

MSSS

**MECCANO SOCIETY
of
SCOTLAND**

NEWSLETTER



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DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Society meeting, Smiths Museum Stirling	21 st January
Society meeting, Smiths Museum Stirling	18 th March
Balado	12 th /13 th May
Constructor's Day	19 th May
NEMS Exhibition at Shildon	27 th /28 th May
SkegEx	29 th June/1st July
Annual Exhibition, Scone	8 th /9 th September

MODERN MECCANO – A CURIOUS DEVELOPMENT

Reference to a Meccano dealer's website recently showed that he had no less than thirty three different Meccano sets for sale. That did not include plastic Meccano, only the metal Meccano sets. Many of the sets were only to build one model. Some (such as the R/C car and lorry) contain instructions for a limited number of variants, typically about three. A few sets do look like the fifties sets and contain instructions for up to 50 different models. What is notably lacking is any form of progression, as used to be possible with the 'A' sets. A youngster visiting one of our exhibitions therefore may be fired with enthusiasm to eventually build models of similar complexity to those that many of us display but has no obvious route to acquiring the parts to do so. Nor does he have a progression of model instructions to lead him forward and introduce gears and mechanisms.

A new set out this Christmas and only available via Marks and Spencer is a Vintage Meccano set. This is a well produced and packaged set of parts including Braced Girders and 3" Pulley Wheels. The predominant colours are red and green with the plates being green and the strips red (yes, really!). While the parts collection is quite different it is roughly equivalent to a nineteen fifties 1 or 2, the instruction manual for which would have contained in excess of 20 models. The instruction manual for the Vintage Meccano Set only contains four models. The puzzling thing about this product is to try to work out who is in the target market; surely not youngsters under the age of 10? "Vintage" is hardly likely to appeal to them. Is it aimed at the more mature Meccanoman (the bulk, we dare to say of our readership). Well he has all the parts and is unlikely to be interested and, anyway, the colours are all wrong.

One is forced to assume that the target market is that very large proportion of the male population who used to have Meccano as boys, maybe still have it some rusting away in the loft, and who are assumed to be delighted at the prospect of returning to the hobby. This makes the set just another in the long line of sets, the only ones available new these days, which are a dead end. No prospect of building bigger and better models is held out to the owner of a modern set. It is an end in itself.

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Club Meeting, 20 August 2006

The meeting was held as usual in the Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stirling, at 2 pm. Members present were Alan McDonald (Treasurer), Desmond Smith, Alistair Nicoll (Newsletter Editor), Robert Jones, Jim Berrie, Douglas Carson, Margaret Tattersfield, Jackie Inglis, Chris Shute, Tim Edwards (Webmaster), Dick Martin, Angus Plumb, Alan Blair, Ken McDonald, Gordon MacMillan, Jim Wood, Jim Gregory, Bob Middlemass, and Bert Hutchings (Secretary). There were apologies from Ian Soutar and Bobby Brown.

Exhibitions: there had been a successful exhibition in Auchterarder on 29 July, organised by Jim Gregory to raise charity funds. There was considerable discussion of Alan Blair's news that the Scottish Vintage Tractor organisation would not be subsidising the hire of our marquee for their "Farming Yesteryear" show at Scone on 9-10 September this year. It was agreed to attend the show, and to hope to offset some of the cost of the marquee by visitor donations. It was agreed which members would provide the Editor with pictures and a report from the event. Certain members indicated their intention to exhibit at the next show at Cathcart on 4 and 5 November.

Treasurer: the Treasurer presented the accounts for the year and recommended an increase in the annual subscription to £12.50. After some discussion, this was agreed without dissent.

Newsletter: the summer edition was distributed to those members present, and will be posted to others.

Website: the Webmaster had recently updated the site with pictures from our open day at Menstrie..

Other business: Alan Macdonald showed us an Empire State Building, built from a set marketed in America under the “Erector” label. Alistair Nicoll sadly recounted the vicissitudes of his involvement in the “Let Me Entertain You” TV program, and on a happier note displayed his repaired 1929 Steam Engine built into a model of a steam carriage. Douglas Carson showed us the recent “Beach Buggy” single-model set from Marks and Spencers, and also sought help with the attachment of a strip coupling to the arm of a triple eccentric, which does not function properly when built according to the illustration in the SML 11 leaflet for the Horizontal Steam Engine. Tim Edwards had brought three different radio-controlled cars built from new sets, all working on different frequencies and using standard AA batteries. The price range was from £25 to £40, and the set provides a fully-assembled chassis, together with the separate parts from which to build up the body. Chris Shute had been published in Constructor Quarterly (again!) with a nicely-built jeep, and he had also brought the Runnymede club’s newsletter to show us. Angus Plumb had found one of the pre-war No.1 non-reversing motors which from 1937 onwards were included in sets 8, 9 and 10 despite being so much less powerful than the previous No.2 motor. Alan Blair had attended the Skegness exhibition at the start of July with his fairground gallopers, and described the astonishing model of the Tornado fighter plane with which John Thorpe had won the First Prize.

The meeting dates for the remainder of 2006 and 2007 were agreed.

Bert Hutchings, Secretary

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Club Meeting, 19 November 2006

The meeting was held as usual in the Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stirling, at 2 pm. Members present were Bert Hutchings (Secretary), Jim Berrie, Ken McDonald, Bob Middlemass, Alistair Nicoll (Newsletter Editor), Douglas Carson, Angus Plumb, Bill Jack, Dick Martin, Gordon MacMillan, Margaret Tattersfield, Tim Edwards (Webmaster), Mike Ridley, Gordon Stewart (new member), Alan McDonald (Treasurer), Jackie Inglis, Jim Gregory, Desmond Smith, and Alan Blair. There were apologies from Robert Jones and Bobby Brown.

Exhibitions: there were brief verbal reports on the exhibitions at Scone (9-10 September), Cathcart (4-5 November), Darlington (11 November), and Greenock (11-12 November by Tim Edwards and Alistair Nicoll). The Secretary reported on a model rail and hobbies exhibition in Musselburgh on 14-15 October and a limited invitation to exhibit at it next year. The Cathcart exhibition will be on 27-28 October next year, and Greenock on 10-11

November again clashing with Darlington on 10th November.

Alan Blair hoped to show a video of our Scone event at the next meeting. There was extended discussion of our options for the 2007 show on 8-9 September, especially since more NEMS members are expected. Alan Blair will try to plan the event in more detail and longer in advance, especially if it appears that a bigger marquee will be required.

The Balado event is on 12-13 May 2007, and the Secretary is to find out whether we have been invited again. The NEMS are organising a display at the Shildon Railway Museum on Sunday and Monday, 27th and 28th May 2007, and hope that some MSS members can attend. Jim Gregory expects to organise another charity exhibition in Auchterarder late in July.

Treasurer: the Treasurer reported that the membership stood at 40.

Open Day: it was agreed that Tim Edwards and Alistair Nicoll would devise the competition for our Open Day at Menstrie on 19 May 2007.

Newsletter: the Editor reported that he had been in email contact with our American member David Lawrence, who has been very ill.

Website: the Webmaster requested members to visit the website and identify some unattributed models from the 2006 Open Day. Photographs of the Scone event by Doug Carson will be added soon.

Other business: Ken McDonald had visited a model rail show in Bonnybridge Community Centre on 1 October, where Gordon and Nigel MacMillan were exhibiting. Tim Edwards showed the Red Arrows "Hawk" model currently available from Marks and Spencer for £20, or 3 for the price of 2, and also the peculiarly-named "1933 Vintage" set with its post-war parts in pre-war colours. Jim Gregory said that a new shop in South Street, in Stirling, had quite a variety of new Meccano sets. He showed the small model built from one of them, and also a delightful miniature traction engine of his own design.

Future meetings: 21 January and 18 March in Stirling, then Open Day at Menstrie on 19 May.

Bert Hutchings, Secretary

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CORRECTION

In our last issue we reported that third place in the Menstrie Carry the Can challenge had gone to Alan Blair and fourth to Ken McDonald. In fact the reverse was true Ken being third and Alan fourth. The two have formally swapped the prizes awarded and we apologise for the error.

FARMING YESTERYEAR

by

Angus Plumb

The Society has found in recent years that staging a Meccano exhibition is not a crowd puller. Even in the centre of Perth on a Saturday with a Farmers' Market in full swing we cannot get enough of the paying public through the doors to cover our costs. Funds cannot withstand these losses for many years. With the impending closure of the Lesser City Hall a new venue was required.

Last year Alan Blair, who owns and shows a vintage tractor, was good enough to arrange for the Society to have a marquee at Farming Yesteryear. This is the largest gathering of vintage farm equipment in Scotland and is reputed to attract up to a quarter of a million visitors over the two days it is staged at an ideal venue, a park in the grounds of Scone Palace just outside Perth. The 2005 event was regarded as a success by the Society and so it was decided to go with it as our main annual event for as long as we could sustain it financially. As we are within another event we cannot charge our own entrance fee.

Consequently, the morning of 9th September found several members of the Society loitering with intent to display Meccano at a prime location just within the gates to the field and just next door to the refreshment tent. The rally lasts two days. On Saturday the show is open to members of the Scottish Vintage Tractor and Engine Club their guests and exhibitors only. On Sunday it is open to the general public.



The venue in preparation --



and in use on a sunny Sunday

Entering our marquee and turning to the right the visitor found that icon of Meccano, a red and green block setting crane, assembled by Jim Lamberton. This was an impressive example, well proportioned, finely detailed and nicely balanced on its roller bearing, setting the tone well for the rest of the exhibits. On Sunday Jim augmented his display with some scratch built houses in garden settings that he was offering for sale. Although not strictly Meccano, these were admissible as they could be used with Hornby Railways.



Jim Lamberton's Blocksetter

Bert Hutchings on the next table displayed a hammer head crane in nickel, inviting visitors to turn the crank handle and put it through its paces. He also had his usual panel of parts showing the principal colour schemes and a small steam loco, a truck and a racing car in 50s red and green. Bert also had his blue/gold railway crane and the interesting book on toys in wartime that illustrates a lad looking wistfully at this model at a time when the parts could not be easily obtained. In the corner was a collection of small models assembled by Jim Gregory who unfortunately was detained by ecclesiastical commitments and could not be with us on either day.

Margaret Tattersfield had added a couple of models in modern colours and parts and presided over the table while also assisting Jackie Inglis on the next table with her extensive display of somewhat temperamental models. The overnight damp and the difficulty of matching transformers to motors gave a few problems that were sorted out in time for the public to descend, as they did in encouraging numbers on Sunday, in spite of weather that was far from conducive to staying inside. It did not help that the generator we were sharing with the refreshment tent was not topped up after a ceilidh on Saturday night until after it had stopped due to lack of diesel.

I wish I could have captured in photographs the expressions on the faces of several children watching Jackie's ping pong ball rollers. Unfortunately, by the time I could have obtained permission from parents or guardians the spontaneity would have been lost. I would refer you to the cover of CQ61. Jackie's machines are based on the lifting Screw (Archimedes Screw). The parents and grandparents had to admit that the attention span of today's youngsters does not extend to assembling this from a screwed rod, fishplates and nuts.

Your reporter was in the next corner with work in progress. If we are to continue with this venue my intention is to assemble a collection of contemporary farm implements in each of the Meccano colour schemes from 1911 to at least the closure of Binns Road in 1979.

Next, on Saturday, was a collection of examples of the original large clockwork motor in various colours and eight small breakdown trucks illustrating Meccano from just before WW1 to 1962, including some unusual parts produced at times of materials shortage due to war time

restrictions. These were mounted by Ian Soutar who spent most of both days busy on the field with his vintage fire tender.

On Sunday this display was relocated and the space was occupied by Les Stephen with an excellent selection of Binns Road products comprising a range of O Gauge clockwork railway, part of a collection of Dinky Toys, two machines assembled from Aeroplane Constructor Sets and a shop display big wheel from the 1960s, incorporating narrow strips and Elektrikit parts. Les is highly knowledgeable and assisted a number of visitors with enquiries relating to Dinky and trains.

On Saturday, next came a pair of stationary steam engines one on the beam principle and one with an oscillating cylinder, assembled in characteristic dark blue and yellow by Bobby Middlemass, who also was unable to be with us in person.

Also on Sunday these fascinating working constructions were re-located and the space occupied by Douglas Carson with his steam driven workshop that some of us will have seen in steam at Menstrie. Bearing in mind the risks involved in a crowded canvas marquee Douglas had rigged up a PDU to drive the main shaft and demonstrate all the functions without the attendant fire risk.

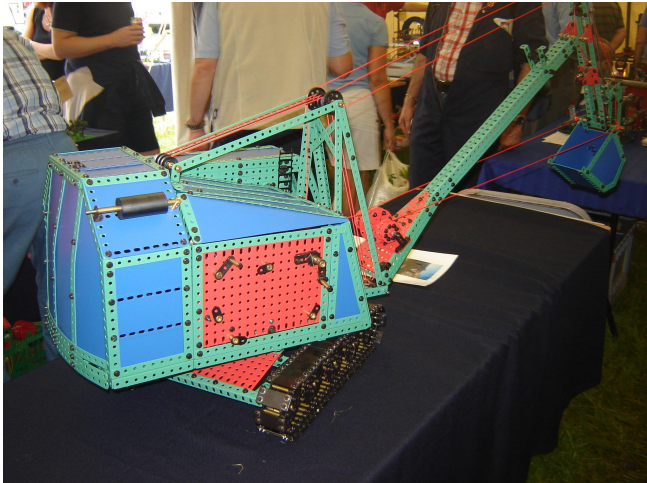
Douglas also had a model of a Horizontal Steam Engine, similar to one Jackie was displaying in red and green, but his was in zinc and yellow and was battery powered, avoiding the hiccups with the generator. Jim Berrie occupied the remainder of the back wall of the tent with a stand of die cast models, not all Dinky, but a very good selection of all types of road transport. These he was offering for sale together with a good selection of Meccano parts and literature. Jim was offering a proportion of his takings to help defray expenses. Your reporter found several items to add to his own collection and noticed the stock diminishing at each visit. I hope Jim was satisfied with his week-end as fund raising through dealing is a lead we must follow if this event is to continue in the Society's calendar.

Ken McDonald displayed his boat rolling gently at its moorings and a 'test your strength' type of fairground amusement, both of which kept the visitors fascinated, as long as the generator held out. Ed Rebecca occupied the table next to the last corner with a Pithead Complex in red and green set up as ping pong ball roller. Although it was not his own design, it was a well constructed piece of modelling that ran well throughout the week-end and is just the sort of complex model that draws the crowds and is ideally complemented by the smaller scale models that Margaret was presiding over that should serve to get people in to the hobby.

Turning back towards the exit the visitor encountered one of our colleagues from the North East Meccano Society in England, their presence is always welcome at our exhibitions and we return the compliment at their show in Darlington in November. Joe Etheridge was showing a Coal Loader inspired by articles in Meccano Magazine for January and February 1939. This was also set up as a ping pong ball roller, but was modelled in zinc and yellow. It still appears to need some fine tuning.

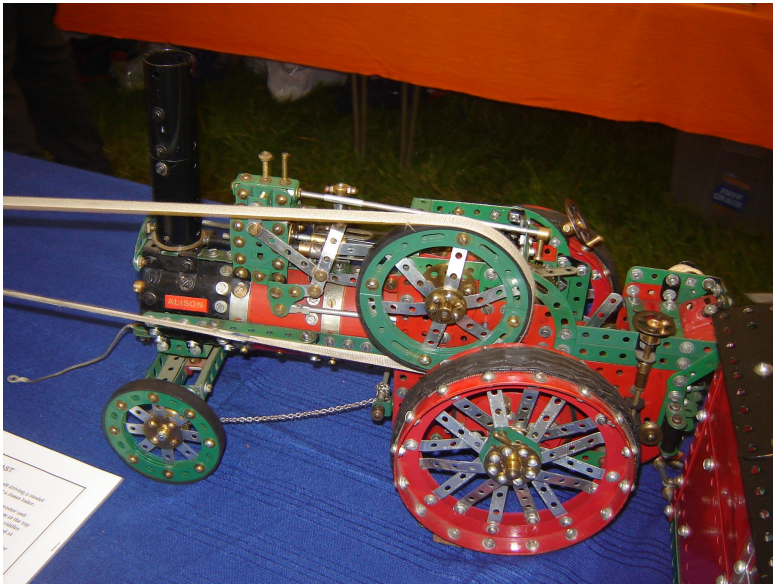


Joe Etheridge carries out some fine tuning



Richard Martin's Marklin excavator

In the centre, to the right of the visitor entering the tent, was a dragline excavator assembled by Richard Martin in Märklin parts from a current set that I believe is still available through Frizinghall and Dave Taylor. This may be a book model but it is a complex construction of over 4000 parts and looks well in blue, green and red. (Märklin is, of course, German for Meccano, the differences are only subtle). The model is fully endorsed in the Meccano World, featuring in the current CQ (no. 73).



George Roy's Traction engine which powered his agricultural machinery models

To the left the visitor saw a well proportioned and detailed Showman's Engine and 'Harvest Past', a representation of a steam driven threshing mill complete with living van assembled by George Roy, also of NEMS. This set ideally complemented a view the visitor could have seen for real in the adjacent park which was being reaped and binded, threshed and combined by a variety of machines, and then ploughed by horse and tractor driven machines.

Finally, Alan Blair's tour de force, the Gallopers, was presented on the last table. Although not yet fully complete this model is most impressive. Indeed as it is not yet complete a lot of the complex construction detail can still be admired. Alan's presence in the marquee was necessarily intermittent as he had his tractor in the rally.

As the visitor left the marquee they passed a bucket inviting donations in appreciation of our efforts. The clink of coins was a satisfying sound throughout Sunday giving good cause for optimism that we may be able to keep afloat and continue with this event.

Outside the marquee, on the right Ian Soutar had placed a selection of parts and manuals inviting the public to have a go at their own attempts at construction in Meccano. On the left Mrs Etheridge was presiding over a selection of recent and current sets for sale. There seemed to be trade to be done as the display changed each time I went out for a look at the field.

On the field were more than 300 tractors from the earliest days to current production, many with equipment attached and most in full working order. A parade was staged that more than filled the ample arena. There were 1100 other entries. Besides the agricultural equipment to be expected from the event's title there were also vintage, veteran and classic cars, trucks, buses and fire tenders from bygone ages, military vehicles, and motorbikes. All the various classes had their moment of glory in the ring, Blairgowrie, Rattray & District Pipe Band provided musical interludes and Rattray School Marching Band were a colourful spectacle. On Sunday, towards the end of the proceedings, The Rt. Hon. The Earl of Mansfield, owner of Scone Palace and Hon President of The Scottish Vintage Tractor and Engine Club, presented prizes in nearly 30 classes of entry to the Rally.

Around the field were trade stands selling goods both new and used ranging from imperial size tools and vehicle parts through die cast models, soft toys, sweets and protective and other clothes to furniture, indeed including the kitchen sink. Anyone who got round the field in less than two hours and survived with a full wallet just wasn't doing justice to the show.

Among Society members who visited were Robert Jones on Saturday, who appreciated the range of old tools on offer on the trade stands, and Bill Jack on Sunday. If anyone else visited and I haven't mentioned them, no offence is intended, being simultaneously an exhibitor, a reporter and a show visitor is a tall order for a novice.

I hope I am not out of order in observing that the Society should be grateful to The Scottish Vintage Tractor and Engine Club for giving us the opportunity to be present at this their 30th Rally. I hope we have been a benefit to them. I am sure that in the event of less than ideal weather the chance to loiter within our tent would be welcome to a large proportion of the visiting public, and the society's members whose interests are not far from our own. I trust the Society will join me in offering thanks to Alan Blair for his negotiations with the Club on behalf of the Society and also for the effort he put in to staging our show while he has other commitments to the rally. Jim Gregory must also be acknowledged for making tables available from his church at Auchterarder. I take the liberty off offering a vote of thanks to Margaret Tattersfield, whose van was put well beyond the call of duty to assist Alan Blair, Jim Gregory, Jackie Inglis and myself with transport and storage.

One or two observations for future years. We more than comfortably filled our available space. If the two tables could not have been placed outside, due to wet or windy weather, we would have been uncomfortably cramped. We hardly want to discourage exhibitors or reduce the range and variety on display. I am sure Les Stephen would have appreciated space to spread out his models and run his trains, his mechanical horse had to sit on the platform ramp. Perhaps his aeroplanes could be suspended in the air in future? It was as well that Jackie could not get her tramcar to operate as there was no space for the track on Sunday. I could have used some free table space as my models depend upon being run to show off their paces.

I would suggest that someone be detailed to offer advice and a helping hand to kids trying their first steps with Meccano. I noticed several lads making valiant attempts at putting parts together, but the skill does not come easy to modern youth, as Wendy Miller appreciates at Skeggie and Ironbridge. It is probably just as well that John Thorpe was unable to be with us with his Issigonis Shield winning Tornado as this model requires a whole table to itself, though it would look well out of doors if the weather smiles and the cabling can be rigged safely. I trust the society will keep in touch with John, as that model is unlikely to be

dismantled for a year or two and the old airfield at Balado next May could be a fitting venue to show it off. John usually attends the NEMS show in Darlington.

Last but by no means least the Society's exhibitors voted amongst themselves on Saturday for the most distinguished models in our display. The results were:

- 1st Ed Rebecca with his Pithead Complex
- 2nd George Roy with 'Harvest Past'
- 3rd Alan Blair with the Gallopers.

The Jim Finlayson Trophy was awarded to Richard Martin for his Marklin Dredger.

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NEMS Exhibition, Darlington, 11 November 2006

by

Bert Hutchings

The exhibition was in the same venue as last year, the church hall of St. Cuthbert's Church in the town centre. The organisers had managed to fit in 32 tables for exhibitors, and still leave a dining corner at the hall's kitchen hatch, where some of the members' wives were providing excellent light refreshments. In the entrance foyers, there were John Thorpe with his Tornado model and usual enormous supply of spare parts, and Stuart Borrill with his superbly-crafted reproduction brassware, but Mike Rhoades had unfortunately not been well enough to take up his usual place, and was greatly missed. Stuart Borrill and I had quite a long chat at one point during the day, and he said that the price of new brass for his parts had recently greatly increased. Some wheels, which he used to machine from a solid blank, were now more economically made as a separate disc with a silver-soldered boss – still enormously stronger than Binns Road riveting, of course.

Some exhibitors had reserved space in advance, up to four tables in one case, and the others were accommodated as they arrived. MSS members who had travelled from Scotland were Bert Hutchings and Ken McDonald with modest exhibits, and Angus Plumb and Desmond Smith who both visited. The entire exhibition observed the two minutes' silence at 11 am.

The prizewinning models were (1st) two beautiful red and green marine engines by Dennis Edwards, remembered as a previous winner with his superb model of Charles Parsons' famous S.S. Turbinia, (2nd) John Thorpe's yellow and zinc Tornado fighter, and (3rd) an ambitious ping-pong ball circulator by Brian Chaffer, which included two of Chris Shute's "Percy the Porter" figures and operated perfectly all day. The NEMS have a special award for meritorious model-building, in memory of the late Frank Beadle, which like our Jim Finlayson trophy is presented by the previous year's winner. This year it was awarded to John Brown for two fascinating Meccanographs.

The most striking model outside the prize-winners was a very large level-luffing travelling crane by John Bader, built in the eye-catching mixture of blue/gold flat plates and nickel strips and girders. Other models on display included a large colliery engine, several Ferris wheels and other fairground models, a near-lifesize radio-controlled Dalek, a walking robot, a

table of period vehicles each built in a distinct colour scheme, a fine 4-4-0 locomotive on three-and-a-half-inch track, a lifting bridge, an SML 28 Pontoon Crane in postwar red/green, an amazing 10-planet orrery by Rob Mitchell, an SML 34 biplane in yellow and zinc, two tabletop blocksetters, a fine red/green model by Barry Richardson of the railway breakdown crane on the covers of the 1954-62 Accessory Outfit manuals, and finally a Spitfire, Hurricane, and other Remembrance-inspired models.

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ROMAN ARTEFACT WITH 25 HOLES

by

David Lawrence

Last year during a visit to the UK I watched - for about 30 minutes – an archaeological dig in progress in the centre of Chester. I don't know what inspired this thought but it later occurred that one of the dedicated archeologists, with his brush sweeping to and fro, suddenly unearthed, not a fragment of pottery, but a rusty 25 hole Perforated Strip. Quite naturally I found myself trying to figure out how this could have happened. The realization that Frank Hornby - if indeed it was a piece of Meccano - who I knew for sure had not been a Roman soldier, introduced this item around the beginning of last century, and I began to wonder if this part had belonged to the son of one of the Roman Legions stationed in northern England. I assumed that the Roman Legions would have their families with them, at such a distant posting, and if they did, there would be children with them, probably wearing togas.

Britain at that time, 82 - 426 AD, when the Scots drove the Romans out (yes, I did a modicum of research) - was a pretty primitive place. The construction set part would hardly have been produced locally. Multiple punching tools not having reached that far west by then. The day of the ancient Briton was taken-up mostly hunting for food or cultivating small areas of crops, so most of the locals were short on spare-time. And the rust on the part meant it was made of iron which the ancient Britons did not have general use of for several centuries. The Scots - who most of the Roman Legions were trying to keep on the far side of Hadrian's Wall - on the other hand, were known to be keen construction set users. (I'm not sure where this piece of information came from, but at the time I took it as gospel). But if it did belong to a Scot, what would he have been doing in Chester - a centre of Roman occupation? Could it be a confiscated trophy originally belonging to a Scot and taken for taxes or just stolen by the Romans on one of their forays into Scotland, or even something more extraordinary, a Scottish spy living among the Romans in Chester. (I find it is no good believing one is getting too far-fetched in this type of cold-case brainstorming. If you do you are likely to miss something really important).

I was having some difficulty though with the Roman Legion theory. The 25 hole Strip had 1/2" hole pitch and I could not accept that this would be a product from Rome, unless it was made under license. The hole pitch would surely be in leagues or some central European unit of length but hardly inches. On a hunch I looked more closely at the rusty part through a magnifying glass and was just able to make out some printing. Further magnification unearthed the wording as - 'manufactured in Angleterre for Bonnie Prince Charlie'. This was the clincher, the deciding factor. It proved the part was Scottish in origin and wasn't Roman at all. However I was not at the end of this mystery yet, for I knew that Bonnie Prince Charlie lived in 1745 (more research) quite a few years later than 426AD, the latest the Romans were

in town. This would suggest that the rusty strip was from a later period, perhaps the strip had been lost down a deep hole into a layer of Roman remains.

It was not until several weeks later that I learned, quite by accident, that Bonnie Prince Charlie was the name of a discount store chain centred in the Liverpool area. It was at its peak in the late 1950's. I now seemed to have the whole story, Frank Hornby and all. For a while though the 25 hole Strip had been handled as reverently as if it had been a priceless piece of Roman pottery. However it didn't last and when all the excitement was over the 25 hole Strip was found to be too rusty to undergo refurbishment and ended its days in the 'odd and ends' box of the young nephew of the archeologist who uncovered it. Both of them repeatedly tell this story to their friends.

(Author: I did watch a Roman dig in Chester, but the rest is fantasy. Apologies to any ethnic group who feel slighted or misrepresented by anything written here. Apologies also to any history buffs who I have muddled or misled.)

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LET ME ENTERTAIN YOU

or

HOW NOT TO APPEAR ON TELEVISION

by

Alistair Nicoll

Early in July I received a phone call. I did not get the person's name but he said that he represented Lion Television. They were making a series of programs in which people would talk about their "passions" and my name had been given to him as someone who might be interested in talking about Meccano. I made my first mistake in this saga by expressing cautious interest and he said they would send me an application form and might invite me for an audition.

The form arrived the next day and turned out to be a pretty standard job application form though they did ask if I would be nervous appearing of TV (answer – of course) and if I had any criminal convictions (answer – yes – convicted for doing 35 mph in a 30mph limit and fined £60.00). The next thing that happened was a phone call inviting me to an audition in Edinburgh in the Carlton Hotel on North Bridge. I was to bring my "apparatus" with me but my "costume" was not necessary. I was to be prepared to do a three minute "act" which would be video recorded.

So it was that on one of those very hot July Saturday afternoons I drove to Edinburgh with three models in a very large suitcase, parked in the St. James Centre car park, and slogged up North Bridge to the hotel. The team from Lion TV consisted of three people, an administrator (known as a "researcher" in TV jargon), the cameraman and the producer. Also present were a number of other people to be auditioned, all of whom - to my alarm – appeared to be

performers in the sense of doing acts that involved music making, singing, dancing etc. The producer explained that the format of the program was to be that each three minute act would be introduced by Brian Conley (“who he?” I thought but did not dare ask). One hundred people in the audience would be provided with press button pads. If during your three minutes, more than fifty people pressed the buttons you would have to leave the stage. Prizes of £100 for more than one minute, £200 for more than two minutes and £1000 for lasting for three minutes were on offer and if you got the top prize you would be asked back for a semi final and, maybe, a final. The performers were to be a mixture of acts in the music hall sense of the word and specialists talking about their “passion” (that word again!). I was, to put it mildly, somewhat put off by this description of what was in store and decided that the easiest way out of this was to do the audition and fail it.

I was first in and did 2 minutes and 50 seconds, off the cuff, direct to camera during which I demonstrated the colour mixer, a Meccanograph and the radio controlled lorry. I was quite prepared for the “Don’t call us, we’ll call you routine” but it did not happen. The producer suggested several ways in which I might improve the presentation – not difficult to do considering the standard I had achieved - asked the cameraman if he was sure that he had detailed close up of the Meccanograph operating and said thank you and good bye. Moderately sure that the matter was now resolved I went home to await the rejection letter – which did not come.

The following Friday about five o’clock in the afternoon I got a call from a lady at Lion TV who introduced herself as Danielle Thornton and said she had good news for me. I had been accepted on to the program and she was to be the researcher who would ‘look after me’. The program would be recorded at Teddington studios in about ten day’s time. During the following days until the actual date of the recording, Danielle was to become a frequent caller. Among other things she called:

- To ask if I would be using music in my ‘act’
- To ask if I would be wearing a costume (did she think I would appear naked?)
- To invite me to call her so that we could write a script together (I wrote one myself and faxed it to her)
- To ask which part of Wales I would be flying from and which airport would be most convenient. This indicated to me that her knowledge of regional accents, geography, and what was involved in transporting Meccano models was noticeably lacking

There were several other calls but those were the main ones. The last one actually came through while I was having a pub lunch on my south, just to check, I suspect, that I actually was coming. She need not have worried. I was on the way to Teddington Studios although I would be spending an overnight with son at his home in Cheltenham.

My wife and I had set out in our VW Polo with two Meccanographs, the RC lorry, a small vibrating animal model, an electrically driven swing and my version of SM4, the Blocksetter. We had to make the journey with the end of the boom of the latter projecting up between the driver and passenger. We broke our journey in Cheltenham, and the next day drove down the A40, the M40, the M25, the M3 and finally along the north bank of the Thames past Kempton Park Racecourse to Teddington. The drive was no bother in spite of the fact that it took place on the day that the major security scare about taking liquids on planes broke and we were driving right past Heathrow.

We arrived at about 11.00am and were assisted to unload the models by the stage crew. I was a bit alarmed that they were left lying on a concrete floor unattended in a reasonably

public place but there seemed to be nothing I could do about that. We were then escorted to a large first floor hall where all the performers and their supporters were gathered. We were to stay there for most of the rest of the day. The day was punctuated by various activities. We had to fill up some forms. Then there was lunch provided in a somewhat indifferent canteen. In the afternoon each act was taken to the studio for a “run through”. This involved meeting the director, the art director, make up, electricians and stage crew. The set was explained in detail as was the method for extracting you from it should you fail to last for three minutes. The producer wanted several changes to my carefully worked out script which I was not happy about. Nor was I happy with the set up in that I was to be sitting at a low table on which were all the models except the Blocksetter. The audience would be looking down at me but from quite a distance – too far I thought for them to really see what the models were doing.

The rest of the afternoon was taken up with visits to wardrobe (to change in to my “costume”), make up, and the Green Room. This latter is a kind of holding cell where you wait before your appearance on camera. This first visit to the Green Room was for the purpose of a “Green Screen Test” which never actually happened. After a break for tea and sandwiches, the performers in the first of the two programmes to be recorded that night, of whom I was one, were taken back to the Green Room to wait. We were provided with biscuits and bottled water as sustenance but definitely no alcohol. We could see the happenings in the studio on a monitor and watched the warm up guy rehearsing the audience in cheers and boos and generally getting them to vocally participate in the proceeding. Brian Donley then appeared and turned out to be a “sarf London” stand up comedian. The show commenced. Second on was lady chocolatier who was demonstrating the making of white chocolate fondants. She lasted 1 minute and 30 seconds. What she was doing was interesting but not amusing and given the general atmosphere, I thought she did very well and did not expect to last as long.

The next act was an 11 year old boy who did what looked like a Tom Jones impersonation and he went down a storm, lasting his three minutes easily. I was next. During a break in the recording the stage crew put my models on the table and placed the blocksetter along side. I had to walk in to the studio and give an envelope to the compere which he then opened and announced my act. We then both went over and sat at this coffee table. It was all downhill from there on. I had been instructed by the producer to make the blocksetter work and although the motor turned OK, I could not get it into gear from where I was sitting. Then, although the little sheep vibrated OK, my swinging man wouldn’t work either. It turned out later that this was due to the fact that a couple of bolts on the swinging part were fouling the frame. This may have happened when the stage crew were setting up the models. Anyway I lasted for 1 minute and 40 seconds at which point the lights flashed, the siren sounded, and I disappeared into a cloud of smoke. The audience therefore never got to see the Meccanographs or RC lorry operating. I doubt if they would have been interested anyway.

The guy after me was a female impersonater (a la Dame Edna Everidge) and he lasted less than a minute. In fact I gathered afterwards that none of the talk acts whether enthusiasts or comedians (or both) survived for as long two minutes.

I did not see the show. As soon as they started transmitting episodes in late August, I left the country and stayed away until they had finished. I have only met one person who has said “I saw you on TV” and do not want to meet any more!

CATHCART MODEL RAILWAY EXHIBITION 2006

This year's Cathcart Model railway show was a week later than usual owing to a double booking of the hall for the last week in October. Meccano Society of Scotland had its usual pitch of four tables on the stage of the main hall with the only major change being that temporary internal stairs had been installed as the whole area at the back of the stage was under reconstruction and closed off. The effect was to restrict the total area available to us somewhat.

Once again we produced two sets of exhibitors. On Saturday Alan McDonald, Jackie Inglis, Douglas Carson, Alan Blair and Bert Hutchings showed a variety of models. Alan had the Erector version of the Empire State Building (kit bought on site apparently) and another couple of modern Meccano models. Jackie had her usual large collection of working models. Douglas had brought along his workshop (electrically driven for the purposes of exhibition) and a small crane "children, for the use of". Alan brought his Marine Engine. Bert had his display of old Meccano and his crane, also "children, for the use of".

On the Sunday Bert and Douglas reappeared and were joined by Bobby Middlemas and Alistair Nicoll. Bobby had his two steam engines, the Beam Engine and the Rocking Cylinder Engine as well as some sets for sale (they didn't). Alistair had two Meccanographs, two radio controlled models and his Swinging Man, who after his failure on TV, performed well.

Society visitors included Angus Plumb, Martin Donohue and Bill Jack and we made £1 for Society funds by the sale of a newsletter. Overall there was an impression of rather fewer visitors (on the Sunday, at least) than on previous years. Maybe this was due to the change of weekend. Apparently normal service will be resumed next year and the exhibition will return to the last weekend of October.

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GREENOCK MODEL RAILWAY SHOW

Once again this year the Society was invited to display at the Greenock Model Railway show. This show is perhaps mis-named as all sorts of modellers appear. This year in addition to the model railways (which admittedly make up the bulk of the exhibits) there were model planes, model boats, a large Scaletrics layout, R/C cars and Meccano. We were represented by Alistair Nicoll and Tim Edwards, both of whom appeared on both days.

Last year at this exhibition we had an excellent position with four tables in a line at the back of the lesser hall which is also used as the food outlet. This meant that every one who came in for tea, coffee etc. passed by our stand and it was a very busy and successful show for us. This time there had apparently been some glitch in e-mail communications and they had received no confirmation that we were actually coming. We therefore found ourselves on the lower level of the stage of the main hall. The four tables had to be laid in two rows of two with a narrow walkway between and the operator on the hall side could not get behind his

tables. The effect was that were down a cramped cul-de-sac. What was even more annoying was that the display on the other side of the stage only used two tables, put almost nothing on them, and the two exhibitors were not even there for a large part of the time on Saturday.

Anyway, we persevered and set up an exhibition. On Tim's side this consisted of his Beyer Garret Locomotive (much admired by the model rail people), the IR operated ball maze, a horizontal steam engine, a tracked travelling crane which operated beautifully and a whole collection of modern Meccano including two examples of the latest red fighter plane. Alistair had three Meccanographs (are they breeding?), two R/C controlled vehicles and his blocksetter which had some electrical problems but still managed to operate to the satisfaction of many visitors.

The exhibition was very busy and we felt our cramped conditions. These were not helped by the model railway display on the upper level of the stage which had loud sound effects including explosions, machine gun fire, jungle animals, and thunder – but not, apparently, trains.

Once again this was a well attended and well organised exhibition. We have taken care to ensure clear communications next year so should be back in our position in the lesser hall. It would be good to have one or two more members of the Society participating. For two people continuous duty on two consecutive days is asking a lot at such a well attended show.

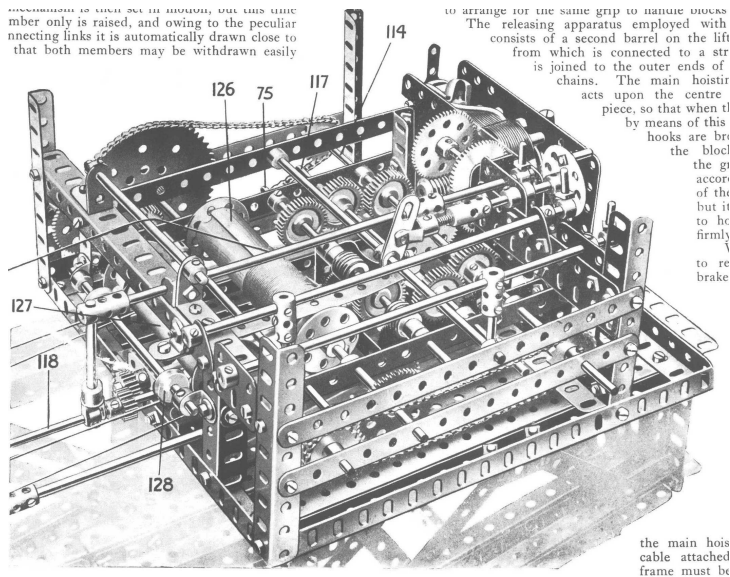
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THE BUILDING OF SM4
(Part 3)
by

Alistair Nicoll

Having completed the gantry I could now turn my attention to the boom. This assembly struck me as being by far the most important, as the first impression of the crane is of the boom. The design has been heavily criticised by structural engineers. There were some articles in CQ a year or two back about this. Apparently the arrangement of cross braces above the GRB is all wrong and it would not (they allege) have been built like that. Anyway the SM4 model plan I am working to is not the model depicted on the manual covers. This was an artists impression drawn by a Mr.Pinyon and actually had a longer boom than SM4. In spite of all this I decided to use the SM4 plan and it worked very well. A bit of persuasion was necessary to get some of the cross braces near the tip in place but apart from that it went together without problem. The boom lacks side rails and I added a series of 2" screwed rods down both sides. I intend to install some wire between them to produce a two rail fence on either side. This, to my mind considerably improves the appearance of the model. To this untutored eye it looks very like the booms on local hammerhead cranes at Finnieston and Greenock Docks and that will be quite adequate.

member only is raised, and owing to the peculiar connecting links it is automatically drawn close to that both members may be withdrawn easily



The gear box as illustrated in SML4

The mechanism was quite daunting however. All the movements are taken from a single drive motor and a small control panel is installed at the rear of the cab. The cab is open sided, as it was on the original full sized crane and this allows the observer to see all the gears in operation. I constructed the gear box exactly according to the plan but did not use the E20R motor specified some years ago. I have an E20R and its transformer/speed control. However given their age, the use of rubber insulation within the

transformer (which may well have perished), and a desire not to envelop neighbouring television screens in snow, I opted not to use it. Instead I used a high powered motor with a gear box attached which I bought from MW models some years ago

On testing the mechanism I found that the rate of movement was imperceptible – one might say geological. I therefore substituted the worm/57 tooth gear drive at the motor for a worm/19tooth pinion. The effect of this was to make movement just perceptible – glacial, one might say. A further increase in output speed was achieved by using helicals instead of the worm. With a small/large helical combination speeds started to come in to a range that could at least operate the crane. Finally I used two small helicals, thus turning the output shaft 57 times faster than my starting speed.

With this output speed the mechanism worked reasonably well but the arrangement for getting thing in and out of gear was clumsy and did not always work. It let me down very badly on “Let Me Entertain You”. Nor did the crane travel. The motor would turn the shafts OK and drive was transmitted to the wheels but not with sufficient power to make the whole thing actually move. Considering the whole thing weighs close to 15kg, this is perhaps not surprising. The open sided cab is also very old fashioned looking.

I therefore intend to strip out the gear box and substitute four separate motors, one for each movement. The motor for travelling I shall put in the gantry, thus eliminating one of the main friction pinches, that when the drive rod for travel passes through the swivelling point. It is also my intention to control the model from a single switched control box attached by a single multi-cored cable. All of which will take a bit of doing for one who managed to survive a complete four year engineering course with only one examination failure – Electrical Engineering. It is also my intention to put on a rather more modern looking cab.

So, I've done it (well nearly). Was it worth it? Yes, I think so. It is a fine model, attracted a lot of admiring looks on its first outing (at the Greenock Model railway show). It is reasonably robust and comes in to two parts for transport. All together a satisfying and not too frustrating a model to build.

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MECCANO ON THE INTERNET

Spanner has been very busy of late with many long threads, often of matters of unbelievable triviality and quite a number of them not even about Meccano as such. One interesting and much welcomed development is the publication of two model plans using Virtual Mec. One of these for a Renault truck looks like quite a complex model and one that it would take a bit of building on the basis of the information given.

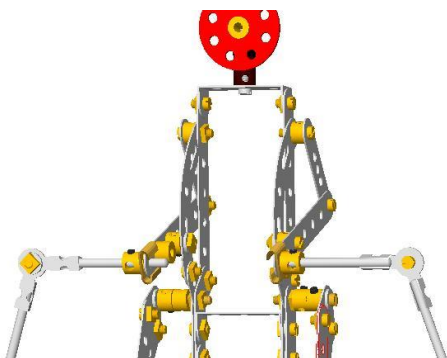
The other was, however for a Unicyclist. The model was first displayed by a French Meccanoman, Jean Max Esteve. It was subsequently built by John Evans and, based on pictures of this model, the VirtualMec version was drawn by Ed Viega. In reproducing the VirtualMec drawings below we gratefully acknowledge the contribution of each of these three gentlemen



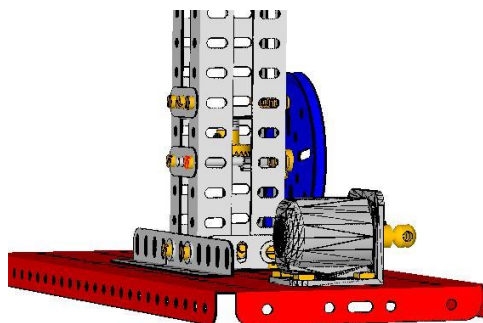
Side View of the complete model



The model rotated 45° anti- clockwise



Detail of the cyclists upper body



Detail of the base

While one might just about make an attempt to build this from the drawings provided, it would have been nice to have the VirtualMec files which were published for the Renault truck. The above files were .jpg pictures

Another completed model photograph that was published on Spanner by Roberto Werner of Argentina was this magnificent realisation of SM31. All the parts are said to be original Meccano including the 1929 steam engine.



Model of SM9 Steam Excavator – the only published model plan to use the 1929 steam engine

Spanner apart a major development has been the opening of the YouTube site on which anyone can post short videos. Some videos of operating Meccano models have already been published. By far the most interesting (or amusing) were two of steam operated walking Meccano models. The steam engine used was the Meccano Mamod engine with a horizontal boiler and the model looked quite bizarre but worked well. Roberto Werner promised in his Spanner contribution to put a video of the Steam Excavator operating on YouTube. It will be worth waiting for.

ELECTRONIC CONTACT ADDRESSES

The Society's web site address is:-

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