

# Talking Points

Topical issues from the world of model railways

## Garden Party at Rosewarne Junction

– or how to promote the model railway hobby amongst friends and colleagues...

### Robert Smith interview by Steve Flint

**M**odel railway shows are often criticised for preaching to the converted – they cater for the established enthusiast, and not enough for the public at large. O gauge modeller Robert Smith has been doing his little bit to promote the hobby to a wider audience by opening up his garden railway to his friends and acquaintances on a sunny summer day. He even arranges for background music – not piped via a CD player and set of speakers, but provided by a live brass and woodwind octet! Editor Steve Flint dropped in on Robert during one of his recent open days to see what it was all about.

### Serendipity

Like many youngsters in the 1960s, Robert started with a small Hornby OO set bought for a birthday.

“In those days many of my friends and relatives had railway layouts,” he said. “They were all large layouts, which provided plenty of excitement and inspiration. My layout grew steadily as

Gwinear Road station was the junction of the Helston branch (departing top right) with the GWR main line between Camborne and Hayle. It was known for having some of the longest level crossing gates in the country. The ‘visiting’ A4 belonged to a friend but the rake of Gresley teak coaches are Robert’s. Brecon Castle and the rake of GWR coaches belong to one of the musicians. Platforms were made from a sand and cement mix in a wooden mould lined with ‘reversed’ embossed plasticard. The bridge is not prototypical, but it is removable and access to the shed was required for large items.



pocket money permitted until within a few years, it went all around my bedroom on wooden baseboards about 40" high, supported by bookcases, chests of drawers, and the like.”

He explained that his desire to build models had progressed from Meccano to balsa structures. “I built a village, a circus, even the Eiffel Tower, until I eventually realised that model railways could provide an endless source of ideas and subject matter for creating models.”



▲ Robert’s Dean Goods, with a pick-up goods for the Helston branch, crosses the bridge on entry to Gwinear Road station, watched by the two daughters of one of Robert’s work colleagues. They enjoyed the afternoon and are really excited about this year’s event.

▶ Ian McGibbon, a fellow O gauge modeller and owner of the A4, his wife, and Ron Ferris – a singer and conductor friend who also loves railways and has a OO model railway. They loved the combination of trains, music and sunshine!







▶ A flautist with husband and young son watch Ian's A4 crossing the bridge.

Robert encouraging shunting movements by Lucy Scotchmer, a professional cellist who discovered a sudden enthusiasm for running model railways. Alan Macdonald is desperately trying to run to the timetable on the branch but the visiting main line trains are causing delays! In the background are two singers who, despite several years of friendship, had not seen Robert's railway before.



Sixth form and university studies meant the railway was packed away in the attic; possibly forever, he wondered.

"Music was left as my main hobby," he said, "but it was whilst playing the bassoon at university that I met my future wife, Anne – a clarinettist – whose father turned out to be a railway modeller and a personal friend of Revd Peter Denny!"

Thus commenced not only a long association between model railways and music, but also 30 years of operating *Buckingham* on his frequent visits to his wife's home town in Cornwall.

"I was really privileged to know Peter Denny personally and was inspired by *Buckingham Great Central* to build a similar branch junction layout with a timetable-based operation."

Whilst helping his father-in-law, Joff Bullen, to build his new O gauge layout, Robert became attracted to the size and weight of the models and the potential for greater realism. "This provided the impetus for me to change to O gauge for my layout, a move I have never regretted."

### A golden age

Robert affirms that his interest has always been in making models and re-creating in model form a historic railway scene that pre-dates his own life and personal memories.

"The 1930s seems to have been a golden age for steam railways and a time of peaceful existence in country locations, although the reality of the depression was obviously very different from this."

As a boy he never found favour in the blue diesel era: his interest was in steam locomotives and pre-BR liveries, which he could only see on preserved railways.

"The Cornish scenery convinced me to change my allegiance from the LNER to the GWR and my O gauge layout which is reaching completion in the shed is thus based on the Helston branch in Cornwall, but the outdoor sections featured in the photographs allow me to run visiting excursions from LNER and LMS territory!"

Robert declared he was an early supporter of attempts to reopen parts of the Helston branch and recently took a ride on the restored section between Truthall Bridge and Prospidnick Bridge on the outskirts of the town. "That's something I never thought I would be able to do," he chirped.

### Garden venture

Robert's garden railway interest actually started in the garage attached to his previous house. "The layout had a branch line which led into the garden via a flap in the end wall. A garden railway was always part of the plan because I had visited and enjoyed many such railways with my father-in-law."

This original railway was visited by many people, including the

local Beavers and Rainbows, as my son and daughter gradually told more people about it. My fellow operators were generally friends who had shown an interest but had no layout themselves." So began a long association with opening up the garden line to visitors of all ages.

"When we moved house, one of the criteria in the house-hunting was that there needed to be a place for the indoor railway section and a garden large enough for an expanding line to be unobtrusive."

Once settled he erected a large shed to house the part built indoor junction station, though he says, two decades later, and it is "...still very much a work in progress!"

### Outdoor challenge

In order to run trains between the indoor section, a large outdoor loop was required. "This immediately raised the issue of weather-proofing because all trains had to venture outside, so I started experimenting with removable covers made from a reinforced-plastic tarpaulin material, stretched over heavy-gauge wire hoops and, later, wooden structures." Robert said that these worked for two or three years in each case, suffering from degradation due to sunlight and rain. "A 9" deep snowfall one year ruined many of the covers," he added. "A better solution was required as I need to be able to run trains even in the rain."

"My final solution was to construct covers from 3" corrugated PVC over treated wooden supports." He explained that these are hinged so that they can either form various pitches of 'roof' over the railway, be folded right back, or even removed completely if the weather is so good that he is confident it will not rain.

"The aim was to be able to change from uncovered to covered in less than five minutes, which is the maximum warning we usually get for an impending downpour." This requirement has been achieved and has been put to the test on several occasions he said. "We can now invite lots of people in the knowledge that the trains will cope with rain."

Robert advised that maintenance of the trackbed is minimal "I use a treated-timber base of 2" x 1½" longitudinals screwed to short fence posts fixed into the ground with Metposts. Baseboards are ¾" marine ply covered with mineralised roofing felt, glued down with roofing felt adhesive, which can be used to waterproof the ends of the plywood as well. I drilled 1" (25mm) diameter





◀ Ian McGibbon and David Jarman should really be doing something about the congested yard at Gwinear Road behind them!

Alan Macdonald and his step-daughter in charge of the fictional terminus named Leedstown after the village in approximately the right place in Cornwall. Alan is one of Robert's regular operators and was brought up with model railways – his Dad models Preston station. This was the garden station on Robert's original layout although the baseboards were rebuilt after about 20 years using the improved method with marine ply covered in roofing felt. The buildings at Leedstown were purchased second-hand from a member of the Cornwall O Gauge Group in about 1990. They are currently being replaced with cast resin versions.

holes periodically in the wider boards, spread the adhesive on the inside surfaces of the hole and then made a small hole in the roofing felt over these locations to allow any standing rainwater to drip through."

Outside track is all Peco with bullhead nickel-silver rail. "This does tarnish and needs occasional cleaning with the usual track-cleaning rubbers."



He has tried various chemical cleaners but discovered they generally leave a residue. "I think there is a market for an effective track-cleaning wagon in O gauge."

### Open days

Robert has enjoyed opening his railway to visitors on many occasions. Most visitors are not railway modellers, he explains, but appreciate the enhancement to the garden which the embedded railway gives. "The unusual but idyllic mix of a musical garden party with a garden railway on a summer afternoon seems to go down really well, though perhaps they go away with a reinforced sense of my eccentricity!"

Though perhaps not, as Robert says he answers many sensible questions about how the railway survives in the English climate, and how he lays the track so that the trains don't fall off.

"If they venture as far as the shed, by climbing over or under the main line, they discover a fully-signalled and scenic scale model station controlled by a happy troop of signalmen ringing

◀ Having decided that rain is unlikely, Robert removes the covers completely so that the visitors can view the train movements more easily. Ian McGibbon and David Jarman are in discussion over a glass of wine in the background. David has been operating the layout for over 10 years and has his own OO layout in the attic with a four-track main line and many electronic gadgets for automation. His family often attend these open days.





Clive Evans has had to leave his locomotive *Brecon Castle* (it had to be Welsh!) and coaches pounding round the main line in order to come and play his oboe. He has never missed one of these musical garden parties, which convinced him to own his own *Brecon Castle*, *Binegar Hall* and a rake of GWR coaches.



bells and drinking beer!"

And of the musical dimension?

"Well, it seems that music and railways go together like strawberries and cream." Robert declared. "One of our best friends, Clive, who plays the oboe, was so inspired that he now owns a Castle and a Hall and a rake of six GWR main line coaches." They sit on display shelves in Clive's house for most of the year but are transported to run on Rosewarne Junction once or twice a year.

"Last year a professional cellist friend attended with her clarinettist husband and she was one of the most enthusiastic visitors we have had, running trains for most of the afternoon."

Robert adds that he and his wife know several other musical families where dad is the railway enthusiast and mum is the musician. "For them, our garden party has become a family tradition."

Two great friends – a singer and a railway enthusiast – Jenny and Geoff Parnell, stay for the weekend. "They make sure that everyone is catered for and happy while my wife plays her clarinet and I play trains. Without their help it would be too difficult for us to manage."

### Boredom never sets in

Robert emphasised that there is a never ending source of enjoyment and fulfilment with this hobby. "There are so many different aspects to railway modelling and skills to master over time. I love the variety, and the freedom to undertake the activity which most appeals."

He can cope with everything from designing and planning, baseboard building, track laying, wiring and fitting control systems, installing signalling and scenery, devising timetables and building rolling stock and locomotive kits "They are all enjoyable but there is one job that, for some reason, I try to avoid or put off... painting. I need to find a modelling friend who loves painting!"

He retains all his models and has no desire to scrap any and start again, so his layout is continually expanding to add operational interest and modelling potential. With no section 'finished' yet, usually because some awkward painting is required, there is always plenty to do.

"As I approach retirement age, I am conscious that I will need

**Robert converted an elderly coarse scale Black Five to finescale by replacing the wheels and making a few other adjustments so that 'special' LMS trains can also grace the GWR main line for added variety.**



▲ The gazebo helps the acoustics and has been known to shelter 10 players in a downpour, whilst they continued to play. The conductor on that occasion did not fit in the gazebo so stood outside and got very wet!

many projects to occupy my time, so the fact that progress is slow does not worry me."

A few years ago he started attending the Missenden Abbey Railway Modellers weekends. "I was not finding time to build locomotive kits due to work commitments, nor did I have the confidence to tackle the kits I had purchased on my own." He was delighted to find that he had effectively joined a model railway club that meets only two or three times a year. "The help and advice from tutors and fellow modellers has been invaluable and very encouraging."

### Spreading the word

Although Robert's open days are by invitation only, and play to a limited audience, he has by way of his goodwill, helped to spread the word amongst those who might otherwise never come into contact with the hobby, never mind visit one of the more usual shows up and down the country. Perhaps they will next time? Or like Clive, perhaps they'll be so inspired buy some models for themselves?

Robert is not alone in opening up his garden line to visitors, it is, of course, a very popular proposition amongst the garden railway fraternity. Not everyone can summon up a group of fellow musicians to entertain, but equally, friends with other common interests, perhaps from your local church, down the allotments, or a regular gym class, will be suitable souls for an afternoon relaxing with trains, and some tea and cakes on the lawn...

Furthermore, by inviting non-railway minded friends, it's a great way to debunk the myth that railway modellers are hermit-like individuals who disappear for hours on end into the attic, closing the hatch firmly behind them.

We'll be making another visit to Robert when he's ready with his indoor section sometime soon.

