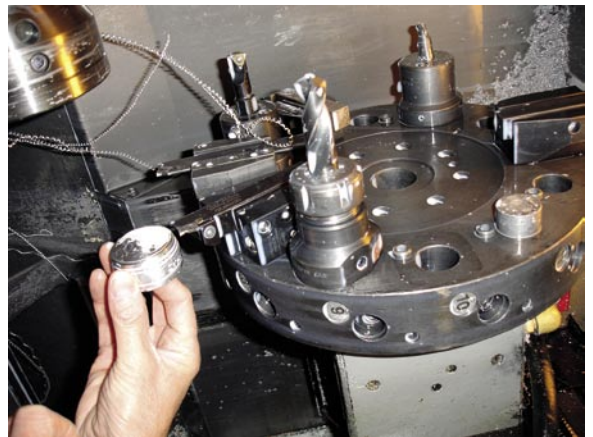
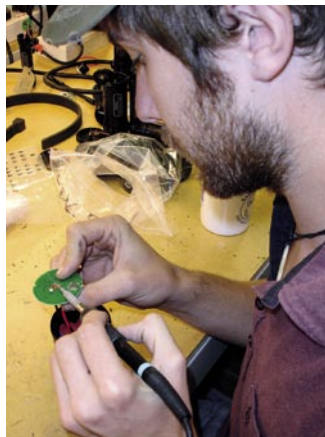
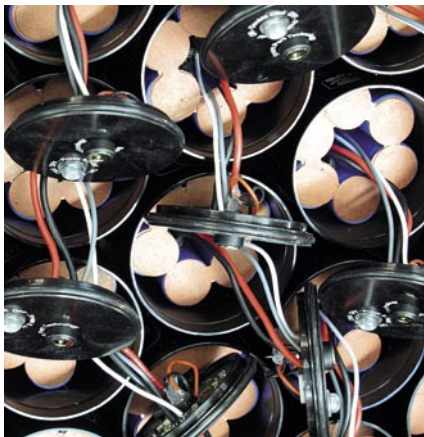
It's a good result when you consider how many UK manufacturers have thrown in the towel in recent years because of competition from factories in the Far East. Sparrow says many of his UK rivals chose to make products for just one bicycle

company (known in the trade as original equipment manufacturing, or OEM). 'This meant that if that particular bike company decided not to use them one year, their business collapsed.'

Sparrow refuses to put all his eggs in one basket. By diversifying into bike lights, he has spread his business across several clients. He now sells to 300 UK retailers and to distributors in 15 other countries around the world. Every one of his products he designs himself, mainly on his computer at home, using autoCAD software.

Although he laments not having more free time to ride his bike, in the past Sparrow has raced mountain bikes and has spent many hours on the Sussex Downs. His nine-mile cycle commute from Chiddingfold gives him the chance to test out his own prototypes.

Now 50 years old, he started out life as a jewellery-maker and silversmith, but grew bored once he'd mastered all the techniques. »



Photography by Dominic Bliss and USE

» In the late 1980s, after falling for mountain biking, he dreamt up a revolutionary new suspension seatpost called the Shokpost. Initially he worked out of his kitchen. But by the mid-1990s, the bike parts were selling so well he wound down his jewellery business, hired an industrial unit, and put all his efforts into USE.

(Clockwise from above) This is how 1800-lumen Exposure Six Pack lights are powered. UK manufacture is more expensive but brings benefits too. Machining a head unit for a light. Charging up the finished products.

### Competing on design

On a bright autumn day, Sparrow's enthusiastic marketing man, Rory Hitchens, gives me the guided tour of the premises. Raising his voice to be heard above the whirr of machinery, he shows me various lathes, milling machines, curing ovens, circular saws and polishing rumblers – many in the process of turning out USE bike products. Minutes into the tour a lorry draws up outside with a delivery of aluminium rods, all destined to become seatposts. Next to all the heavy machinery are the administration offices. Across the other side of the street I meet the 10-strong team assembling the Exposure bike lights.

Not every USE part is manufactured in Petworth. It works out much cheaper to have many of the plastic, rubber, packaging and electronic components made in Taiwanese factories. Sparrow knows he could save money by having his designs manufactured and fully assembled in the Far East, but he says the advantages of being UK-based outweigh the disadvantages.

'Yes, it's slightly more costly,' he admits. 'But that's



not detrimental to us. Light technology is so fast moving, and we've got the flexibility and the speed to react [to the market]. We can move quickly and leave the competition behind. We haven't got economies of scale, or access to very cheap manufacturing, so we have to be cleverer. We try to out-think and out-design the competition. Attention to detail is a creed that goes through our entire business.'

### Many hands make lights work

Watching the skilled workers piecing together his Exposure lights, I see what he means. Circuit boards are soldered, emitters are wired up, lenses are fitted, batteries are packed, logos are lasered onto light casings, and the final products are all then tested and charged up. It's a production line, but with the skill, precision and friendly atmosphere here it doesn't feel it.

Traditionally, bike parts manufacturers shift most of their product early in the year, as bike shops prepare for the summer rush. This often leaves them twiddling their thumbs from springtime onwards. Not USE. By diversifying into a winter-product such as lights, Sparrow has ensured he and his staff remain busy over the summer months. Some of his employees are gap-year students, saving up to go travelling in the New Year once the wholesale demand for bike lights has dropped.

Both Sparrow and Hitchens are bullish about potential sales for Exposure lights, especially the clip-on front and rear lights, the Flash and the Flare. With a recommended price of £40, they admit they're not cheap. But they're convinced they'll be adorning the seatposts and handlebars of thousands of bikes this winter. 'Cyclists will be blown away with these lights,' says Hitchens. 'I have high expectations that this will become a product everyone wants to put on their bike.'

In the meantime, Sparrow is looking to design lights destined for other sport and leisure activities. He's working on prototypes for yachting torches, and wrist-mounted divers' lights. The outdoor camping and hiking market is another target. 'We want to use the knowledge we've gained in bike lights to get into other activities,' he says. 'For example, I'm working on a head torch that will be better and cleverer than anyone else's. It has to be, otherwise we won't bother doing it.'

To steal a march on the Far Eastern manufacturers, he knows he has to diversify even further.

*For more details, visit [use1.com](http://use1.com) & [exposurelights.com](http://exposurelights.com)*