



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

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Editorial

This is going to be a somewhat different edition this month with a heavy reliance on photographs and videos which are accessible via Youtube and the North Star website. First, some corrections/additions arising from last month's edition.

I am advised the correct hole size for ensuring a tight fit of Tenmille plug in chairs to the sleepers is 2.7mm or 2.8mm.

ACDC whose head office is in Joburg but has branches in Durban and Cape Town is a supplier of plug in (male/female) strip connectors as below.



The No Name Railroad has acquired a name to wit the Grahamstown, Pietersville and Virginia Railroad (GPVR) for short.

Subscribers who use Telkom as their service provider did not receive their November edition of the NSC. It was rejected as spam. If the individuals concerned wish to obtain a copy, I suggest you do so via the North Star website.

Now on to this month's newsletter and how I got there.

I received a communication from Google that my storage limit on my phone had been reached and if I wanted to back up photos and videos I would have to buy storage. Now I know one of the co-founders of Google, Larry Page, has a USD45m "yacht" to maintain (the father of the boat's captain lives in Knysna) but I prefer to spend my limited capital elsewhere so decided to reduce the amount of space (data) on the phone taken up by videos in particular. However most of the videos concerned were historical records for me so the plan was to transfer those to YouTube and share them with the model railway community via YouTube/the North Star Railway website. This exercise involved a steep learning curve. When I had done this in the past the videos concerned had been downloaded from camera to desktop and from there to YouTube. This was a long way round the houses. My computer literate daughter pointed out I could upload the videos directly from the camera on the cell phone by sharing the videos with Youtube.

One tip for those who wish to emulate this exercise, make sure the cell phone is set to for a wifi transfer and is not done via the phone service provider as this chews data.

So a total of some 90 videos have now been uploaded to YouTube showcasing a number of gauges and power systems. The longer videos have also been loaded to the Gallery section of the North Star website (www.northstarrailway.com for anyone in any doubt).

At the same time an exercise was undertaken to edit some of the older videos descriptions to give people a better idea of their content. This is an ongoing process, the next part of which will be the editing of the videos themselves – when I have learned how to do this!

So what is the main topic this month? A common complaint by people who are interested in trains is that they don't have space to build a layout. Well I have news for such people, you do! And to prove a point and arising from the rediscovery of a whole lot of photos on my cell phone, the main topic this month is space for your layout or a wander around Pecorama. This was originally covered in NSC Volumes 2 nos 11 and 12 and 11 no 3 but is well worth a revisit.

In my opinion there are 3 iconic railway/model railway places that are must sees in the UK. The first, featuring the prototypes and associated rolling stock is the National Rail Museum in York (entry is free!) and from a modelling perspective Pendon Museum, close to Didcot, Abbingdon and Oxford, which has been reviewed on several occasions in the NSC, and finally Pecorama, located in the village of Seaton in Devon.

A place for your layout or a wander around Pecorama

There is a great deal to see and experience at Pecorama. There is a well stocked shop which if memory serves me correctly you have to negotiate before entering the museum/display area.

Outside, there is an extensive ride on set up pulled by a live steam loco around manicured gardens. There is also a separate children's indoor adventure playground. This newsletter will concentrate just on the museum/display units, the theme of which is finding a home for your railway. The gauge of the layouts concerned is mostly 16.5mm i.e. OO/HO but there are also some O gauge/7mm scale and also 32mm gauge but 16mm scale layouts.

There are signs above some of the layouts concerned so the photographs are self explanatory in several instances.

Having learned how to upload videos to YouTube I thought the photos would be a breeze but another steep learning curve was experienced.

There are about 100 Pecorama photos and having saved them in an album on the phone one would assume they could then be uploaded en masse to YouTube. Not so, there is no facility for so doing.

In the end having tried for hours to go the direct route, the solution was to simply transfer the photos by e-mail instead. The results can be viewed at the following URL (Uniform Resource Locator)

Pecorama <https://photos.app.goo.gl/1P2F4pA8jGzAC5hF8>
(Control+click to access)

As can be noted from the URL concerned, the transfer takes place via a Google app. YouTube is owned by Google so it seems odd that photos cannot be loaded in a batch to but this is probably because the app is designed for videos. The solution arrived at (eventually) was to share the photos concerned via a URL link sent via e-mail to my desktop, download them and save them in a folder as JPEGs.

If you want to see all the photos do not press the "Play highlights" sign once you have accessed the photos by control clicking on the URL. Just click on the first photo and then scroll through the rest by using the white arrow on the right of the black border.

Happy wandering!

Pen-y-Bont

While about to exit the 16 mm Exhibition at Stoneleigh in the UK in April, a most unusual layout was encountered – and inside garden railway if you like. This layout had featured in the March 2023 Garden Rail magazine. Another article was contained in the May edition which was on sale at the Exhibition and which I bought. Subsequently, I managed to obtain a copy of the March edition which describes the evolution and building of Pen-Y-Bont. This write up draws heavily on the two Garden Rail articles.

As the name suggests the layout is based in Welsh slate territory:

Nothing out of the ordinary about that. The unique feature of the layout as the builder, Steve Howard describes, is that "all the scenery was going to

be from real plants, growing in soil and it would be left outside all year, except that is when dismantled and transported to exhibitions”.

This removed the possibility of using wood as a baseboard construction material albeit perhaps tanalised wood might have done the trick. The starting point therefore was polycarbonate roofing sheet. On top of which sit two inch deep plastic plant trays into which plugable drainage holes have been drilled. Two inch thick strips of expanded foam insulation sit inside the trays to act as a base for the 32mm gauge Peco SM32 settrack mostly used for the build.

The layout was designed to be portable from the outset so keeping the weight low was an important consideration. To make things manageable, the scenic section of the layout comprises five 4' x 3' sections each of which has a plant tray secured to it and is fitted with aligning pegs.

Further 4' x 1' trays sit at the rear containing dwarf conifers to act as a backdrop. A 14" high dismountable backdrop proper constituted of plastic window fascia boards sits behind the conifers.

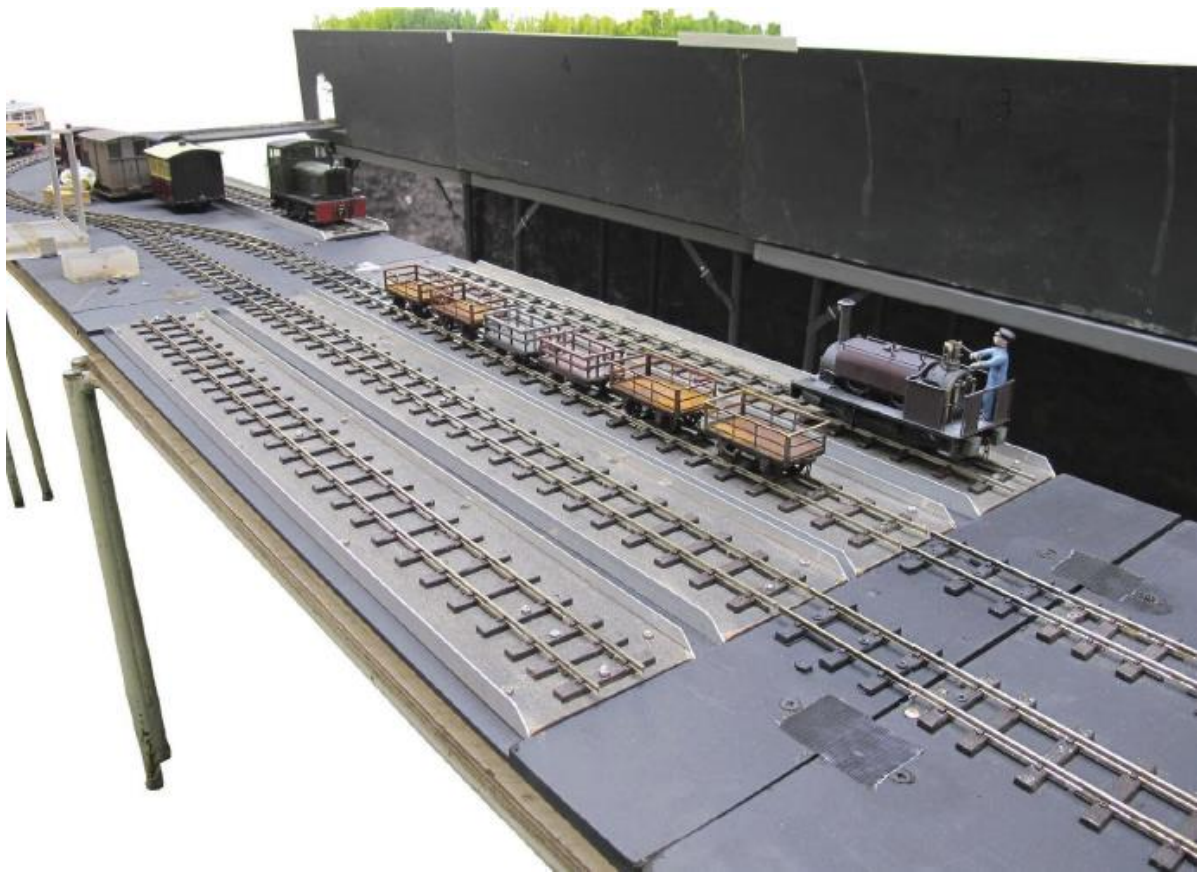
The layout rests on plastic tables with metal fold-down legs.

Despite the weight saving measures, this is still quite a heavy layout.

Each baseboard weighs around 20kg Two people are required to lift each of them to maintain them in a horizontal plane and so not spill any of the plant tray contents.

The photos below show some of the structure details referred to above.





***The fiddle yard mostly made from 12mm mdf. Photo March 2023
Garden Rail***



Main line and passing loop with station halt at rear



The front of the layout pretty much in its entirety



***Locos are steam powered or battery/radiocontrolled
Grouncovers on Pen-Y-Bont***

Now we move on to the plants. This is not my field and again I have had to draw heavily on the Garden Rail copy, this time from the May edition. Furthermore, while not necessarily being indigenous to the UK, these are the plants that are available there and are probably not available in South Africa. Thus while the plants concerned on Pen-Y-Bont are described it should be borne in mind they could not be replicated in South Africa. However given the range of groundcovers that are indigenous to this country I am sure a layout could be built constituted of local plants. I will compile a list of such plants – in my next life!

Arenaria Balerica

Tiny leaves; low and slow growing alpine; spreads well; tiny white flowers



Isotoma (Fairy Carpet)

Low growing creeping alpine
Pale blue flowers



Leptinella (brass buttons)



Fern like leaves:
Yellow/green
ball shaped
flowers;
spreads well
with creeping
rhizomes;
hardy in winter;
tolerant dry and
damp
conditions:

Mentha Requierii



Spreads well;
Forms a dense
low growing
mat of tiny
green leaves;
Produces
masses of tiny
purple flowers
in summer;

Pratia Pendunculata



Vigorous low
growing alpine
similar to
Isotoma;
produces
masses of small
white star-
shaped flowers.

Raoulia



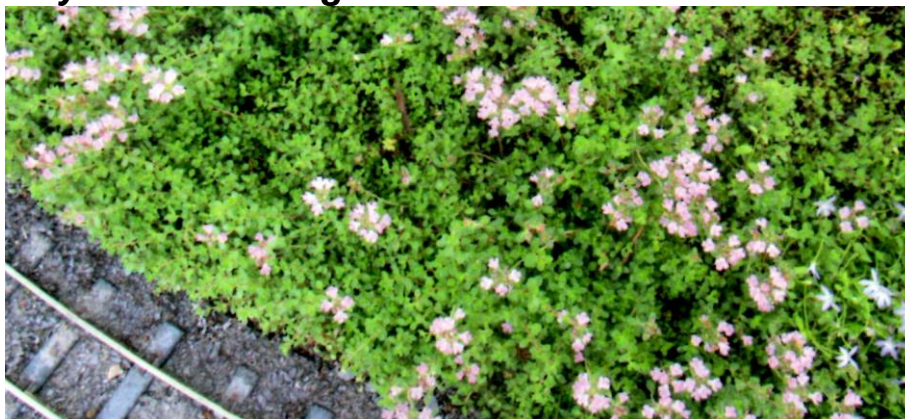
A silver leaved alpine;
According to Steve Howard this plant is a bit temperamental!

Soleirola Soleirolii (Mind your own business!)



Common plant in damp shady conditions;
Tiny leaves;
Does not tolerate frost well;

Thymus Russelings



Several varieties with pink, red or purple flowers;
Hardy and fast growing;
Easy to grow from slips;

Moss

Pen-Y-Bont has several different types of moss on the layout. Most have been harvested from the rooves of buildings and fallen logs. They need to be watered to prevent them drying out.

Conifers

The layout has several types of miniature conifers for the backdrop. These need to be pruned regularly to stop them getting out of hand.

South African groundcovers

Now all that is required to complete this article is a list of suitable indigenous groundcovers. They certainly exist but even Mr Google could not assist with their identification. There must be somebody out there who is knowledgeable about the subject – horticulturalists, wives? If you know of anyone please point them in my direction.

Visit to Cape Town

A visit was paid to Cape Town recently in order to meet visiting Australian friends. It is true travel broadens the mind but sadly not necessarily in a happy direction. Cape Town is exhibiting the symptoms already in evidence in South Africa's other major cities – over stretched facilities, the result of too many people. And as for the traffic and the driving!!!

Kirstenbosch which for many years was a must visit botanical garden is suffering from inadequate maintenance. The flower beds in the gardens require attention and the Moyo restaurant leaks like a sieve when it rains. When we were there you had to switch on the torch on your cell phone to visit the toilet!

On a happier note after a gap of three years the Winelands Light Railway was revisited and it was going like the proverbial fair.



Replica of a turn of the century Stanley Steamer. Andries Keyser driving this gas fired live steam vehicle

As indicated in the previous review in November 2020, the Winelands Light Railway is a major tourist attraction drawcard. The premises have developed with the trees being more than double the height relative to our last visit. This gives the operation a greater sense of 'maturity'. There were large numbers of customers picnicking on the grass and enjoying train rides. This would tend to make one believe that this is a highly profitable enterprise but the high regulatory/compliance/insurance costs of the operation must be borne in mind.

Three phase electricity has just been installed which will enable some of the equipment with greater capacity to be brought on line in the expanding workshop. Andries is confident that just about any mechanical repair or build task required by the railway can now be conducted 'in house'.

As per the above photo, Winelands Light Railway continues to accumulate 'toys'.

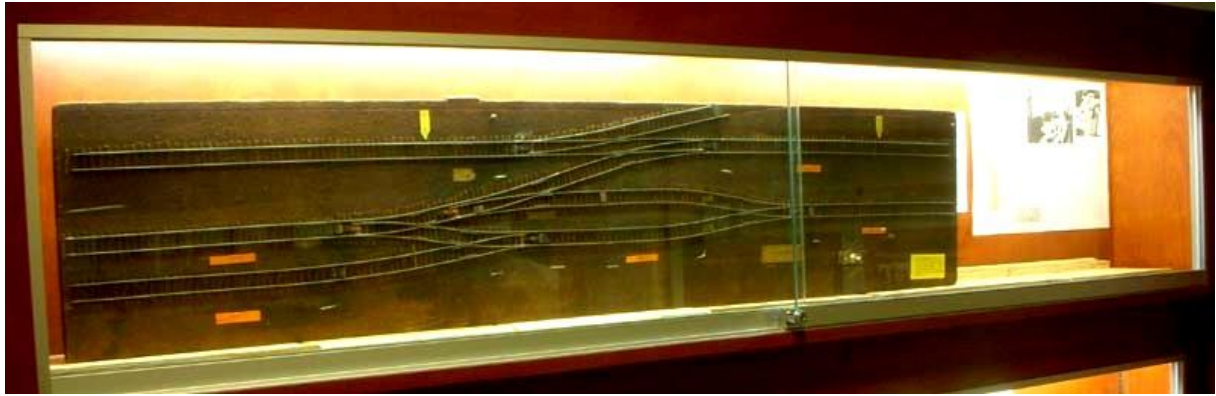
I concluded my November 2020 article by saying a visit to this operation is a must if you are ever in the area. One word of warning: Andries is a very busy man so if you wish to see him, making an arrangement beforehand is advisable.

Model Railroad Specialists/the Hobby Shop in Plumstead

The other Mecca for me in Cape Town is the Hobby Shop in Plumstead. This gives a good indication of the health of the hobby.

The good news is the shop continues to be well stocked but there are a couple of caveats to that comment: firstly there is a greater range of non railroad items available, a trend that has been in evidence for some years – hence the change of name? Secondly, and perhaps of greater importance to model railway/railroad hobbyists, a greater percentage of the railway orientated items is second hand. One can look at this two ways. Yes it is nice to be able to buy the modern kit with all the bells and whistles but with a depreciating Rand this is the preserve of the few, mainly professionals, in our society. So in operating in the second hand market Model Railroad Specialists is providing a valuable service to the lesser privileged members of the hobby.

Here is an example: at the initiative of Ron Speight who was the motivator of the construction of a multi gauge portable display layout, a John Allen Timesaver module (covered in Volumes 1 no 2, 4 no 9 and 10 no 10 of the NSC) is to be constructed by the Knysna Model Railroaders. The cost of new points and track would be between R3000 and R4000 so to reduce the expense involved, second hand points and track are to be used. To cut a long story short the club was able to purchase used points very reasonably (thank you Pierre) at Model Railroad Specialists. The hobby will be the beneficiary by enabling a lightweight layout to be shown to the public. One of the features of the Timesaver and indeed its primary function, is to enable the public to engage in a switching competition i.e. to reposition cars on the layout with the minimum number of moves.



John Allen's original Timesaver module now 51 years old! This survived the fire and now resides at the San Diego Model Railroad Museum

Hopefully, Timesaver, which via a Digitrax LNW1, may be operable by cell phone, will attract more people, particularly youngsters into the hobby in Knysna.

Collections

This was a bit of an after thought. Following the move from Kloof to a smaller property in Knysna, the household authorities began to complain about the fact that every cupboard in the spare rooms were bulging with boxes containing trains, books and magazines. Offspring were also bringing the age factor into focus and the fact they had not been inducted to the mysteries of the model train world. Now while these complaints are of course utterly unreasonable, action has had to be taken to do something about the situation (LGB items take up so much space!) So a start has had to be made thinning out the collection. First to go will be some of the magazines. As has been pointedly pointed out to me, I never look at them after the initial reading. In any case many of the back copies are available on the publishers' websites. While disposing of the hard copies is a bit like parting with your security blanket, the time has come to don big boys trousers. The non bound magazines are going first in the form of 16mm Today, Gauge I Newsletter, and G Scale Society Journal. I would prefer if the magazines concerned went to a model train club and ideally one which owns its own premises but this condition is not being stipulated. The only condition which is, is that the recipient has to pay the courier cost.

LGB items will follow in due course but they won't be free.

Sob sob.

The end