



Archaic Grace

(Above, left) The caseback of the Equation Marchante, with striking sun motif adorning the winding rotor, in recognition of the watch's prime function – indicating the difference between 'real' solar and mean time; the so-called 'equation of time'.

(Above, right) A close-up of Blancpain's new Equation of Time 'Marchante' timepiece with additional moonphase and perpetual calendar functions, launched at BASELWORLD in April (£69,700).

The Equation Marchante is Blancpain, through and through

James Gurney

⌚ Blancpain are content to leave their new flagship creation with only the most diaphanous veil of utility masking its function as a pure display of prestige watchmaking. The Equation Marchante's prime function transcends mere anachronism by addressing the issue of 'real' solar time with a solution of such grace as to render the importance of the problem itself negligible. *QP* profiles a watch archetypal of Marc Hayek's masterplan.

There is, with Blancpain, a sense of having stepped out of history; "Since 1735 ..." and all that. This impression being reinforced by stories of Jean-Claude Biver – the man who resurrected the Blancpain name – receiving ghostly guidance from the House's eponymous founder, while walking through the Churchyard at Le Brassus. An 18th century air seemed to permeate the company, from the 'Collection Prive' erotic watches to the increasingly rickety chalet serving as their booth at the Basel show, to the comparative disdain for frenetic marketing activity. This feeling clearly struck a chord however, as, despite their lack of glitzy product launches or celebrity brand ambassadors, Blancpain is still widely perceived as belonging to the highest echelon of watch houses, to be mentioned in the same breath as Vacheron Constantin or even Audemars Piguet.

Of course, such perceptions can be expected to persist in the slow-paced world of watches – but not indefinitely. The arrival in 2002 of a Hayek dynasty scion to take control was an immediate portent that Blancpain was to become, once again, a company where things happen.

Step by step

Luckily for the spirit of Blancpain, Marc Hayek had the confidence in both himself and his peers not to have rushed in and made wholesale changes just for the sake of looking busy. Crucially, Swatch Group Chairman Nicolas Hayek's grand-fils has a successful background outside the watch industry (running a cigar bar and restaurant in Zurich included) that gives him the knowledge and experience to take Blancpain at its own pace. Indeed, Hayek's relaxed manner is almost a shock, given his family's tendency for hyperactivity. Do not be fooled though; there has been tumultuous activity beneath the placid surface. And the best proof of this approach is in the first major watch to emerge from under his helm-

manship at Blancpain.



A sundial with its 'analemma' equation curve beneath – a figure-of-eight shape embracing the noon timeline, enabling one to add the equation of time to the solar time indicated by the dial, in order to calculate the 'civil' mean time.

The 'Equation Marchante' is exactly the step back in time that Blancpain is somehow meant to express. While benefiting from current technology for design and production, the concept is resolutely archaic. If you like the idea of time being measured by a device whose workings you can observe and understand, rather than simply delivered by an electronic display, then you will find the Equation Marchante doubly satisfying. Of course, the value of being able to discern the current difference between solar time and sidereal time – the so-called 'equation of time' function – is even more remote than a chronograph (at least with the latter you might find yourself timing something with it). The only practical use for the Equation Marchante is for checking the calibration of your sundial plate – solar time having declined in popularity as a standard over the last millennia or so. Even the Babylonians came up with a system to compensate for the annual variation that solar time exhibits. But this apparent redundancy is, naturally, half the point. As always with complicated watches, it is the elegance of the solution rather than the importance of the problem that matters.

Released alongside the Equation Marchante in Basel, Blancpain's red-gold Tourbillon Grande Date Tourbillon (£44,610).





The cam critical to executing the equation of time function is visible through the Marchante's dial window at 6 o'clock. The solar minute hand is also visible here, tipped with a sun motif.

Complexities

Combined with a perpetual calendar and retrograde moonphase, the calibre 3863 is a 400-component product of several years' development. Blancpain, perhaps wisely, do not specify whether the claim is for the running equation or for the combination of equation and perpetual calendar.

The running equation mechanism of the new Blancpain has been incorporated within a self-winding movement, base calibre 1150, combined with the world's thinnest perpetual calendar, and a retrograde moonphase display module. Luckily, the complexity is not matched by bulk, the movement being no more than 5.25 mm high and 26.80 mm in diameter. The Equation Marchante has two minute hands operating from the centre of the dial, with the first indicating mean time, while the second, marked with a gold sun, shows solar time. A retrograde pointer indicates the difference.

The system works by reproducing the relative variation between solar time and mean time as a cam that causes the solar hand to advance or retard as appropriate. This relatively simple solution is possible because the variation is essentially fixed over a year-long period. However, there are added complications that enter the equation: the inclination of the Earth's axis and the slight eccentricity of its orbit. These two factors can be expressed relatively simply through unwieldy equations, whose combined product luckily gives a gratifyingly elegant graphical solution. Known as an analemma, this solution's plotted curve resembles a lop-sided figure-of-eight – from which the time to be subtracted or added to solar time can be read off. Sundials frequently show analemmae as a way of visual correction marking out the seasonal variations in solar time. The equation of time's cam replicates the analemma's figure-of-eight shape – a most satisfying solution that Blancpain could not resist making visible from the dial.

For mechanical's sake

The first equation watches and clocks – either incorporating mechanisms to show the equation or simply supplied with tables – began to appear as a result of the commercial expansion of the 17th century, when the need to establish exact time references for various activities emerged. The value here being that an equation watch could be accurately referenced against apparent noon and then corrected for mean time. Such a timekeeper is then, by default, a calendar watch and it was therefore only a matter of time before calendar displays were also incorporated. This is a logic that Blancpain's Equation Marchante also follows with its calendar functions displayed on subdials at 3, 6 and 9 o'clock.

The Equation Marchante will, of course, be made in vanishingly small numbers and will elicit a virtually negligible effect on Blancpain's profits. The value it has as a symbol is however far more significant, as it lends extra credibility to the values Marc Hayek wants Blancpain to embody. There are obviously other names that have never appeared on a quartz watch, but only Blancpain can make the claim with any weight, as it was the first company to be revived on the basis that mechanical watchmaking had an appeal beyond mere utility. ○

Further information:

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The new Léman Grande Date in a steel, 40 mm case, with black dial (£4,230).