

BACK ON TRACK

FEELING inspired to start a vintage Scalextric collection? The Holy Grail for collectors is model code C70 – a Bugatti Type 59 that was issued in the 1960s, but only produced in limited numbers. At the time of writing, a mint-in-box example was being offered for £12,000 (A\$22,560). In the UK, specialty businesses offer new-old-stock and reproduction parts, plus full restoration services for vintage Scalextric models.

▶ WHEELSTORIES MICHAEL STAHL

A matter of scale

Everything old is new again for baby boomers, even Scalextric cars

FOR 12 years, John Corfield has been president of the car club with the biggest number of cars and the smallest number of members. Just 100 or so adherents, spread across the nation and a sprinkling overseas, collectively own something in the region of 40,000 cars. But bragging about who owns what simply isn't done in this small world.

Corfield, 63, was a founding member of the Australian Scalextric Racing and Collecting Club. "When we formed the club in 1992, there were 16 or 20 of us – a bunch of like-minded individuals that loved Scalextric, and each thought they were the only ones."

In 1952, British toymaker Minimodels had introduced a range of wind-up, tinplate model cars called Scalex. Five years later came Scalextric, the cars now guided and powered by a gimbal wheel on a rubber track with electrified steel rails.

Variable-powered hand-controllers and an expanded range of cars further increased the electric racing game's popularity in the early-1960s. The first Scalextric World Championship was staged in London in 1964 and was hosted by the reigning F1 world champion, Jim Clark.

Scalextric – almost the generic name for the 1/32-scale slot car hobby – has been through ups and downs over the intervening years, with the advent of home computers and radio-controlled models hitting sales hard. But new models, boutique brands and the 'baby boomer' phenomenon have resuscitated the cult in the past 15 to 20 years.

Corfield recalls that the explosion in slot car racing's popularity during the 1960s led to there being three commercial slot car tracks in his childhood suburb of Wentworthville, in Sydney's west.

"Scalextric cars back then were too expensive for my pocket-money, but I was able to build a competitive 1/32nd car out of scrap model kits, a bent-aluminium chassis and a reasonably good motor. The real thing came out of a box marked Cox or Monogram [the US brands] and was 20 times more expensive than anything else on the shelf."

Does he think, just maybe, he's over-compensating now? "Uhh, 'yes' is probably the right answer." But Corfield won't say how many cars he has.

The king of Australian collectors is Jim Berry,

who 20 years ago opened specialist slot car shop Armchair Racer. Berry's collection is reckoned at 5500 cars, and includes Scalex clockwork cars, mint-in-box track sets and examples of Holy Grail cars like the Type 59 Bugatti (model code C70) and James Bond DB5 (C97).

While Berry displays some of his collection in his Sydney shop, other members don't have the luxury of such secure premises. "Imagine you're someone with 3000 cars, even at \$100 a car," Corfield says. "The insurance premiums mean that most people can't afford to insure them." Corfield will allow that perhaps 10 club members have collections of more than 1000 cars. The more usual figure is around 200 cars, with values of collectible models ranging from \$200 and up.

"It struck me about 10 years ago; this club was like a forerunner to the Men's Shed," says Corfield. "We're basically a bunch of middle-aged men who didn't have these things when we were kids. We don't go to pubs or clubs, so we don't get to talk socially to other middle-aged men. But we really enjoyed this thing we had in common. And it's competitive – the more competitive, the better."