"AERALIS can make a major contribution to Britain re-building its manufacturing base"

An interview with Bob Bell, Interim Technical Director, AERALIS

Q: Bob, can you start by telling us something about your background?

A: My background is very much in motor racing. Up until the beginning of this year, I was the Chief Technical Officer for the Renault Formula One Racing Team but then I decided that, as I'm now in my 60s, it was time for semi-retirement. So, now I'm working for the team as a Technical Advisor which has freed me up to get involved in other projects. And AERALIS is one of them.

Starting from the beginning, I graduated from Queen's University Belfast in 1979 with an honours degree in Aeronautical Engineering which I followed up with a doctorate. After that, I joined the McLaren Formula One Team in 1982 as an Aerodynamicist. I worked with McLaren for some fifteen years through the very successful period in the '80s with Prost, Senna, Lauder, winning many championships with them, and also undertaking exploratory projects for McLaren to do with unusual vehicles such as a world land speed record vehicle.

I left McLaren in the late '90s and worked for a number of different teams for the next few years, including Benetton and Jordan, before joining Renault as Technical Director and helping them to win the 2005 Drivers and Constructors Championships with Fernando Alonso. In 2010, I moved to the Mercedes team as Technical Director and saw them through to the end of the 2014 season when they won the first of their current successful seasons. After that I returned to Renault as CTO.

As I said before, I moved into semi-retirement earlier this year, allowing me to undertake non F1 consultancy work.

Q: With your background in Formula One, what attracted you to AERALIS?

A: I first came across AERALIS in 2015 after reading an article written for the Royal Aeronautical Society magazine which caught my interest. Tristan Crawford, the author, was talking about developing a new military aircraft in the UK, which is not something we do now. We certainly don't develop complete aircraft on that scale. We make a lot of very important sub-assemblies for other organisations but we're not developing new commercial or military aircraft on our own.

It seems a big shame that we have lost this capacity in the UK manufacturing industry when we were so dominant in the '50s and '60s.

It also caught my attention in that Tristan mentioned he would be keen to use some of the supply chain that's used in Formula

One, and perhaps some of the technologies that are now available through it, materials, structures and so on. So, I contacted him and said, "Look, I'm happy to give you some advice. I know the Formula One world well and I can help you a little bit on that." That conversation developed and I've been associated on and off with the AERALIS project since then in an advisory capacity. After a few years, I took the next step of investing in the company and was delighted when they asked me to become their Interim Technical Director.

Q: Were there any other, more personal reasons?

A: Well, I love aeroplanes as much as racing cars and there is a lot of synergy, so I think I can bring something to the party. I'm passionate about Britain rebuilding its manufacturing base, it's a great country for engineering, science and technology and we're world leaders in so many things. For me it's important that we maintain a strong foothold in developing aircraft into the future and is just something that's personally important to me. And, as I say, I've got a small financial interest in AERALIS and I like the sort of people it attracts. It's a great team of people and I've got every confidence that they'll deliver, otherwise I wouldn't have invested. Not just hard cash but I wouldn't have invested my own time and effort.

Q: Finally, what exactly does the role of Interim Technical Director involve?

A: Well the company will need a full-time Technical Director when it stands up a permanent organisation after this next funding round. But in the meantime, they need someone to coordinate the engineering and technical activities and I agreed to take on the challenge.

Basically, I'm setting the overall planning in place for the engineering operation, focusing mainly on the design, manufacture and operation of the pre-production flying prototype. So, it's all about advising on some of the technical decisions that need to be taken for the development of the aircraft and also working with strategic partners and key suppliers and to start building those crucial relationships. I suppose my main objective is to ensure that when full funding arrives, we're ready to hit the ground running.

The bottom line is that I'm putting my time and money into AERALIS because I believe they can make a significant contribution to Britain re-building its manufacturing base, and I love fast, novel vehicles.