

Submitted by:- Tony Dunbar Autobiography
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I became a 'Ferroquinologist' (lover of the iron road) at the very early age of 8 months when I was given a Hornby train set (brought with biscuit coupons I'm told) for my first Christmas having been born in April 1939.

I don't actually remember that particular train but I do remember being taken in a push-chair to watch the trains through a convenient hole in the fence just by Buckingham Road bridge at Wood Green Station.

Through my spy hole I could see a procession of trains on the ECML and watch the coaches being shunted around Bounds Green Depot. We could also savour the aroma of the soft Yorkshire coal that the LNER used and the wonderful (?) yellow smoke it threw off. One of my earliest memories is of seeing one of the 'Silver' series of A4s still in the silver livery - I thought it was a ghost.

My grandfather had a new and second-hand furniture shop in Finsbury Road, Wood Green and he kept me in trains during the War (and beyond) from the homes he bought in as people moved away from London to escape The Blitz. I remember an engine shed that was big enough for me to get completely inside!

A strange thing happened one year when, I suppose, I was about 9 or 10. The front room (lounge) door jammed in the closed position. My Dad said he couldn't understand it but would get somebody to deal with it. Me, being me, thought I could help by unjamming it from the inside and I duly got the front window up and crawled inside. I couldn't believe my eyes - the floor was covered with an electric 'O' gauge layout. Then, too late, the penny dropped! It was fast approaching Christmas! I couldn't get out of there fast enough and, of course, the window wouldn't shut. I pulled and pushed but it wouldn't budge and then, out of the blue, one of my (many) Aunts appeared. I swore her to secrecy and we managed to get the window down before Mum and Dad appeared. Oh, the wait for Christmas. I don't know how I managed to keep the secret!

At last Christmas Day came and if by magic the door had opened and I could get my hands on the new layout - whow! An outside third rail layout with 2-6-0 loco (by Basset Lowke) with loads of wagons and coaches. My clockwork things, of course, soon appeared on the layout and long trains were the order of the day, at least until the accumulators went flat. No transformers then, the mains were still 240v DC!

By this time I was well known in the local model shop (which was at the Bowes Park end of Middleton Road, N22). I used to visit every weekend sometimes to buy but more often just to look. Eventually I was invited behind the counter and helped out getting tea, running errands, etc., and just learning - a wonderful time.

The North Middx Model Railway Club occupied rooms at the rear of the shop but I couldn't join as I was too young! They had an outside third rail OO layout. When the shop closed down the club moved (the first of many moves but that's another story).

The O gauge grew. I built my own track. A visit to Basset Lowke at High Holborn to get the components for a yard of track was a birthday treat. At Christmas it was not just Basset Lowke but Gamages as well, to see their latest Lionel exhibition layout. Unbelievable excitement!

Time passed and the re-introduction of Hornby Dublo was announced. I was familiar with the trains as I'd got some pre-war catalogues. I could imagine the layout I could get into the same space as my 'O' gauge. A 'Duchess of Atholl' set appeared - it would just fit on the dining table - I was hardly allowed to touch it as it was thought to be very 'delicate'. Power was still a problem until we obtained an ex-RAF rotary converter - 240v DC in - 12 DC out but noisy with it and then, joy of joys, the North Met changed the mains to AC and a MOD transformer was acquired - only problem 220v in and up to 1,000 out! We kept it in a wooden box with a screwed down lid!

I was still visiting the model shop and one day in 1951 a customer bought in a pre-war Lionel US 'OO' gauge (different to UK 'OO') loco and train together with copies of the Model Railroader magazine - I was hooked. I couldn't believe what was available and the detail achieved even then. I persuaded my Grandfather to buy me a subscription to the Model Railroader for Christmas and it started in December 1951. I've still got that first issue and every one since!

That was the start of my interest in US railroading. Of course I couldn't buy anything as there were no dollars available for such luxuries so I wrote for all the free catalogues and tried my luck with the manufacturers for 'samples'. Most said 'Sorry' but Model Die Casting (Roundhouse) responded positively and sent a complete car kit, which is still in service on my layout.

A big feature of my calendar was the exhibitions held at particular times of the year, "The Schoolboys Own" just after Christmas (who remembers the super British Railways 'O' Gauge layout?), the Model Railway Club Exhibition at Easter and the Model Engineer later in the year - all those beautiful models, stand after stand, to look at, admire and wish!

1952 saw me leave Trinity Grammar School and transfer to Enfield Technical School where I learned the engineering skills that I possess. Mr Dowsett, one of the metalwork teachers, was a model engineer and he started a school ME club - we started building a 'Juliette' but I left before it got very far.

In 1955, when I was 16, I left school and joined the Civil Engineering Department of BR in the New Works Office at King's Cross. I became a Student Civil Engineer and continued to study on a day release (and evening class) basis. Eventually, after 7 years, I gained a Higher National Certificate. I became Chartered in 1967 and stayed with BR for 38½ years.

Meanwhile, back in model land, I joined the North Middlesex MRC when I was 17 and found, to my delight, a fellow American enthusiast was already a member, namely Bill Lane. The main (portable) layout was still outside third but they had one 'universal' two rail circuit that Bill and I were allowed to monopolise.

I passed my driving test soon after joining the club and my Saturday treat was to borrow my Dad's delivery van and do the rounds of the local model shops in search of any American models. Occasionally, I struck lucky. Taylor & McKenna over in Harlesden had a couple of 'Penn Line' engines that they had received as trade samples. One, a Pennsy Class T1, 4 -4 -4 -4 caught my eye but, at £20, appeared beyond my reach. However, I persuaded Dad to lend me the cash and repaid it at 10 shillings (50p) per week. I've still got the T1. The prototype was designed to handle 1,000 ton passenger trains at 100 mph but the diesel electric put paid to their development and they had a short working life.

Rai Fenton and Bryan Clarke (both now NLSME members) joined the North Mid around 1959 and then there were four!

North Mid was never a large club, I don't recall there being more than about 20 active members at any one time. Our interests were split between the UK and US railways - we only had room for one layout in the club room and that had to serve the British OO and EM gauges and the US HO group

which had continued to grow over the years as a small amount of US models became available - not always legitimately I'm afraid. One dealer (an importer of Irish sausages!) based in Reading ended up as a guest of Her Majesty - his stock was later auctioned by Customs and Excise to the delight of many of the HO section, as we had become.

The majority of the group had joined the British Region of the (US) National Model Railroad Association as our interests grew. In those days BR had a membership of under 100 - now it is well over 700. Total membership of the NMRA is about 24,000 spread all over the world. Life membership in 1963 was \$100 or £40 at \$2.80 to the pound - as it turns out a real bargain. One of the major benefits of the NMRA has been the development of standards to permit full interchange of all manufacturers' products without difficulty - Oh! if that was true of the UK where each manufacturer has its own set of 'standards' which are often totally different to somebody else. There are even differences within a company - Triang had 14 different wheel standards in production at one time!

1966 saw Bryan, Rai and I make our first excursion to the USA and Canada - a busman's holiday as we all worked for British Railways but so totally different in every way but the track gauge.

An important event in the US modelling scene is the Annual NMRA Convention. Held in different locations each year, attendances now reach 5 - 6,000 people. The Regional organisations also hold their own Conventions as well. As BR was the first NMRA Region and it was to celebrate its 25th anniversary in 1971, it was agreed that the (US) National Convention would be held in London and, naturally, we got involved in its organisation. Around 500 people came. Later we were to organise the Regional Conventions in 1983, 1988 and last year in Peterborough

North Mid built a layout especially for the event - 'Woodside Union Terminal' or 'WUT'. We exhibited it at the 1971 Easter Exhibition as well.

Time passed - the HO section grew - North Mid moved yet again, this time to St Michael's at Bowes Church Hall in Palmerston Road where we had the use of the main hall. Naturally it was a good excuse to build a bigger layout and 'Woodside Union Terminal II' was the result. Many of you will recall seeing it at our NLSME exhibition a couple of years ago - it resides in its storeroom at HQ - all 23 sections of it!

About the time of the club move I met my wife Margo thanks to NLSME member George Case. George was one of the Operations Managers at King's Cross Station with special responsibility for the remodelling of the throat layout that was part of the GN Suburban Electrification scheme. He had a small office off the typing puddle (too small to be called a 'pool') on the West Side of the station where Margo worked. I was looking after the P.Way staging and liaised with George to keep the trains moving. A visit to his office one day changed my life! Mind you, we did have a 7 year courtship just to make sure!

WUT II took us about 3 years to get to an operable state. Even in those days we had a Christmas Open Evening and that year we erected both WUT I and II in the hall and celebrated by running all the trains off of the old layout and onto the new via a temporary bridge. After the last train had gone over we ceremonially removed a length of track to signify abandonment of WUT I.

We completed the layout in time for the Easter 1981 MRC Show at Central Hall, Westminster where it was very well received. Margo took a stint at driving and you could feel the onlookers thinking, "Why is she driving? Why can't I be in the middle?" Actually we needed all available hands as to fully operate the layout - for any length of time - you need a dozen people to be available. Over the years we exhibited it in locations as far apart as Barrow-in-Furness, Bournemouth, Brighton (twice), Peterborough and Watford.

We were still at St Michael at Bowes but time was running out as demolition of both church and hall

was proposed in order to fund a new worship centre and other developments on the site. Incidentally, we were then paying per quarter what NLSME members now pay per year in subscriptions!

The future looked bleak for North Mid as we once again hunted for a hall with lots of storage for the layouts. Salvation was at hand in the shape of Tony Nixon (one time NLSME Secretary) who was also a member of the North Mid and suggested that there was an area at HQ that was being used only as a rubbish tip and that NLSME would consider it being developed with an extension to the building. Unfortunately, it was only really big enough for one section of the Club.

By that time (1985-6) I was Chairman of North Mid and it fell to me to lead the discussions into the Club's future. Unfortunately the only realistic solution was to dissolve the Club and go our own ways. The WUT group chose to join NLSME en-masse and a couple of the 'OO' group came along as well. We sold the nameplate from an A3 Pacific 'Tracery' and the proceeds largely funded the new building which was described in the Newsletter between April and December 1988. WUT II was put into store in a warehouse belonging to one of our members - we put it up there occasionally until we built its present store cupboard at HQ.

Of course, when we joined NLSME we had no club room apart from the main meeting room at HQ and couldn't (or so we thought for many years) put up WUT II in there. However, the 'OO' group made us very welcome even allowing us to run our US equipment on their layout even if it did mean removing the station awnings, certain signals and raising some bridge girders to achieve the necessary clearances. A 'Big Boy' looked a bit odd passing through the typical British scenery on the layout.

In the period between joining NLSME and completing the building there was much discussion on what form WUT III would take but, eventually, the layout you see today took shape, at least on paper.

Construction finally got going in mid-1989 and we held an event in August 1990 to celebrate the running of the first trains on the lowest section of the layout. We didn't celebrate the completion of the last station area to be built, i.e. Richmond, until last year (1999)! Needless to say the layout is not complete and will keep us amused for years to come.

My interest in the US scene has not diminished but I must now admit to having more than a passing interest in the live steam side of the Society. Thanks to Norman Brown (who had succeeded Bert Mead as Chairman) I became involved with him in doing the fetes with the portable track and the Club loco 'Butch'. I learned to drive and found I enjoyed going home with a dirty face and hair full of cinders! An evening at Colney Heath (organised by Dave Green) for the North American Section confirmed that live steam could be fun!

Anyway, it was Margo who got me thinking about getting hold of a loco as she had taken up riding once more and was looking for a horse to own. Now, 2 'horses' are better than one.

I purchased my 'B1' (which turned out to have a duff boiler - lesson one, never buy without seeing it run!) and then Ron Thorogood's 'Speedy' which really proved to be a useful machine for fetes and a great one to learn how to take it to bits and put back together again. I used to do that in the back of the garage as I didn't have a workshop in those days. A move of home changed that situation in June of 1993.

My career with British Rail went through a very sticky phase in 1993 as the King's Cross Project, on which I was working, collapsed when Union Rail said they could do the second London terminal for the high speed link from the Channel Tunnel, cheaper by making use of St Pancras instead of King's Cross. Eventually I was made redundant and left BR in February 1994.

In the months leading up to my departure, people kept asking me 'What are you going to do with yourself with all that spare time?' So I said 'I'm going to build a live steam locomotive!' This was greeted with looks of amazement by some and great interest by others. The next question was 'What locomotive are you going to build?' Now, Margo has very strong opinions as to what engines she likes; they must have lots of wheels and/or make a lot of noise hence her admiration of the UP 4-8-8-4 'Big Boy' and the BR 'Deltic' (her typewriter used to slide across the desk when one entered King's Cross!) So we compromised with a 'Britannia' and she selected the name 70026 'Polar Star' after her horse Stella.

As luck would have it, a set of castings, drawings and a few other bits came up at the July Lacey Scott auction and the die was cast when I secured them. After setting up my workshop I finally started construction in November 1995 - I intend to run the engine this summer!

This is not the complete story of 'Me and Trains' but I think that's enough for now.

Over the years I've tried to put something back into the hobby with the result that because I usually make a lot of noise I've been President of the British Region - NMRA, Chairman of the North Mid MRC and Chairman of the NLSME. I've been quiet for a couple of years now but I don't believe it will last!

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Tony Dumbar