

Variations on a Theme

Narrow Gauge Conversions from Kitmaster 'Italian Tank' kits - Andrew Wilson

The Genesis

Those of us who have passed sixty but still feel like teenagers inside probably cut our collective modelling teeth on those wonderful Kitmaster kits of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although relatively expensive when pocket money rarely exceeded half a crown they were a delight, and an eye opener. They were also frustrating as the coach kits steadfastly refused to go round the curves on my Hornby Dublo three-rail layout. I have lost count of how many of the 'Pug' kits were converted into narrow gauge 'might have beens' but it was the 'Italian Tank', No.8, which first saw the light of day in December 1959 that attracted me. It just cried out to be transformed into a narrow gauge engine but it was to be another quarter of a century before I got round to doing anything about it.

Snowdon Ranger

As I have related I had harboured the idea that the old Kitmaster 'Italian Tank' HO kit would make an attractive narrow gauge 'might have been' and it never ceases to amaze me that so many Kitmaster kits are still readily available from the Kitmaster Collectors Club, internet auction sites and model railway exhibitions. The one used in this conversion was bought at the Keighley Model Railway Show many years ago as a built, battered, but complete 'Italian Tank' and the first task was to carefully take the kit apart. This was surprisingly easy using a sharp scalpel blade to score along the joints and the fifty-year old polystyrene cement gave up the ghost. At this point I had no real idea of what I was aiming for, no photographs, no drawings, just a vague idea of something with a Festiniog flavour, a touch of 'Linda'/'Blanche' mixed with a little of the exotic continental. Typical pie in the sky me!

Anyway back to the modelling. Once broken down into its component parts a decision needed to be made as to what type of chassis to use. I didn't really want to scratch build one and as there are relatively few commercial 12mm gauge units on the market the choice was between a new Tillig or used Berlinerbahn 0-8-0T unit. Having a supply of both, courtesy of '55 Association' member Blair Hobson, I opted for the former.

The first task was to work out how much of the footplate moulding needed to be removed to accommodate the Tillig motor and drive shaft. A card template was made before any plastic was removed and once satisfied with the fit a brand new craft-knife blade was used to cut through the tough black

Kitmaster plastic. With the modified footplate sitting on the chassis the two smokebox pieces were cemented together using Plastic Weld. A section of the boiler barrel bottom had to be cut out to clear the Tillig gearbox. Once a snug fit was achieved the smokebox could be attached to the footplate and the smokebox door glued in place.

After perusing no end of pictures of narrow gauge locomotives I decided to base the cab on the Hunslet design used on the Penrhyn Quarry Railway 0-4-0STs *Charles*, *Blanche* and *Linda*. This proved to be an inspired choice as I could use the GEM cast white-metal side sheets from the 5½ mm scale *Linda* kit as a template. These were cut from Plastikard and stepped down from the bottom line of the side tanks. However, this meant lowering the cab floor by cutting away the rear section of the footplate and resting it on the rear Tillig chassis support moulding. A small fillet of Plastikard was then cemented to the cab floor to attach it to the footplate. At this point the cab front was inserted, but only after cutting away part of the firebox back plate to clear the motor. The resulting gaps were they filled with small bits of Plastikard.

Thoughts now turned to the tender. As I had a number of GEM 5½mm scale white metal tenders from the old *Prince* kit and from Malcolm Savage's re-worked *Palmerston* to hand I decided to use one of these; the GEM *Prince* one got the vote. As this had previously been coupled to a model of *Palmerston* the first job was to strip it of its old paint scheme. Once down to the bare metal I had a brain wave and decided to fit a tender cab based on the one used with the Festiniog Railway's *Linda*. As I wanted to use as much of the Kitmaster kit as possible I made this from the cab back and a section of the cab roof. Although the Malcolm Savage Models (MSM) *Palmerston* tender is much narrower than the footplate of the 'Italian Tank' I was not at all perturbed as many locomotives have run with tenders not the same width as the cab.

With the basic engine and tender complete some test running was undertaken and it was immediately apparent that the engine was far too light. As a result the side tanks were lined with scraps of roofing lead until the engine could haul three bogie coaches and two white-metal four-wheel coaches on my steeply graded test track as well as the GEM tender.

Attention was then turned to detailing the engine and tender. The Kitmaster safety valves were used and to alter the appearance of the boiler fitting a cast Fairlie dome from the MSM range of 5½ mm parts was placed between the dome and cab front with a turned brass whistle on top of it. Handrails, injector pipework and boiler clacks were then fitted along with a second whistle in front of the fireman's side of the cab. A vacuum ejector pipe was fitted on the driver's side. Festiniog Railway style sand pots were placed ahead of the side tanks and these came from an old *Prince* kit. At the same time cab pipework was fitted before the cab roof was fabricated from Plastikard and fitted with a third whistle! It was then decided that the engine should be oil-fired and so an oil tank was made to fit inside the tender.

By this time I had decided that the Tillig cylinders were too small and so used the Kitmaster cylinders. These were carefully cut down to fit snugly over the Tillig cylinders and immediately transformed the look of the engine. A frame extension was then made to fit between the cylinders and front buffer beam which was also fabricated from Plasticsard. The cab steps come from an old Airfix Drewry diesel shunter kit while the tank steps are from the Kitmaster donor. A vacuum brake cylinder was placed under the fireman's side of the cab and this came from the MSM stable. The final touch was to fit a pair of vacuum pipes from the scrap box and chopper couplings.

Sometime ago I had bought a series of 5½ mm scale Festiniog and Welsh Highland railway name and works plates from Gareth Floyd of Guilplates. One set was for *Snowdon Ranger* and as this name seemed to suit the little 0-8-0T, so *Snowdon Ranger* it became. However, I was having difficulty in deciding on a paint scheme. I had three possible alternatives, Festiniog green, Penrhyn lined black or midnight blue lined out in black and white. After chewing the matter over with Dave Etheridge and Dennis Harrison I opted for the lined black.

So with engine and tender cleaned and primed with Halfords grey plastic primer a couple of coats of Halfords satin black were applied. Lining is courtesy of the Fox waterslide range while the Festiniog Railway crests come from MSMs. The final touches were to add the name and works plates along with two oval Boston Lodge works plates on the smokebox sides, which came from the Peter Thatcher range many moons ago and to fit two lamps, one to the smokebox top and the other to the tender. The result is a very attractive, not to say convincing, addition to my collection and was a real pleasure to build.

Moel Tryfan

I was more than pleased at the reaction to the first of my Kitmaster 'Italian Tank' kit conversion, *Snowdon Ranger*, from my fellow members of the 55 Association. The Chief Engineer of the TVR was particularly effusive and it was at that point that I realised I must be doing something right! Chairman Dave Etheridge was as over the top as ever and even Malcolm Savage and Mike Chinery made the right noises.

It had always been my intention to build three 0-8-0T+T engines based on the Kitmaster kit and running on the Tillig/Berlinerbahn 'TT' gauge 0-8-0 chassis but the trio were going to differ in some subtle and not so subtle ways. Experience in traffic with *Snowdon Ranger* brought about some changes in design.

The second engine to be released to traffic from my Embsay Works was *Moel Tryfan* and really there is not much difference between it and *Snowdon Ranger*. The most obvious is that *Moel Tryfan* has been coupled to a GEM *Linda* tender, which suits the engine very well. Other changes are the boiler fittings, *Moel Tryfan* retains only the Kitmaster dome and has two MSM Fairlie domes fitted. The one between

the chimney, which is a GEM *Linda* casting, is in fact masking top feed apparatus in the same way as on the re-boilered LB&SCR 'C2X' 0-6-0s, while the one over the firebox hides a blanked off safety valve.

The engine is dual-braked and so carries an air pump on the driver's side of the smokebox and both the front and tender buffer beams have vacuum and air brake pipes attached. Most of the associated pipework is visible and I think this adds to the continental flavour of the engine. Unlike *Snowdon Ranger*, which is oil-fired, *Moel Tryfan* is coal fired. The other obvious difference is that *Moel Tryfan* has much larger cylinders which I feel makes it look more 'narrow gauge'.

Livery is loosely based on the dark blue livery carried by the Festiniog Railway's *Linda* before it was painted into Penrhyn Quarry Railway lined black, midnight blue. The lining, however, is different as I have chosen to use the white-black-white as adopted by the LNER on its apple green locomotives and British Railways in the early 1950s when it painted its Class 8P express locomotives dark blue. The lining once again came from the excellent Fox range of water slide products, the nameplates from the Guilplates range and the FR crests from Peter Blackham.

I ran *Moel Tryfan* on my mini-layout, Penty Bach, at the Telford show in July 2009 and was surprised by how many people wanted to know more about it. Performance-wise there is little to choose between the two 0-8-0T+Ts as both are packed with white metal and lead weights. However, when running on a continuous circuit *Moel Tryfan* is probably a coach less powerful than *Snowdon Ranger* and this is probably down to the heavy white metal GEM tender that it has to lug around.

Beddgelert

The third conversion was always going to be more radical and I started with the tender. I wanted to build a bogie tender with a cab styled along the lines of the one coupled to the FR's *Blanche*. I first wondered whether to use the tender from the Kitmaster 'General' 4-4-0 but this was a little too small and so I took the *Blanche* tender and extended the side sheets until they were long enough to accept a pair of MSM South African Railways cast bogies. A coal bunker was needed as the engine was going to be coal-fired and this was loosely cribbed from the Ivatt '2MT' 2-6-0s that worked on the ex-Cambrian Railway lines along Cardigan Bay in the 1950s and 1960s. Constructed out of various thicknesses of Plastikard the only non-plastic parts are the white metal bogies and the cab roof which is made from brass. Looking at the photograph below I think I might add some rain strips to the roof.

The engine is also different from *Snowdon Ranger* and *Moel Tryfan* in that it is fitted with extended side tanks. The cab is based on the GEM *Linda* castings but a Belpaire firebox has been fitted to the boiler and a GWR style brass safety valve bonnet sits on top of the firebox. The Kitmaster sandbox in front of the dome has been replaced with a MSM Fairlie dome but the most obvious modification is that the Chief Engineer has fitted the engine with a Giesel oblong injector. The word in the workshops is that it came

from Towyn Pendre after being taken off the Talyllyn Railway's 0-4-2T No.4 *Edward Thomas*. Fireman who have worked on all three engines claim that *Beddgelert* with steam on a candle.

Beddgelert is also dual-braked and features a fully detailed cab and boiler backplate. The cab was put together one afternoon when a blizzard was raging across the Yorkshire Dales. I know that most of the detailing will be hidden by a crew but rather like George Mallory when asked why he climbed Everest he said, "Because it is there." I feel the same with the cab, gauge glasses, blower valve, injectors and so on are modelled because they are there!

The outside cylinders are also different. They come from a GEM *Linda* kit and are just about the right size for an engine of this size. If you look closely at the illustrations *Beddgelert* has handrails that are welded to the engine and tender and there is not a brass handrail knob to be seen. It was then that I decided to 'age' the conversion. I had noticed that many older main line tank engines, the Eastern Region's Gresley 'J50' 0-6-0Ts were a good example, had welded sections added to their side tanks as a cheap option to replacing the whole of a corroded tank, so if you look carefully at *Beddgelert* you will notice sections have been welded to the side tanks, lower cab sheets and part of the tender.

When I started *Beddgelert* the intention was to turn it out in Midland Railway crimson lake lined out in orange and black following the precedent of the LMR which turned out a handful of its crimson Stanier 'Princess Coronation' class Pacifics in this style. But before the conversion was complete I was browsing through a narrow gauge magazine and came across a photograph of some 0-8-0T+Ts on the CF de Froissy-Cappy-Dompierre in the Somme department of France. When I logged on to the relevant website I was rather taken aback as they appeared to be running REAL Kitmaster conversions! "Blow me down", or words to that effect, thought I. Is nothing sacred in the world of narrow gauge railways? The two real Kitmaster conversions were in fact from Borsig and Franco-Belge and not from Raunds out of Kitmaster! Anyway they were both painted green, one a dull olive green and the other a much lighter shade.

So *Beddgelert* emerged in a light green akin to NER/LNER apple green and was lined out in white-black-white using Fox water slide transfers. When finished I thought it looked too immaculate and so decided to tone it down with a bit of weathering. Well judge for yourself whether it is too much or not. Rumour has it that *Beddgelert* was hired out to another 2ft gauge concern in Carmarthenshire's Towy valley and was given some hammer on its heavy mineral trains and 1 in 30 gradients. Although it performed well there was a strike among the shed cleaners and so she was not cleaned and returned home in less than pristine condition. Apparently the Chief Engineer was smoking 'Old Shag' in his briar and a young cleaner fell into a pit because of the thick blue, not to say pungent, smog coming from the bowl and so they all walked out until a smoking ban was implemented in the shed!

Now she is run in *Beddgelert* is the best of the trio. This I put down to the relatively light tender and she looks fine at the head of a rake of either Talyllyn or Festiniog coaches, albeit in need of a thorough

clean. I have some WHR modern bogie stock under construction but none are finished yet so I will have to wait a while to see how she handles these monsters.

I still have a couple more Kitmaster 'Italian Tanks' sitting on the shelf and I might be tempted to produce the Midland crimson lake version at sometime. If I do it will not be a clone of the existing trio, but then I do also have a Tillig 2-8-2T chassis and an old K's 00 gauge bodyline kits of the GWR '9700' condensing pannier tank which is earmarked for a 5½mm scale conversion. An interesting aside is that the cost of Kitmaster 'Italian Tanks' seems to have risen considerably since I started on these conversions, I wonder why?