

Collecting Hornby (and other O-gauge trains) in Holland

By Hans van Dissel

When Glenn Ball asked me if I would write something about collecting Hornby in *The Netherlands*, I said that I'd be pleased to do so, if he didn't mind if I strayed a bit from the straight and narrow. For the truth of the matter is that I'm not a Hornby collector per se, and while being honest I might as well reveal that that goes for a number, if not most, of the members of the Dutch HRCA, to which I belong. Glenn replied that straying wouldn't be a problem, so here goes.

As most of the boys of my age (yes, well, alright, so I'm 54 now) I started my model railway career with a clockwork tinplate O-gauge set when I was about five years old. In the Fifties in Holland that meant either a quality set from Märklin or Hornby, which was expensive, or (apart from Hornby MO stuff) a cheap set from German manufacturers like Bub, Otto Beck or HWN (Heinrich Wimmer, Nürnberg). In my case it was a Bub set consisting of a four-wheeled impression of an electric locomotive of the Netherlands Railways (NS, Nederlandse Spoorwegen) and two four-wheeled coaches. This was added to over the next few years, until I was eight and my father judged me old enough for a proper model railway, and gave me a Fleischmann HO set. This became a major hobby until I was about seventeen and girls and (classic) motorcycles took over. The first interest has resulted in being now happily married for more than 30 years, the second in becoming editor/publisher of a classic motorcycle magazine. Notwithstanding my shift in interests, I had kept some of my old tinplate trains. They lived on a shelf in the hall of our apartment, just being nice, nostalgic objects to look at. And it so happened that once in while a visitor spotted them and said, "I've got some of those things too. If you like, you can have them." In this way a small O-gauge electric Märklin loco, some Hornby wagons and a few Fleischmann coaches found their way to



our home, plus a box of 3-rail track and a Lionel transformer. A rather eclectic collection, but it meant that I could once in a while lay an oval with some sidings on the floor of the living room and run my tinplate train. What really turned this rather sporadic interest in a new and major hobby was the discovery that not twenty miles from our home, someone had founded a Märklin toy train museum. After visiting this museum, which had a collection of Märklin trains only surpassed by that of the Märklin factory itself, for the first time, I was well and truly hooked. Although most of the couple of thousand wagons and coaches and hundreds of locomotives were by Märklin, there were also showcases with trains by other manufacturers – Hornby, Bing, Kraus, Jep, Lionel, Exley, Issmayer. There were a lot of names I had never heard about and I started to read about old toy trains, bought some books (the Hornby book by Graebe was of course an eye-opener, as was *Toy Trains* by Pierce Carlson and *Clockwork, Steam and Electric* by Gustav Reder) and had many conversations with the owner of the museum, Cor Spreeuwenberg. Unfortunately after ten years Cor closed his museum due to advancing years and most of his immense collection was dispersed through auction houses. He kept a number of choice items, but did not enjoy them long, as two years later he passed away. I found that I liked the diversity of O-gauge trains that had been produced by the toy train manufacturers in the past and started to collect whatever I could find. I quickly found out that my budget wouldn't stretch to the top-of-the-range items by the famous (and thus very collectible) makes, but by being more modest in my ambitions and going for the lesser items and the lesser

My first-ever train: a cheap and cheerful Bub clockwork set in the colours of the Netherlands Railways of the Fifties.

The presentation of the Dutch HRCA at a big model railway show in 2006. Everything is Hornby in this picture, apart from the ACE canopy on the right.

makes, I could build up a nice and diverse collection, which is what I wanted. When I got serious about collecting, my original aim was to have something – a single item would do – from every manufacturer who had ever produced O-gauge tinplate. This seemed feasible, as at the time I thought there had been around 200 manufacturers worldwide and with the growth of internet and eBay I had that whole world to choose from. Ah well... Over the years I found out that the total of O-gauge makers is nearer 400 than 200 and in order to lay my hands on makes that were not yet represented in my collection, I had bought some of the most awful tinplate trains ever produced. So, although I still keep my eyes open for 'new' makes, my interest has shifted to items that I really like. As regards Hornby, this has resulted in about a dozen locomotives and 60 or so wagons and coaches. Most of these have been acquired via eBay, the rest I found on model railway shows in Holland and England, or through tips from fellow members of the Dutch HRCA. This club is the brainchild of Peter Zwakhals who is, I fear, the only one of our small band of brothers who really only collects Hornby O-gauge and mint-and-boxed at that. He has a very impressive collection, ranging from sets of the very early Twenties to an as-new Princess Elizabeth, and about everything in between. Most of the other 25 or so members collect something besides Hornby, or, like me, have some Hornby as part of their overall collection. Thus we have a member who also has an extensive collection of narrow-gauge tinplate Biller Bahn, a member who specialises in Kraus Fandor, a member whose primary interest is Meccano and some people who focus on Jep, Bing or Liebmann Stadtilm, while the rest, like



Trains galore... this is what happens if you like them all. On the upper shelf stands a rake of aluminium American Model Toys New York Central coaches, below that a Spanish Paya 2-6-2 with Wagon-Lits bogie coaches and on the third shelf a French BLZ electric loco with three matching coaches, followed by two Fournereau coaches (also French). On the fourth shelf are a couple of Hornby Pullman coaches and bogie wagons, with on the right a German HWN clockwork set on a very early post-war (late 1945) German aluminium kit-built railway bridge, with below the bridge an electric Danish two-rail Pioner Expressen set. On the fifth shelf stands a circa 1936 20-volt Hornby Royal Scot with some Bassett-Lowke LMS coaches and a 1912 Carette Midland Railway luggage van, while the sixth shelf is occupied by an electric Czech Merkur 2-6-2 and matching coaches from the Fifties.

me, has a bit of everything – although I can claim to have more of everything than anybody else... whether that is something to be proud of, or an indication that after nearly 20 years of collecting I am still unable to make up my mind, I'll better leave to others to decide. Only one or two members run Hornby Dublo; the rest of us are into O-gauge.

Collecting O-gauge tinsplate trains is very much a minor interest within the model railway world in Holland and although there regularly are shows and fairs where model trains are offered, the vast majority consists of HO stuff. There usually is a sprinkling of tinsplate O-gauge, but that is mainly confined to run-of-the-mill items from Märklin, Bing and Hornby (British as well as French). Sometimes some of the German traders who attend the larger fairs have some interesting items from middle- or east-European makes on their tables and in this way I have bought some Russian, Czech, Hungarian and Austrian trains.

One of my favourite Hornby items is this early Twenties No.1 Midland Railway boxed goods set.

Holland never had its own O-gauge tinsplate trains, but in neighbouring Belgium the firm of Gils produced simple, but nice electric sets such as this one in the Fifties. Interestingly, Gils used a system with three isolated rails for the forward and reverse motion of its locomotives, which means Gils locos cannot run on ordinary 3-rail track.





Left: A Ferris Sydney Suburban set crosses a Märklin bridge as some Hornby goods stock is waiting to be loaded at the Cabo goods shed in the foreground. The two-storey station and destination indicator are by Märklin and both lettered for the Dutch market. Between the station and the Hornby No.2 junction signal stands a Jep electrically-operated level crossing and behind that an also French black GMP signal gantry.



Above: Part of my layout. Under the canopy (maker unknown, but certainly pre-war) a ca. 1926 Hornby 0-4-0 M3 loco with two Bing GN coaches waits for its passengers, while in front of the Thirties German Cabo station and the pre-war Hornby signal gantry a Hornby Metropolitan set passes and over the Bing and Kraus bridges a Märklin 2-4-0 loco and four matching bogie coaches rumble along. Between the station and the passing Metropolitan some narrow-gauge Biller Bahn goods stock is waiting, while in the background stand a Twenties American Flyer water tower and two ca. 1910 Bing engine sheds. The gantry crane in the left foreground was made by Doll in the Thirties.



Left: A corner of the layout, under the stairs which give access to the basement train room. On the siding between the Bing signal box and goods shed stand three Robilt tank wagons. The upper track is part of an oval of 3-rail Gauge 1, which enables me to run the few Gauge 1 trains I have.



Once a year the Dutch HRCA attends the biggest of the model railway shows in Holland, where Peter Zwakhals and Niek van Ees (the two most active members of our small club) set up a large O-gauge layout, where we run our electric Hornby (and other!) trains. I'm glad to say this layout is always a crowd-puller and is much fun to run, especially as it offers the opportunity for our locomotives and rolling stock to 'stretch their legs'. I do have a permanent layout at home, but at about 10 x 15 feet it is not really big enough to run a 'proper' train with four or five bogie coaches or a nice long goods train. Moreover, some of my bigger locomotives cannot negotiate the curves on my layout and while I do like just looking at them sitting on my shelves, those toy trains were made to roll, after all. With at least double the space available at a show, you can truly enjoy the beauty of O-gauge on the move. I tend to take the nicest items I've acquired during the past year along to our annual show and so the last time I was able to run a recently bought 20-volt Hornby Royal Scot with a rake of four LMS Bassett-Lowke coaches (including the twelve-wheel Dining Car and the mail van with working pick-up apparatus) and a Hoge streamliner (a nice piece of Thirties Art Deco train design), as well as a 6-volt Metropolitan set. The Royal Scot and the Metropolitan are, in my view, two of the nicest locomotives Hornby produced, and especially the latter, with the four matching lithographed coaches I now have, makes for a beautiful sight (yes, I know Hornby sold it with just one 1st/3rd and a brake/3rd, but with two extra 1st/3rd coaches I find the whole so much more convincing). And the pride of the Hornby line, the Princess Elizabeth? No, I haven't got that one – yet, but I'm saving for it...

Apart from this annual public appearance the Dutch HRCA has its own yearly get-together at one of the members' homes, where we show off our latest acquisitions (again, not necessarily just Hornby), talk trains and do some trading. I for one seldom leave without having bought something... For the rest we see each other individually and keep in contact by phone and e-mail. I think all of us are also members of the HRCA and I was a member of the HRCAA for a couple of years as well, when I was focussed on Australian and New Zealand makes – amongst others I have a nice boxed electric Robilt set, a Ferris Sydney Suburban set and a Maurlyn Gold Chief, plus some rolling stock, as well as a Cranko live-steam loco (one of the few mint-and-boxed items in my collection, by the way). Ah yes, and I've got a beautifully made Fox loco, which to my dismay I could find nothing about in Bruce Macdonald's otherwise excellent and very readable Spring, Spark & Steam. If someone has the complete story on the Fox products, I would love to hear it. To round off, if you want to have a peek at what the Dutch HRCA is doing, go to <http://home.planet.nl/~zwakh019/home.htm>. Don't worry about the language; the site is in English. There you will also find the very usable price guide to Hornby O-gauge locomotives, compiled and regularly updated by Peter Zwakhals. Oh, and that very first, very cheap Bub train set? I still have it and I wouldn't trade it - not even for a Princess Elizabeth!

Left: Instrumental in starting to collect tinplate trains seriously was the Rail Toy Museum, run by the late Cor Spreeuwenberg. This view shows part of his collection of Märklin tank wagons; Cor had reputedly the largest collection of Märklin trains in the world, apart from the factory museum at Göppingen.