

The HORNBY DUBLO story

by Michael Foster

NOBODY has ever claimed that Meccano were the first in the '00' range of Model Railways, but today, with nostalgia creeping in, many people think that they were the best. The Company kept very close contact indeed with the German Toy Manufacturers and, indeed, the Marklin Company held a considerable number of their shares in the late twenties.

Frank Hornby himself, must have seen and considered the Table Railways introduced in 1921, and realised with the success of the Twin Train system (Trix) manufactured initially in Germany for Bassett-Lowke that something was going to have to be done. Indeed, Marklin had their own '00' scale models also well and truly launched onto the market by 1936. In Great Britain, '00' scale modelling was purely for experts with a lot of patience as they were making their own track with outside 3rd rail and, in general, using six volts as the power supply.

One of the great successes of Meccano was the incredibly close contact it kept with its customers.

"Dealers in toys woke up to the fact that a new era in toys had commenced; the boys were no longer content to play with something that gave pleasure for an hour and was then thrown away, which broke even

before it had ceased to have the power of giving pleasure; that boys had brains and could be interested in things which stimulated serious thought and which called for powers of invention and ingenuity, hitherto stifled through lack of an outlet."

This is literally as true today as when this sentence was first written by the inventor of Meccano in his Editorial in the 2nd Meccano Magazine in November/December 1916! The Company actively encouraged letters and, indeed, the Meccano magazine at one stage was printed in 17 different languages and sent literally all over the world.

As they had been beaten by their competition with the introduction of '00' scale models, Meccano were able to sit back and assess the strengths and weaknesses of their competitors system and, at the same time, listen to what was required from their customers. A criticism of the early Twin Train Railway was in some people's eyes the lack of realism in the outline of their locomotives. Indeed, a few years earlier Meccano had introduced their Modelled Miniatures—Dinky Toys—and were building up a world-wide reputation as quality diecasters. They used all their skill and experience in this in making the moulds of their locomotives and the first announcement appeared in the September 1938 Meccano Magazine. The Company used their 'Meccano Magazine' as a good chef uses his menu, i.e. letting his customers know of the delights shortly to come before them. Train sets came onto the market towards the end of 1938, but were not readily available until the early months of 1939.

Sir Nigel Gresley had just been given the honour of having his 100th Pacific Engine named after him and was, in many respects, the hero of the hour. There were both electric and clockwork versions of his loco with articulated teak coaches and the famous 0-6-2 tank. This latter locomotive, through various modifi-

cations, was still in production and a very good seller right at the other end of the scale in 1964. But for the war, who knows what might have happened in Hornby Dublo because their acceleration through the months of 1939 was quite incredible. New tank wagons appeared in March, cattle, meat, fish vans and the teak horse-box were advertised in April and were available in May and June.

Advertisements in July showed the City Station and the Engine shed, although in point of fact, these were not officially announced until December 1939, together with electric points and signals. In September the High-Sided Wagons and the High Capacity Brick Wagons were introduced.

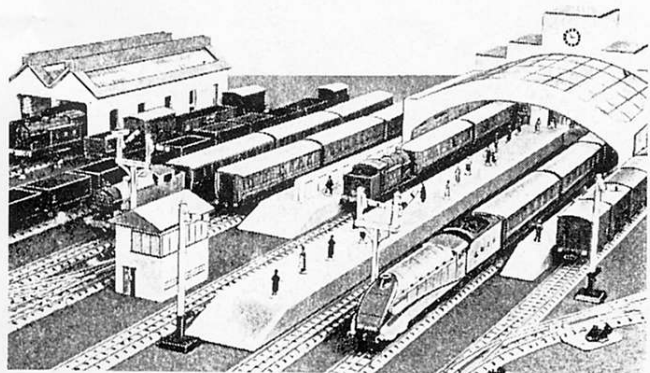
The 0-6-2 Tank locomotive was available, clockwork or electric, in the four liveries of the main companies, but only teak coaches were available. An interesting facet of a 'supply and demand' situation, was a firm in Manchester offering litho coach papers to be stuck onto the side of the teak coaches to convert them into the groups not represented, i.e. LMS, GWR and SR.

In the early part of 1939, the 'Duchess of Atholl' 4-6-2 LMS non-streamlined locomotive was shown and, indeed, some of the pre-War literature showed this much photographed model, but alas, it was never introduced and in December 1939, in one of the many items of literature put out by the Company, it stated:

'We had planned to produce this as a beautiful Hornby Dublo reproduction of the LMS Princess Coronation Class locomotive and, indeed, it is already very near completion. Unfortunately, the War has compelled us to hold up production and to turn our machines onto other work.'

It is fascinating to read contemporary issues of the Meccano Magazine which came out every month through the War and must have been a very high source of morale and inspiration to countless thousands of people. It followed the success and failures and, as usual, was bang up to date with technical information and news of the War and even in April 1944, a whole article stating the Nation was waiting on tip-toe for the invasion of the European Front. D-Day wasn't until June!

In April 1946, Dinky Toys reappeared with the Lagonda and the Jeep and I am sure prior to that stores and warehouses were ransacked and train sets which had been held for the duration of the War were released, but very few were available. It is hard for us to imagine the scarcity of materials at that time, both paper and metal, and it was not until December 1947 that their reintroduction was announced. However, it was not until the late summer of 1948 that one could buy the 'Duchess of Atholl'

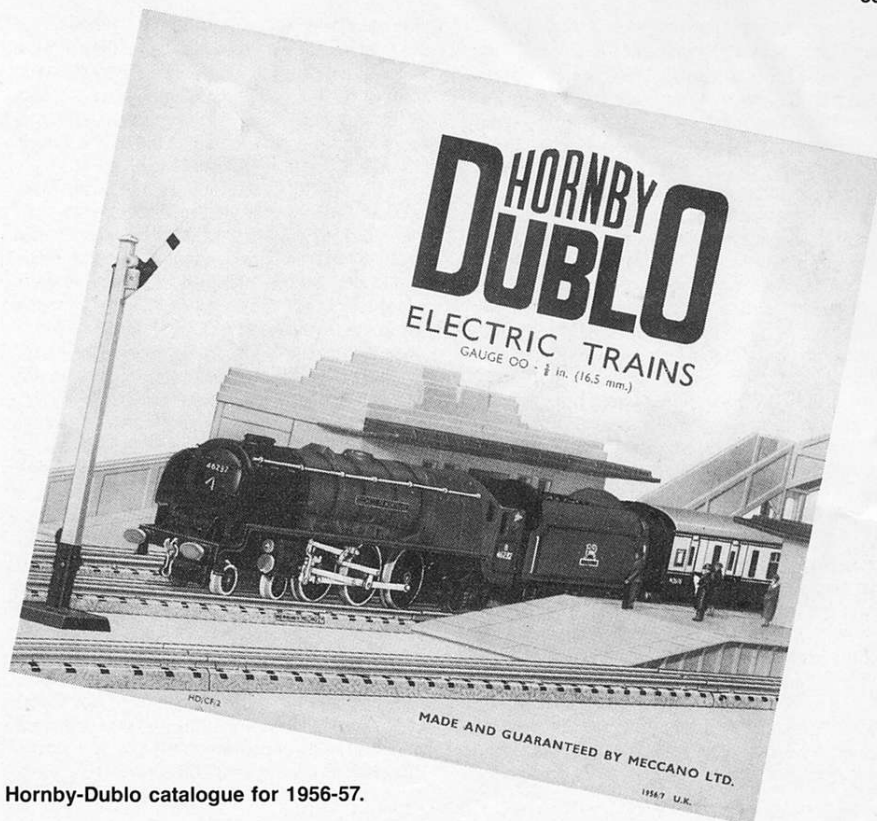


'A realistic terminus, yard and engine shed. The station is particularly effective, with its passenger platforms, accommodation for perishable traffic vans, and carriage sidings outside the actual building.' Meccano Magazine 1940.

locomotive or the remoulded 'Sir Nigel Gresley' with the open valve gear. Like an engine starting on a cold morning, the production of the company coughed and spluttered dependent on the availability of raw materials and indeed, in 1951 very nearly faced a close down, partly due to the priorities of the Korean War and subsequent shortage of materials. After the Second World War, new couplings appeared which were designed by Sydney Pritchard of Peco Ltd and one of the main features of these was the uncoupling rail introduced in December 1949 and consequent realism of operation. The diecast mainline station, island platform, etc., appeared in September 1950 and earlier that year Meccano, as always in the lead in the technical sense, were the first to fit television and radio suppression to their models.

An article in the December 1951 Magazine stated that replacements and spare parts were still not easily available as total production was being used to make new sets for other boys and it was not until September 1952 that the electric points were re-introduced. However, the clouds rolled away and in the spring of 1953 the 'Duchess of Montrose' and the 'Silver King' locomotive were announced and again sales built-up to their peak in the late 'fifties and early sixties.

However, we go too fast ourselves. In November 1954, the 2-6-4 Tank locomotive appeared with the tin printed Suburban coaches, the latter planned and drawn pre-war, which were followed by the transparent windowed coaches two years later. In January 1955 questions were asked why not a turntable—why not indeed! Two years later to the day in January 1957, the first one was introduced. As I mentioned, the Meccano Company were exceptionally good at squeezing the last drop of interest and anticipation out of their customers and many suggestions were reprinted with 'who knows' after them. Such a case happened in August when they were talking about coaches in Great Western and Southern Region livery and in October 1957 the 'Bristol Castle' arrived followed a couple of months later by the first of the Dublo Dinky Toys series. It was very difficult to get scale vehicles to go with Hornby Dublo trains and apart from the Double Decker and Single Decker buses, the only other vehicles of correct scale were one or two of the pre-war lorries

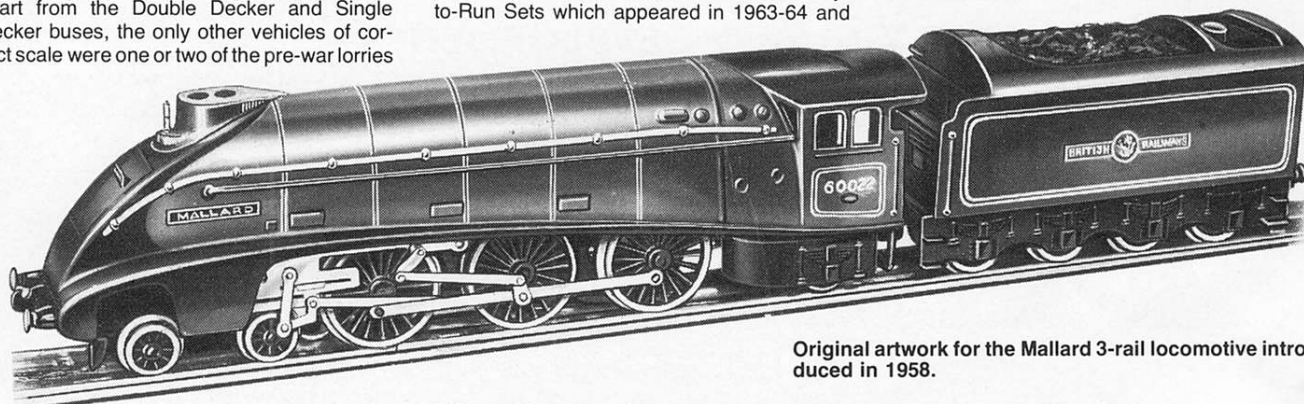


Hornby-Dublo catalogue for 1956-57.

made by what was by reputation the finest toolmaking company in the British Isles—British Industrial Plastics.

The detail required by Meccano was, in many cases, unrealistically intricate for their market. The fantastic concern that their models looked life-like was incredible and the number of trial moulds they made to simulate coal is apparently beyond count. One of the schemes being that no straight line of coal must be longer than 5/32 of an inch! Another point was reference to the rivets which appeared on the wagons and engines and in one particular case some 3,000 rivets were jig-bored and measured 0.056" wide. Look at the 0-4-0 Ready-to-Run Sets which appeared in 1963-64 and

possible insufficient weight and consequently bad adhesion. This was one of the reasons why rubber tyres were fitted to the traction wheels, which, on the 3-rail design was acceptable provided the track was clean, but it did have quite severe problems on anything but the shiniest track when the 2-rail version was introduced later and caused its withdrawal in 1962. Again, Meccano were by no means first in the introduction of a 2-rail system, but theirs was announced in April 1959 with an almost incredible list of new products in both rolling stock and buildings, new stations, engine sheds, as well as



Original artwork for the Mallard 3-rail locomotive introduced in 1958.

and the No. 35 series which included the Austin 7. In February 1958, the first of the Super Detail Wagons arrived and heralded a whole new era. I have heard many fellow collectors commenting 'Ugh! Plastic rubbish' and indeed, to the mature enthusiast some of the plastic models on the market in those early years left something to be desired, but as I said, this was to the mature enthusiast. The plastic train sets available were designed for the younger operators and fulfilled their objective admirably. As to 'plastic rubbish', well just a minute; there were 17 highly detailed separate drawings for the bulk grain wagon alone and the moulds were

although this was again to try and recapture the young enthusiast, there are over 700 rivets detailed on this particular model—I know because I've counted them. Indeed, it was shortly after this in April '60 that the ICI Chlorine Tank Wagon first arrived with super-detailed brake gear and was highly praised in the Trade Press at the time.

In December 1958, following a three page article on the full size Bo-Bo Diesel locomotives in an earlier issue of the Magazine, the Hornby Dublo version came out and this was the first model locomotive with a Polystyrene body and was the subject of much controversy with apparently heated management discussions—the main argument being the

a whole range of locomotives. Towards the end of 1960 saw the introduction of the Super Detail coaches, as well as the Co-Co Diesel with a diecast body and the 0-6-0 diesel shunter. It was also the era of endurance tests with a standard production 'Bristol Castle' locomotive running an actual 153 miles in four days.

In September 1961 the French Hornby-Acho models first appeared with their Bo-Bo locomotive and coaches and their own range grew up and was in production until 1973. Most people have, in some cases, grudgingly admired the technical expertise of the French but I don't think it is for me to say which of the two systems were better. The French motors were exquisite, but there again so they should be because

they had not only the experience of the Meccano Company in England to go on, but also their very strong European competition. In March 1961 the Pullman cars appeared, followed in October by the 'Barnstaple' West Country Class locomotive. Reading the Meccano Magazines from now on, one can see to a certain extent the gradual decline in the Hornby Dublo line beginning, although obviously this was not noticeable at the time. It is the age old problem of what does one make next?

Indeed, the models which followed from October 1962 are now probably the most highly prized of all, other than pre-war Hornby Dublo and there were such items as the Southern Electric Set, the Super Detailed Restaurant Cars, the 6-wheel passenger brakes, the Hopper Wagons, and finally towards the end of '64 the track cleaning wagon. There is an interesting story concerning this last-mentioned item in so much that a Triang track cleaning wagon was used to clean the track of the Meccano Company's exhibition layout in their London showroom in Conduit Street. Apparently this was seen one morning by one of the directors who, having been told by the assistant that a track cleaning wagon must be used on a model railway, insisted that one be introduced into the Meccano range. A model was hastily put into production, the technical side based almost exactly on that introduced many years earlier by Mr Wills of Wills Fine-Cast Ltd and housed in a 16-ton mineral wagon. 839 of these

were actually sold and there was 1,700 left in stock at the time of the takeover. Apparently, it was not that effective compared with the wide felt band of the Triang model, and so was almost immediately discontinued and never appeared on any stock sales list of the Triang Company in the middle and later 60's.

At the time of the introduction of 2-rail, Meccano stated that they would continue with 3-rail manufacture which for a short time they did, but relatively low sales just made it uneconomical and in September 1964 Messrs Beatties were advertising that they had literally bought the complete 3-rail stock of locomotives.

1964 regrettably saw the end of the Meccano Company as it then was, the result of having found the market changed for its three main product ranges. Triang model railways and to a certain extent, Playcraft sold through Woolworths, creamed the younger enthusiast sales, while on the other end of the scale greater variety was required amongst the locomotives and the rapid rise of the white metal kit manufacturers must have had some effect. Indeed, before the War it was possible to buy the Hornby Dublo chassis separately, although to my knowledge never advertised as such, but after the War this was cancelled as a matter of policy and only complete models were sold.

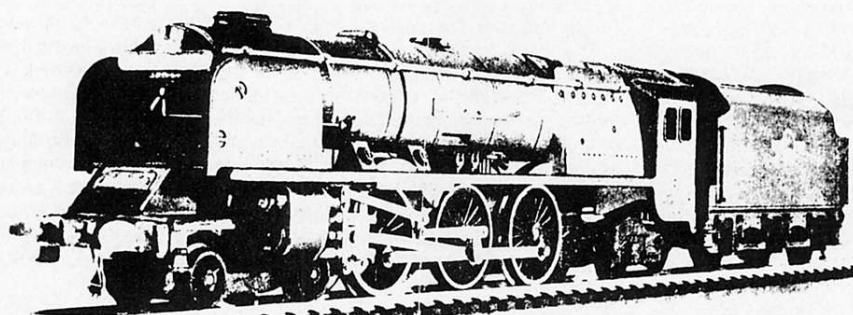
In the early 60's the choice from both Meccano and other manufacturers was too wide and so literally everything had to be sold and all the chassis were available separately. Lego

plastic building kits also took a lot of the younger Meccano constructors interest, particularly as this, from my memory, was the time of the lead paint scare on models and the danger of metal toys, etc.—strange, when one considers people had been using it perfectly safely for 60 years or more and generations of our engineers had their interest aroused with Meccano and I am glad to see it is coming back so strongly. The other main product range—Dinky Toys—were having to cope with the arrival of Corgi models—the ones with the windows—as they were originally advertised—as well as diecasts from Lesney.

The Hornby Dublo models are now purely for collectors and those steam railway enthusiasts who want a three dimensional reminder of the glories of an era which, rightly, will not fade and die. Hornby Dublo models are no more, but their products are still available, manufactured as Wrenn Railways by George and Cedric Wrenn. We live in rapidly changing times and the technological acceleration is almost frightening. It's only understandable that methods, techniques, etc developed over these last few years should lead to improvements which can be incorporated constantly in the models. So well were the Hornby Dublo models constructed that with proper maintenance and care there is no reason why they should not only last your lifetime but also your children's lifetime and serve as a reminder of the models that pioneered today's superb railway products.

How Railway Modeller readers heard about the introduction of the 2-rail system.

APRIL 1960



HORNBY-DUBLO DEVELOPMENTS

AS readers will know, the extensive programme announced last year by Meccano Ltd. was only completed in the early months of this year, and the last two new two-rail locomotives did not appear for review purposes until February. Of these the "Golden Fleece" is our old friend the ex-L.N.E.R. A4 with another name and number, but the "City of London" is a new model with a redesigned chassis, modified body and plastic-bodied tender on a diecast underframe. There is a great deal more detail than on the previous Pacific. The safety valves are fitted in the improved roof, finer handrails are fitted, and to cap it all there is an I.M.S. maker's plate on the tender. The chassis is fitted with the original large-diameter armature and it does appear that Meccano Ltd. are keeping this motor in their original locus as standard—an excellent thing for those lucky few whose layouts are large enough to accommodate the long trains a Hornby-Dublo Pacific can tackle. There is, moreover, ample space for extra weight in the body should the enthusiast wish to increase the adhesion, though, as with the three-rail Pacifics, there is plenty of power for all normal requirements. The top armature bearing is now of the oil-retaining pattern on the "City", the A4 remains as before.

Further news concerning the 1960-1 programme is to hand, perhaps the most interesting of which is that the old favourite ex-L.N.E.R. N2 0-6-2 tank is to be available in two-rail. We can also now reveal that the Pacific mentioned last month is to be the S.R. rebuilt West Country class, one of the most powerful and attractive of modern designs, extensively used on all classes of trains on the Southern Region. A new ring field motor is to be fitted to the "Castle" and 2-8-0 as well as to the new Co-Co and 0-6-0 diesel, which it is claimed will give a high torque at all speeds with freedom from magnetic locking. It will have improved brushgear, giving longer life, and oil-retaining armature bearings. It will also incorporate a very rigid construction providing proper shrouding of all vital parts, thus preventing any ingress of dust, fluff, etc., perhaps the most common cause of poor performance in model locomotives. In the rolling-stock field the most interesting features are the new coaches. In addition to the corridor brake 2nd door coach, a passenger brake van and a compo sleeping car, all with metal sides, moulded ends, underframe details and roof overlay. There will also be a range of three all-plastic Pullman cars: a brake

2nd, an all-2nd and a kitchen 1st. Except for the obvious cases of the van and sleeping car all are to have full interior fittings. In the S.D. range there will be a four-wheeled S.R. utility van, a most valuable addition to one's stock, particularly where platforms are restricted and space does not permit a bogie luggage van. Another useful addition will be the six-wheeled United Dairies milk tank, the first ready-to-run milk tanker with the right number of wheels. The Lowmac machinery truck, Blue Spot express fish van and I.C.I. caustic liquor bogie wagon are also to be included, the last four being scheduled for 1961 deliveries.

The most interesting feature of the new stock is the fact that we now have three interesting potential trains, a parcels train comprising the passenger brake and four-wheeled utilities, a milk train (possibly headed by a rebuilt West Country) and an east coast express fish headed by the A4.

On the accessory side 1961 will see the introduction of a large terminal or through station kit with an overall roof spanning three tracks, while the two-rail track system is to incorporate a very large number of different pattern isolating rails and a power supply kit. All this adds up to a very interesting programme indeed from Meccano.

