

A Kelton History, by Mr. Alain PRÊTRE

Introduction

“Les Chaprais” is a district of the Besançon City (East of France) which was the unchallenged capital of French watchmaking in the 1960's/1970's. The following articles were translated from local news bulletins taken from <http://www.chaprais.info> (original articles published in May and June 2015).

Part 1: Kelton and Les Chaprais



One of the first Kelton ads, 1957

No doubt some chapraisien [editor's note: inhabitants of Les Chaprais] remember this famous slogan from the 1970's: "You change [of clothes], change your Kelton!". But do they remember that the adventure of Kelton started in Les Chaprais? This is what Mr. Alain PRÊTRE, a chapraisien who worked in the company, tells us here.

Everything really started across the Atlantic in 1946. Mr. Stéphane BOULLIER, at the head of a bisontine [editor's note: from Besançon] watchmaking company called "VIXA", operates an economic mission in the United States. He is playing the ambassador for the French capital of watchmaking... The decision-makers at TIMEX don't resist too long to this passionate fellow and his smooth talking. They are convinced. The idea comes of age in 1955 when the Americans

land in Besançon to invest the French watchmaking market... The name KELTON is chosen! According to Mr. BOULLIER, when he went to the US and the TIMEX managers asked him what his hotel was and he answered ELTON, KELTON was born. The Americans didn't want to jeopardize the TIMEX brand which was famous in the US, they differentiated the French production by giving it another name.



A Kelton ad from 1963

A workshop is put in place 14 rue des Villas, in the district of Les Chaprais. A worker manufactures the KELTON watches for TIMEX, with spare parts coming from the Timex factory at Dundee (Scotland) and blueprints coming from the French mountains near Switzerland. The essential vocation of TIMEX CORPORATION, whose headquarters are in Middlebury, Connecticut, is to produce watches for a large-circulation. The company owns several subsidiaries in the world and particularly in Scotland.



The first Kelton headquarters, 14 rue des Villas

At the time, Luigi CARRETTA lives in Besançon. Born in London in 1935 from an Italian father and an Irish mother, he is passionate about football since his childhood [editor's note: European football i.e. soccer]. As a teenager he played with the Felham club in London. After working at SIMCA in Paris region he joins the "Swiss circle" team in Besançon. He is not a professional and he needs a



Kelton ladies watch

job for a living. In 1955 he is hired by LIP as a worker to control metals, under the responsibility of a German who stayed at Besançon after WWII and who trains him...

An evening, he goes to a pub avenue Carnot, and there he meets Mr. Alex SIMSON who works for TIMEX, he puts together the KELTON watches, rue des Villas, and is looking for a worker to do the watchmaking Quality Control... Mr. SIMSON proposes the job to Luigi, the latter admits he knows nothing in the matter, but – he says – “you come to the workshop on Sunday mornings for a month, and I’ll train you”. So he is hired on January 1st, 1956 at KELTON, 14 rue des Villas at Besançon.

The spare parts coming from the Dundee factory in Scotland are of bad quality. The demand for watches explodes, at Besançon KELTON hire new people and install their workshop rue de l’Avenir ; their QC and administrative personnel in a

new building, 13 rue des Jardins ; and finally their accounts department rue du Château Rose.



Kelton calendar watch

Part 2: Kelton leaves Les Chaprais



Kelton dive watch, WR to 25 m

Watch retailers refuse to distribute affordable watches because of LIP, so KELTON management hires BiC [editor’s note: famous ballpoint pens company] ex-Sales Manager in order to benefit from his distribution channels, particularly tobacconist’s shops and stationery stores. Mr. BOULLIER still purchases some supplies in the French mountains near Switzerland. He resells his company to TIMEX who keep the brand KELTON.

Little by little, KELTON move their spare parts manufacture from Dundee to Besançon. Mr. Michel MAILLARDET, at the time a toolmaker trained in Switzerland, works in the family business at Morteau and Besançon; he takes over Mr. LEROY as Manager. Before that, Mr. MAILLARDET was sent six months to work as a toolmaker at TIMEX LACO, in Pforzheim Germany,

because the Americans who found the Germans very efficient told themselves “if he passes this test, he’s a good one...”

In 1961 the first part of the Besançon factory is built, 1 rue Denis Papin. In 1965 and 1966, parts #2 and #3 are built then in 1970 part #4, in 1975 parts #5 and #6 and in 1977 the last part #7. The surface of the factory will reach 55,000 square yards on two levels.



Mr. BOULLIER & two colleagues, on the building site of the future factory, June 1961 (photo: B.FAILLE)



Kelton factory in March 1972 (photo: B.FAILLE)

All the parts of KELTON watches will be manufactured at the Besançon factory, among which 50% will be exported to the other TIMEX facilities around the world.

The manufacture of spare parts, of cases and watch crystals, as well as the complete assembly of the watches needed – among other things – a big labor supply of skilled young women with an excellent view. Staff was composed of 40% of men and 60% of women.

When building the movements women were split on each side of the conveyors, they received the stand, put a screw in, and put it back on the conveyor belt for the next woman to add a spring, etc... Around fifteen pieces made a watch movement. Often the workers were singing while working... Nice times!

They were all wearing yellow scrubs and were nicknamed “les jaunottes” [editor’s note: from the french “jaune” for yellow].

As a matter of fact, scrubs set the tone. Workers in after-sales were in sky blue, shipping in orange, case and dial workshops in dark blue, while the managers, watchmakers and technicians were in white.

Sales in France will go from 136,000 units in 1962 to 2,140,000 units in 1972.



A Kelton ad in a newspaper

Progress in watch manufacture will go from 148,000 units in 1962 to 3,900,000 units in 1972.

Staff will reach 2,500 people in 1975 and almost 3,000 people in the following years.

Management will adopt the 9 to 5 working day, a first in Besançon, after opening a canteen in the factory. A pause of 45 mn for the staff at lunch break. In 1975 Luigi CARRETTA will put in place 39 daily bus shuttles that will allow to pick the staff at home in a radius of 37 miles in all directions around Besançon. These buses will drive more than 1,250 miles per day. Some of the drivers were part of the factory staff. Luigi tells me that at the time Peugeot [editor’s note: famous car company] cancelled their bus shuttle, nice opportunity for his project...

Sources: Luigi CARRETTA’s memoirs; Claude GUILLEMIN & Alain PRÊTRE personal memories; TIMEX Magazine monthly magazine put in place in 1975 and 1976 by the Management to improve communication with the staff; two photos from Bernard FAILLE (in “Mémoire Vive”, city of Besançon).

Part 3: from Kelton to Fralsen by way of... Sylvie VARTAN...

This is the third and last post dedicated to the Kelton factory, written by a chapraisien [editor's note: inhabitant of Les Chaprais], Mr. Alain PRÊTRE who worked in the company. We thank him for this work on memory.



**The Kelton Timex factory in 1986.
Photo: A.PRÊTRE, all rights reserved**

The Kelton factory needed a big labor supply, Management made parents come and told them: "See how clean! Your daughter will not get dirty. We take her on your porch and we bring her back by bus on the evening".



**Kelton Timex factory staff
on their way out of work**



Sylvie VARTAN's Kelton watches

On April 29th 1969, Ms. Sylvie VARTAN [editor's note: a famous French singer] arrived by helicopter above the factory... Private concert at the canteen for the staff, at the end of the afternoon 1,800 people were present, and give-away of a short-playing record on the way out of work to commemorate the event. The "Sylvie VARTAN" watches went out a few weeks after that.



**A record of Sylvie VARTAN's
concert at Kelton**



**The F1 racer FITTIPALDI,
sponsored by Kelton**

In 1975, it's the Formula-1 racer Emerson FITTIPALDI who visits the factory. TIMEX was his sponsor and to mark the event they were proposing a "Rallye" limited edition watch.

In 1987, Mr. Stéphane PEYRON is sponsored by TIMEX for his solitary crossing of the North Atlantic Ocean by sailboard, a first. Staff remember being able to see Mr. PEYRON's sailboard in front of the factory guests' reception.

In 1988 for the bicentenary of the Independence Day of the USA, TIMEX participates to the restoration of the flame of the statue of Liberty in New York and they organize a tour of Besançon factory for a press group. My department head had asked me to drive them through the workshop and I recall there was a terracotta sculpture from Auguste BARTHOLDI [editor's note: a famous French painter and sculptor] exposed at the guests' reception, wrapped in a French flag and a US flag (MEMOIRS A.PRÊTRE).

But change is coming...



Restoration of the Flame of Liberty in New York

In 1980 the entry level watch market is heavily impacted by the Asian competition and the arrival of quartz technology. That year the company tries to react by integrating an electronic facilities management for SINCLAIR, building the ZX81 and the ZX pocket computers (the ancestors of today's PC). The product specs change but sales don't follow. In 1982, in discussion with IBM France, the company creates an electronic modules building facility in the factory. The watchmaking workshop being dismantled, a part of its staff goes to follow a training at IBM Essonne [editor's note: in Paris region].



The Kelton Timex factory, closed

The company also proposes to develop color film with a 3D effect for the NIMSLO. In 1985 a photo lab will be created in the factory basement. It will work approximately one year before the machines are moved to Atlanta (US). The Management seemed to be waiting the coming of Mr. NIMS and Mr. LO in Besançon with the goal to produce the case, the experience had been conducted in 1967 for the POLAROID without significant success.

Little by little parts of the watchmaking activities are relocated and downsizing plans succeed to voluntary departure plans starting 1985.

Today [editor's note: i.e. in 2015] if the watchmaking activities have been closed for a long time, the company FRAISEN OPEX still manufactures watch parts with plastic injection. The activity goes well, a part of the relocated production has moved back to Besançon and there are still 250 workers on site. The huge premises of Trépillot [editor's note: industrial estate in Besançon suburbs] are now the property of the SMCI [editor's note: a local property developer]. The company FRAISEN OPEX rents about 25% of the remaining buildings.

The time for rehabilitation has come...

Bonus part: who remembers the Vixa watches?

In his first article dedicated to KELTON, Mr. Alain PRÊTRE, member of the group "History, Heritage, Memory of Les Chaprais" talks about the bisontin [editor's note: from Besançon] father of the VEXA company: Mr. Stéphane BOULLIER.



Mr. Stéphane BOULLIER, on the right, on the building site of the future Kelton factory, June 1962 (photo : B.Faille site mémoire city of Besançon)

Mr. BOULLIER was the head of the VIXA watchmaking company. The manufacture was created after WWII liberation. Headquarters were located 14 rue des Villas at Besançon.

In the year 1946, VIXA became a watch provider for the French Air Force, with watches equipped with HANHART German movements recovered by France as war damage.

The movements were still produced in Germany in a zone under French control. French forces in Germany had the cases and movements made

at Hanhart's premises and sent them to France to be put together by KIPLÉ under the brand VIXA. The VIXA "Type 20" is similar to the Luftwaffe chronograph but has a few differences: the German cases were not in steel and shockproof system apart the movements had flat steel release springs instead of the thread spring. Even the turntables were different because stamped "made in Germany".

Production starts in the early 1950's based on Hanhart cases and movements. Deliveries start in 1954 (back case engraved "5100" for order number and "54" for year) for a total production of 4,000 to 5,000 units, a very few of them still circulate nowadays. The ever-rising quotation of this specific watch (between 2,000 and 2,500 euros) is explained by its very small number of units produced and that it's at the crossroad between military and dress watch collections.

The VIXA manufacture at 14 rue des Villas disappeared from the moment Mr. BOULLIER became president of TIMEX FRANCE in 1955 to become the new KELTON manufacture.



Kelton factory in 1986

