



THE NORTH STAR CHRONICLES – a newsletter primarily for the model railway fraternity

Volume 11 no 4 April 2023

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Editorial

This is going to be a different NSC. For reasons which will be explained, it primarily concerns a disposal sale and the background to it. No bargains I'm afraid but maybe there will be some items which you have been seeking. Who knows?

When you come to the end of a lollipop – Max Bygraves 1960

What on earth has a song by a deceased British entertainer got to do with model railways? The answer is I have come to the end of the collecting phase of my lollipop! Some background is required.

Like many another I was introduced to trains from an early age – initially clockwork Hornby O gauge, soon moving to 3 rail Hornby Dublo. The HD phase lasted a long time even through university and despite furthering my other main interest in life chasing the other gender. Anyway, upon emigrating to South Africa in 1968 my parents were left with the 'train set'. The deal was the first of the four boys involved would get the 'train set'. My two elder brothers had 5 attempts between then and produced 5 girls but I was fortunate to score a bull's eye first time so the 'train set' was dispatched to South Africa where a layout was erected in the staff quarters of the townhouse in which we were living. As an aside this prompted a comment from my dearly beloved that there had not been any mention of an interest in trains before we got married....

Anyway, back to the story, the HD layout was built in the late seventies but in the early eighties I met the late Ian Sutherland, the late Sheldon McGlone and through them John Everitt, Keith Stamper (now resident in

Canada) Erich Dokoupil, Rob Shirley (now in the UK) and a host of others. This was the start of model railroading and Durban Modular Railroaders. The history of the DMR is documented in the North Star website.

In 1982 I obtained my first Atlas (then built by Roco) model – an HO Illinois Central Gulf GP38 – the cost being USD 28 then equivalent to R28! One of these locos was sold recently on eBay for USD55 currently equivalent to over R1000! Who says trains are not a good investment?



Atlas (Roco) GP38

My loco was fitted with a decoder in the late nineties but did not have sound so a new decoder with sound was fitted by Trevor Pankhurst a couple of years ago. Although the bodywork detail of this loco is far inferior to today's Kato products, the early Roco one had a can motor, double flywheels, pick up on all wheels and it still runs beautifully. There is a moral here somewhere – buy quality?



Blast from the past! September 2003. Gravin Phyfer (right) in conversation with the late Owen Storbeck. Roy Lowe behind him operating a live steam loco via radio control. Phyfer junior at rear.

In the later years of DMR, I pursued an interest which had been germinating for a long time, namely live steam. In fact, to obtain a live steam loco, an Aster for LGB 'Frank S', I bought the late Mike Humphries LGB collection and laid a 45mm track around my swimming pool (above). Shortly afterwards a Pearce live steam Leak and Manifold loco was purchased. The prototype of this loco was 2'6" gauge, unusual in the UK. The model was 15mm to the foot and supplied to run on 45mm track. However, a kit of wheels enabled the loco to run on 32mm track as well. I did in fact subsequently regauge it to 32mm and this started me on the 16mm scale locos running on 32mm track journey.



My first two live steam locos: left Aster for LGB 'Frank S'; right Pearce Leak and Manifold 'E B Calthrop'. Both locos fitted with radio control.

During this time, I was fortunate to be travelling overseas at least once a year on business and this enabled model railway equipment to be brought in as hand luggage and so avoid import tax and duties etc. As another aside, in all the time I was importing locos, the majority as hand luggage although some had to go in the hold with lots of fragile stickers attached, (including a 16mm NGG16 – see photo at top of this newsletter- and a NG15) not one was damaged. The only loco that did experience damage was the only one that came via courier!

So the acquisitive phase which in the early days started with Hornby Dublo then after meeting Keith Stamper moved on to HOn3 then to live steam, enabled a sizeable collection to be accumulated. It has to be remembered that a crucial factor in all this was the Rand which was considerably stronger than it is today. I keep pointing out to my dearly beloved that my trains have been a far better investment than the sparkly bits she wears on her fingers.....

So what was the plan for the collection? About 10 years ago I was going to pack up work in Durban, move to Knysna, buy a property there and open an operating model railway museum. But then as the title of the 1966 film goes, a funny thing happened on the way to the forum, I had a stroke. Although it was mild it would not have been fair to my dearly beloved to commit to the museum venture only for me to keel over and leave her with a problem so the museum idea was canned. Over the next few years we had the appalling havoc wreathed on the economy (and as a result on the Rand) by the ANC government and of course latterly Covid.

On the Hornby Dublo front, in the past couple of years we have lost more than a quarter of the membership of the KZN chapter of the HRCASA to Covid and age related issues. The reality is, it is a dying organisation – certainly in its current form. No new members are joining. The current membership will be gone in the not too distant future. On that cheery note we move on to the next couple of threads influencing my decision making.

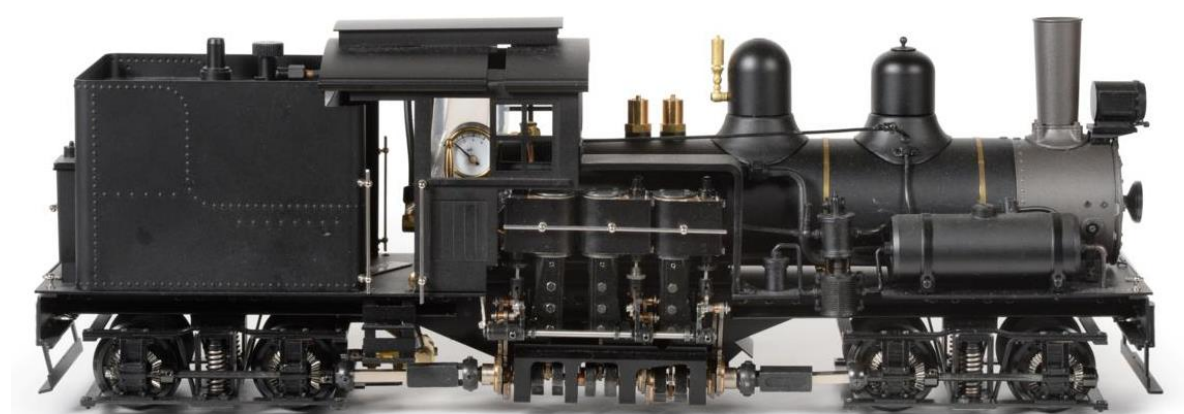
The eventual move to Knysna has been a sobering development. I simply have too much 'stuff'. (my wife was never in any doubt about that and never ceases to remind me accordingly!) As I said in last month's newsletter, 119 into 30 does not go. So the decision had already been made that the Hornby Dublo collection had to be shipped to the UK for disposal as there is still a vibrant market there. The shipping process is currently underway with all the items catalogued and boxed. But this is not going to be an easy process. It would be if I was intending to return to the UK which I am not. Just as in this part of the world there are processes to be gone through. The problem is I don't think those who are handling the process have experienced a fairly large collection of model trains being returned for sale to the UK without their owner despite the items concerned being manufactured in Binns Road in Liverpool in most cases more than 70 years ago! Likewise, the HOn3 brass collection is going (returning) to the USA. That leaves the LGB and live steam items. I shall revert to the former later.

As regards the steam locos I was initially pretty determined to retain them to the end but then another funny thing happened involving a gentleman who has recently moved from Johannesburg to Mauritius. He happened to mention to me that he was interested in acquiring what turned out to be an Aster G scale Alishan Shay.



Aster class B 'Alishan' Shay, 1978 run, sitting on top of its box

This is a model of one of the 20 Shays (eight 18 tonners and twelve 28 ton) most of them bought before the first world war, by the Alishan Forest Railway when Taiwan, then Formosa, was ruled by Japan. It looks like the prototype of this loco was coal fired. The model has an interesting history. It was purchased some years ago from Garden Railway Specialists, Princess Risborough, England. This shop used to be a Mecca for me until they stopped issuing the forms required to claim the VAT back at Heathrow, but I digress. The model had been refurbished by GRS, the process including the asbestos (yes asbestos!) boiler lagging being removed. This 1978 run was meths fired and from my perspective is aesthetically superior to the 2010 run.



Aster G scale (1:122.5) class B 'Alishan' Shay 2010 run

As can be seen from the photo, the prototype was oil fired. The model runs on butane gas.

There is a write up of the history of the loco which can be viewed on the Aster website at http://www.asterhobby.com/CL04_01/detail.php?id=81

I happened to have one of the later models which had only been run a few times but it was not a loco to which I was particularly attached like the Accucraft Mich Cal Shay for example, so after pondering the matter I said to myself 'why not?' and offered it for sale. The potential buyer rightly wanted to see what was involved so I undertook to make a video which can be viewed on Youtube at: <https://youtu.be/c6mHSfZvjMY>

The model concerned was bought as a kit which was way beyond my skills level to build. Just over 10 years ago on one of my overseas trips I encountered a gentleman on the Isle of Man who kindly offered to build the Shay kit for me. The completed loco was run a couple of times and then packed away ahead of fitting it with radio control. Before that could be done a roundtoit was required. Unfortunately, roundtoits were scarce at that time so the loco languished in its box.

Upon receiving an expression of interest, I 'dug out' and unpacked the loco from its carrying case. The first task was to convert a rolling road from 32mm to 45mm. This was necessary as currently I do not have a permanent track in place. It is unlikely there will be one for some considerable time (another factor motivating a thinning out of the live

steam collection). All my efforts at the moment are concentrated on getting the HO layout and a 5" gauge coal fired live steam "Butch" operational. The latter is also to be sold.

Sadly, while the Shay still steamed well, there was a leak from the axle water pump. Upon dismantling this, the cause was revealed in the form of a damaged seal/O ring. Next problem from where do I obtain a replacement?



The damaged O ring

Aster's recent history has not been a happy one. My recollection is that the company got into difficulties and established a joint venture with Accucraft (the parent company thereof). According to what I have read this has not been all that successful with quality issues being experienced with respect to recent Aster models.

In the UK, the long established agent for Aster was replaced by Accucraft UK, a relationship that did not endure and was terminated some two years ago. No Aster agent has been appointed since. This does not exactly make life easy for Aster loco owners who like me are looking for spares. The balance of probability is these will have to be sourced directly from Japan.

Book/magazine collection

This is a subject to which reference has been made in the NSC previously but is a thread to the thesis being developed in this edition. It is the case that the magazines in particular are basically redundant in the sense that many of them are available electronically. For example, assuming you are either a Model Railroader or Trains subscriber you can look up every single edition of the former back to inception in 1934 via the internet. That is why I gave away my collection of bound editions of this magazine. A similar fate awaits several other print magazines. But what about the books? I still have not come up with a solution to that problem! Many of the books concerned are relatively rare and I doubt if the photos therein will ever be available in quantity via the internet. The challenge is to find a home where the property is permanently owned by the occupier concerned which ideally should be a model railway club.

The state of the hobby in South Africa

The next few comments are well known to South African residents but less so to the overseas community.

In order to understand where we are now we have to go back a few years. Many of the 'intelligensia' (hah!) currently in government draw their inspiration from failed experiments like the Soviet Union and East Germany. The result is the heavy hand of the state stifles enterprise and job creation. Couple that with cadre deployment and BEE (Black Economic Empowerment or is it Enrichment?), the omens were not good for economic growth anyway. But then we had the Covid disaster and the catastrophe of State Capture under Zuma (you can read about this

on the web). Finally, in the past year in particular, the economy has been devastated by the Eskom debacle with the state owned electricity generating utility being unable to satisfy the needs of the population. Frequent power cuts have ensued with businesses and the public having to resort to employing their own generating units at horrendous cost. The result has been a large number of business failures and even more unemployment.

Insofar as the model railway hobby is concerned the pressure under which the economy is currently suffering has inevitably washed off onto private individuals. Generally, people have little or no money for their hobby. New sales are suffering and second hand prices have collapsed. My view is that it is that there is a strong likelihood of hobby shops closing. The exception to this state of affairs is those involved in the professions and in particular medical specialists. It is a basic law of economics that shortages generate higher prices. So it is with the specialist professions. As Willie Sutton replied when he was asked why do you rob banks "because that is where the money is"! So it is with the model railway community, you have to go where the money is and one of the best places is the professions.

I must admit to having been pretty depressed about the future of the hobby, what with the prospect of a NHI and worse an ANC EFF coalition (Ain't No Effing Clue?) ruling the country after the next elections.

However this was before a recent visit to the Hobby Shop, formerly Model Railroad Specialists in Cape Town. My expectation was that the shop would not have a lot of stock. Well how wrong can you be?

The shop was better stocked than I have ever seen it. Admittedly the displays – e.g. the ex Ron Etter loco builders/numbers plates display and the ship models enhance that well stocked perception. However if you are a Marklin HO modeller and if you have some spare cash burning a hole in your pocket there is a collection of second hand but never run items for sale. It is just as well my wife was with me on this visit otherwise I would have been severely tempted to reduce the number of items on display.....

On a more serious note, another encouraging aspect of this visit was that the manufacturers have taken note of the financial pressure people are under (not just in South Africa) and recognise that they have to bring the younger people back into the hobby. As a result, they are marketing entry level sets. In the case of Marklin set 29453 – the Container Train set - comprises the loco with a sound decoder, rolling stock, track and of course a digital controller/transformer. All this for only R4750!

<https://www.maerklin.de/en/products/details/article/29453>

Hornby's 'iTraveller' starter set R1271, cost approximately R4400.

<https://uk.hornby.com/products/itraveller-6000-train-set-r1271m>

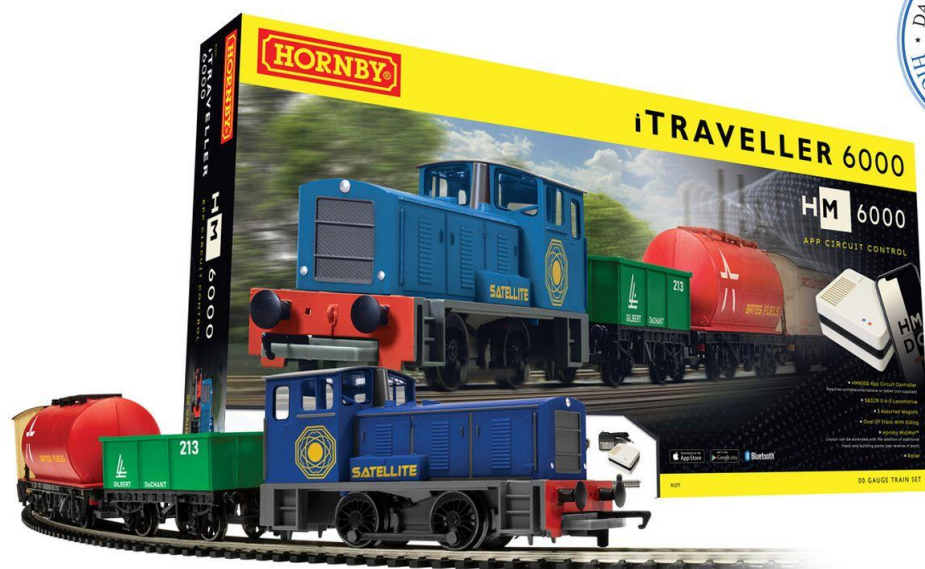
adopts a different approach being bluetooth orientated and so can be operated via a cell phone using the HM6000 which is included in the set.

This starts me off on another tack, I think some people waste an awful lot of money buying controllers when a cell phone and an app such as engine driver may be a perfectly adequate substitute.



Marklin Digital Starter Set 29453

HoHornby



Hornby iTraveller 6000 Starter Set

Must say if it was my choice, even if it is more expensive, I would opt for the Marklin set. The loco looks more robust and does not have the ghastly Hornby (Triang) couplings.

So where is all this leading?

Well as indicated previously, I was pretty depressed about the future of the hobby prior to my visit to Cape Town. But now there is a viable option entry level to the hobby. At the top end of the market, retailers need to find the professionals.

To an extent that is also true about the second hand market but I fear that in a more general sense what has happened to the middle class in South Africa has already and will continue to exert a negative influence on the hobby in general and prices in particular. Of course it can be argued that technological changes have also been a negative factor. It is a fact that locos with can motors, flywheels and pick up on all wheels are far superior runners to open frame locos without fly wheels. Three rail track is simply unacceptable to all but the collectors these days.

That raises yet another aspect of the hobby – collectors. As stated previously the market in train books has all but collapsed. As regards trains themselves, in my experience, the state of the economy, an aging, shrinking population on the part of those involved, has also had a negative effect on prices of Lionel, American Flyer, Hornby and Hornby Dublo. With respect to the last two, my understanding is that some 7 years after he died, Mike McCaul's collection is still for sale – and it is deteriorating all the time. When I was in business, my partner used to have an expression: "When the ducks are quacking, you feed them" Hmmmmm.

There is no doubt the market in Hornby and Hornby Dublo is in the UK. That is where my collection is headed but it raises another problem, namely how do you obtain the necessary permissions to export from South Africa and import to the UK? My answer is find someone who is emigrating to the UK and include the collection with their household goods.

I suspect a similar approach will have to be adopted with respect to LGB. Prices have come under pressure locally and the cost of couriating to the main market – the USA makes selling overseas not that attractive. LGB is so damned bulky!

There is one area where significant savings can be obtained with LGB and that is track. Accepting that code 330 brass rail is very robust, it is also very expensive. Tenmille code 200 rail is much cheaper and if you are prepared to diy which basically involves sliding the rail into the sleepers, is despite the critics, a viable option for running LGB locomotives. They do not ride up on the sleepers of code 200 rail. If the same diy approach is adopted to building Tenmille points there is a massive saving relative to the cost of LGB switches.

There is of course another significant advantage of using code 200 rail and that is electrical conductivity. The trouble with brass rail is that it corrodes very quickly and you have to spend your life cleaning it. Nickel silver also corrodes but to a far less extent so you can spend your time running locos not cleaning track and save money in the process!

Well we are coming to the end of this month's edition of the NSC lollipop. I did warn it would be different. If I have offended any ANC supporters, serves you right with what your party has done to this lovely country.

So what is for sale?

Let's start with the big stuff:

A 5" live steam "Butch"



Butch in its Gary Lambert built frame

- Castings for LMS Princess Marina 3½" 2-6-0 Mogul. New price ex Reeves in the UK over GBP1100
 - Several live steam Gauge 1 and 16mm scale locos. Lady Anne (radio controlled) would be a good introduction to live steam. Refer Roundhouse website <https://www.roundhouse-eng.com/> for details.
 - Couple of Mamod locos – a relatively cheap introduction to live steam.
 - Large LGB collection of locos and rolling stock – mainly North American orientated but Crocodile and Mallett with decoders also available. Some track but mainly curves; points, crossings etc but no straights. Ask me if you are looking for something in particular. Obviously if you have interest you will want to have an idea of prices. No huge bargains I am afraid. At the moment there is no great haste to sell and the collection has been a good Rand hedge. We don't want to waste one another's time so please serious offers only. You can contact me on shares@iafrica.com or 0824573393.
- The end.