



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

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Editorial

This month's content is radically different from what was originally intended. What started me off on this train of thought (excuse the pun) was a query about the subject from a friend. But with Christmas just around the corner and in pursuance of my objective of promoting the hobby, I decided to write about it as something different, namely wooden toy trains. My primary source is Wikipedia :

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wooden_toy_train

Wooden model railways (or let's start them young)

The first thing that strikes one when researching this subject is that it is a big market – multiple brands (well over 30) and manufacturers mostly located in the Far East – China, Indonesia and Thailand. But of course this is a relatively new development. It would seem that factory manufacture of push along wooden toy trains on wooden tracks originated in the USA in 1936 and spread to Europe principally Sweden and Germany after the Second World War. Early models were crude by today's standards with the locos and rolling stock mainly unpainted and the coupling system being hooks and eyelets. Painted items started appearing in the late 1960s.

In a highly competitive market with no restrictions on entry, manufacturers tried to protect their market share by patenting as many aspects of their product as they could, for example Ben Orel's patent for magnetic couplings granted in 1960.

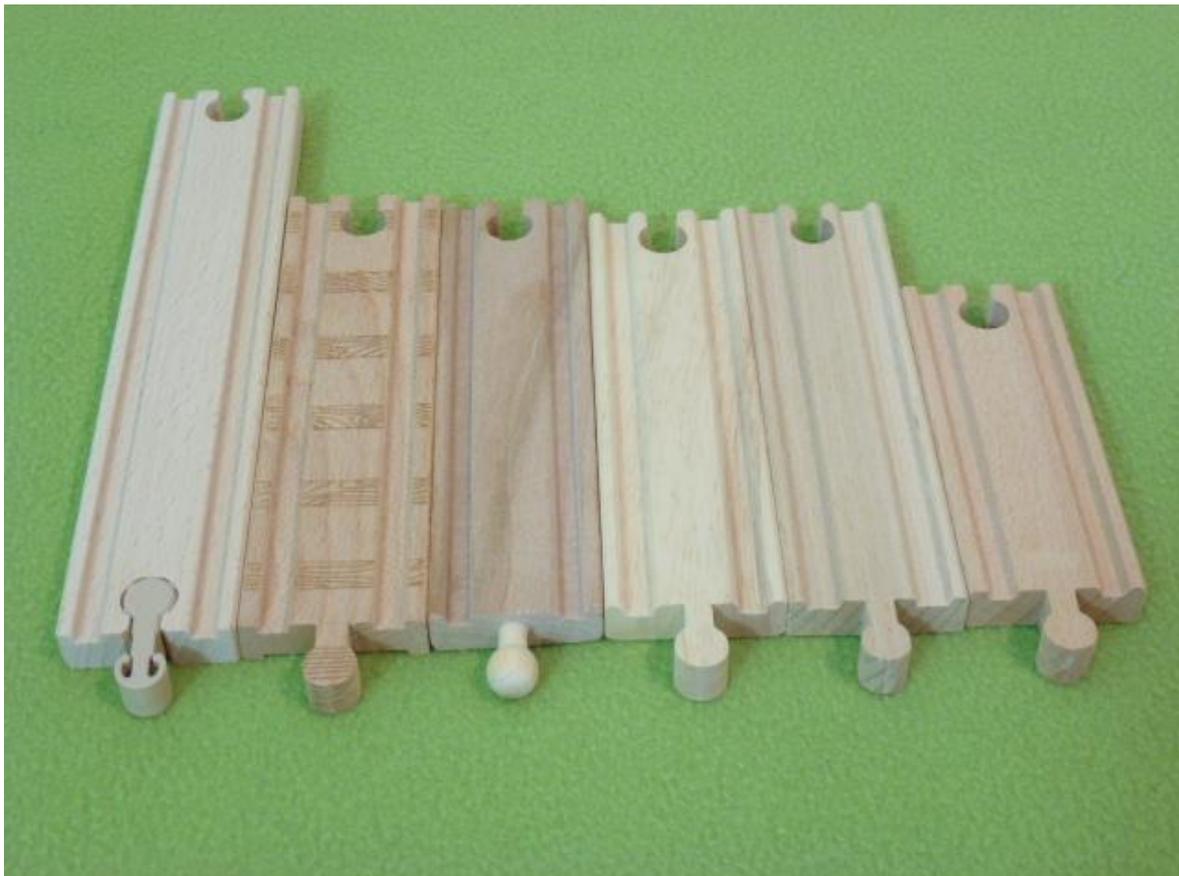
Track systems

Most manufacturers used either beechwood or maple and latterly rubber tree for their tracks and a 'peg and hole' system for joining them. In order to circumvent patents while still retaining compatibility with other manufacturers there is a wide variety of track systems available. Understandably there are no NMRA (National Model Railroad Association) or NEM (Normen Europaischer Modellbahnen – European Standards for Model Railways) for wooden tracks! There is not even a common gauge but again to enable compatibility some manufacturers have settled on tracks being 40mm wide and 12mm high. Grooves are 3mm deep, 5mm wide and have 20mm between them. Other manufacturers work on Imperial standards resulting in small differences from the foregoing metric ones.

Some track pieces such as curves and points have grooves on both sides. By turning the piece over a left hand point can be converted to a right hand one or vice versa.

By using the so called vario system which allows a degree of play when joining the pieces, trains do not derail despite operating on layouts which do not conform to the exact geometry.

Examples of different tracks (Wikipedia)



On the left is an Ikea (originally a Swedish retailer of furniture) version with the plastic connector. Next to it is a Thomas the Tank Engine version with indicated sleepers followed by a Tesco (UK supermarket chain) variant also with a plastic connector. On the far right is track from Brio (also a Swedish company and allegedly

the first to use 'peg and hole joiners in mass production) made entirely from fine grained beechwood.

Note the Ikea system uses all 'female' tracks with plastic joiners. Some systems use hidden joiners i.e. the holes for the joiners are covered.

Thomas the Tank Engine

First published in 1945 in the Railway Series of children's books by Reverend W Awdry, the character of Thomas the Tank Engine has become the most popular symbol of railways for young children. This popularity was enhanced by the 1984 TV series 'Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends'. A further development was the establishment of the Learning Curve Toys Company in 1989 which went on to introduce a wooden railway system called 'Thomas & Friends' based on the Thomas the Tank Engine characters. The success of this system resulted in new markets opening up outside the traditional ones and in new countries.

Other manufacturers have jumped on the bandwagon producing push along trains to the same scale and gauge but in plastic.

Whittle Shortline which started as a cottage industry in the USA in the early 90s developed a different niche in the market – one based on US prototypes and diesels rather than steam. In addition the models exhibited greater realism.

Model of Chessie System GP40-2 by Whittle Shortline (Wikipedia)



Following a scandal involving the use of lead based paint by Chinese wooden toy manufacturers demand for US made Whittle Shortline items increased substantially.

Technological developments

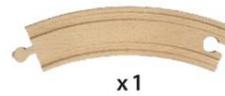
The 1990s saw the introduction of battery power to what until then had been a 'push along' toy. In the early years of the 21st century radio control was added. I am not aware of wooden trains with DCC but somebody will have done it!

Accessories

Bridges and tunnels have been available since the 1960s. As with the mainstream part of the hobby early buildings were basic but again in the 1990s designs became more sophisticated with greater interaction with the trains. The examples below came from the Brio website.



4
PIECES



Example of a layout with parts from different brands (Wikipedia)



From the basic train models



To the not so basic.....Retro Replicas



From the basic layout



To the not so basic layout



Even less basic layout.....Thomas Wooden Railway



Outdoors



Another shot of the same layout



South African wooden toy train suppliers

As will have been noted from the foregoing, Brio is a long established brand name. Table Mountain Toys, as the name suggests based in Cape Town is a South African Brio distributor. Table Mountain Toys website address is:

<https://www.tablemountaintoys.co.za/contactus>.

Timber Toys: <http://www.timber-toys.co.za/> is a distributor of Big Jigs push along train sets. The company also seems to be based in Cape Town.

Playtoys <http://www.playtoys.co.za/product-category/wooden-rails-trains/train-set/> retails the Big Jigs range.

Polly Potters <http://pollypotterstoystore.co.za/> sells a basic train and wagon set. It is not clear if the set comes with track.

When starting to research this subject I had no idea the market was as large as it is. The fact that there are so many brands available (at least internationally) reveals the demand is there. Some conclusions can be drawn from this:

1 Grandparents, aunts, uncles and parents, if you are looking for a robust Christmas or birthday present for your toddler grandchild, nephew, niece or child look no further!

2 The evidence suggests a wooden push along train set should feature prominently at a model railway exhibition. We were successful in catching the attention of youngsters at the May exhibition by letting them drive the Hornby Dublo/Tri-ang layout. An even younger section of the population can be attracted by providing a wooden track layout where toddlers can do the pushing.

3 There is a wide range of products from which to choose. Product reviews are available at Play Trains: <http://play-trains.com/best-wooden-train-sets/>

Wooden Train Set Brand Profiles - Wooden Train Set Reviews

<http://www.woodentrainsetreviews.com/wooden-train-set-brands/> and

Best Reviews Guide www.bestreviews.guide/Wooden-Train-Sets

to assist with making the right choice especially if buying on line.

4 It was surprising to learn that as far as can be ascertained no model railway retailers in South Africa stock wooden train sets. Is there an opportunity for them here?