

# N-Trak UK

**December 2015**



Well here we are again, another year and another newsletter! In this issue it's good to be able to report a plethora of new products and maybe some old ones revisited. We also have a great article on the Pennsylvania K4 loco, recently released in N by Bachmann. So with no further waffling by me...

## **The Pennsylvania K4 Pacific in**

**N.**

**By Hans Starmans**

"It's just a popular engine", or so I was told by someone. Although aired with some disdain, the popularity of the Pennsylvania K4 4-6-2 went beyond railfan admiration. Both Sir Nigel Gresley and Richard Wagner have scrutinized Pennsy's Pacific for their own designs, the A1 for the Great Northern / LNER and the Baureihe 01 for the Deutsche Reichsbahn respectively. Apparently, the Pennsylvania had struck a pleasing balance between power, speed and practicality that became a benchmark for good engineering. The designation K4 implies there must have been a K1, 2 and 3. The K1 was a "Lines East" Altoona design that never made it off the drawing board. The K2 was a "Lines West" design that did materialise, but never made headlines for itself. A century ago the vast Pennsylvania still was organised like an Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy into two semi-independent entities. The K3 was a K2 with larger diameter pistons. The Pennsy even went on to build two K5 locomotives - K4s with a

heavier boiler and more pulling power - which failed to fulfil the prophecy of New York Central Hudson adversaries.

Before Bachmann announced this year's new arrival, the story of the K4 Pacific in N was one of some despair. Despair about mainstream manufacturers producing a 3rd version Daylight, Challenger or Big Boy, but not a common prototype such as the K4, or its freight counterpart, the L1 Mikado. These two bread and butter Pennsylvania locomotives shared the same boiler and together numbered 999 units, about as many as all 4-8-4s built for US roads combined. Despair also about the dodgy performance of the Minitrix K4, which harks from the Jurassic Age of American N scale.



**Figure 1 : Minitrix K4 (Photo - Hans Starmans)**

Minitrix released the K4 in 1969. These were the days when existing components had to be re-used as often as possible to reduce costs, and of cold war, when it read 'made in Western Germany' on the bottom to maintain a clear distinction between German products from east of the Iron Curtain. Like the Hornby/Minitrix Britannia, the K4 borrowed its chassis from the German class 01 already in the Minitrix program, the trailing truck being the most important change to

avoid undue concessions. In turn, this N gauge chassis was basically a scaled down version of the Trix HO model introduced in 1957. The K4 superstructure was plastic in contrast to the German model being entirely metal. All in all not bad for its day, albeit that current collection relied too much on conductivity of Zamac parts, which deteriorated over time and made the loco temperamental to say the least. The concessions contained within the shell were to spawn freak results five years later when it was mated to the Kriegslok 2-10-0 chassis. Notwithstanding a driving wheelbase virtually to scale, the Minitrix model bore a likeness to some Frankenstein contraption rather than Pennsy's noble drag freighter. British modellers got a déjà vue reprise with their 9F. Oh well, at least they ran and pulled well enough, didn't they?

In 1994 Precision Scale Co. imported no less than four different brass versions of the K4, sporting three different tenders. Streamlined, with skyline casing, different pilots and smoke box arrangements, short tender, long tender, spoke drivers and even welded up drivers.



Figure 2 - 3 PSC Brass K4s (Photo - Hans Starmans)

For obvious reasons, the latter was least popular. Unfortunately, the brass K4 displayed just as much mechanical temperament as the Minitrix K4. Importers had yet to realise that N gauge modellers do not buy brass for display in showcases. We've got Horribly Oversized for that. In N the thing

has to work and pull! The problems were not insurmountable to solve, but clearly the price tag of several hundreds of dollars put up an insurmountable threshold for most to attempt anything. Dare devils, however, were rewarded with a sweet running engine once the problems were solved.

There it was, almost out of the blue: Bachmann's 2015 edition of the Pennsylvania K4 in N.



Figure 3 - 2 Bachmann K4s (Photo - Hans Sodenkamp)

Two versions are on offer: a pre-war with slat pilot and a post war with solid pilot and smoke box appliances rearranged, each in two different numbers. One pre-war version comes lined out, depicting an early sample as it was delivered with even the drive wheel spokes lined out. At one time the PRR did have a tradition of lettering and lining its passenger power in gold leaf (!) although, not surprisingly, this was later substituted for gold coloured paint. So this garish scheme is not a fantasy and makes for an eye catching model. The other models aren't plain black either: window sashes in red, dark grey smoke box, and crisp lettering in deep yellow all help to kill the monotony of blackness.

From my personal perspective, some details could have been better. The sand dome is a bit too high but the cottage industry

already comes to the rescue with a 3D print. The drivers are a bit more undersize than seems necessary. 80" translates into 12.7 mm in N. The Bachmann rides on 11.5 mm diameter drivers against 12.0 for the old Minitrix (11.4 for main drivers!) and 12.6 for the brass model. Under particular lighting conditions the boiler barrel displays a "fold" resulting from two conical shapes meeting under the steam dome where in reality there is a stretch of straight drum. Compared to the Minitrix K4, this is but a minor concession and quickly forgotten as soon as the loco is put into action on the layout.

Both samples running on the PH & LF modular layout in Derby turned in very pleasing performances, with surprisingly good tracking, gentle starts, good haulage and no hesitations. Our home layout branch line contains a short incline at 1 in 19 followed by a long easement to level. On this, my Bachmann K4 sample made it to the top with 6 heavyweight coaches! The highly dependable current collection is a blessing and important in conjunction with the DCC sound chip by Soundtraxx, which comes as standard equipment. Advertised by Bachmann as "Value Sound", the decoder only supports basic sound features such as bell, whistle, chuff and hiss, with the brake pump played as an automatic feature. Things like F11 brake function and a generator spooling up when the headlight is switched on, are forfeited. In itself, of course, it is quite an achievement to have sound in an intermediate if not smallish sized tender. With this in mind, the chuff is nothing short of spectacularly loud and quite

convincing. There's a choice of three whistles. The factory programmed freight banshee would be fine for a PRR 2-8-0, but is inappropriate for the K4. The two alternative chimes are quite weak and rather easily "out-barked" by the chuff. Here Soundtraxx could have done better.

There might be the odd thing to mutter about, but that would dismiss the Bachmann K4 unfairly for what it really is: a long overdue N scale Pennsylvania K4 that actually does really well on the layout.

### **New to You:**

#### **Model Power DCC and Sound equipped locos**

There seems to be a bit of a trend developing here as several manufacturers are now producing ready to run steam locos factory fitted with DCC and sound. I dare say most of you are familiar with the range of locos released a few years ago by Model Power that offered reasonably priced models of several types of loco, albeit in often spurious liveries. Well they're back, but now also available fitted with an MRC sound decoder. The models are good and workmanlike, run well and the sound, at least that fitted to my USRA Mikado, sounds realistic with a good volume level and all the 'bells and whistles' you might expect, yet still at a reasonable price

#### **N Scale Laser Buildings**

This was a new company to me but I met the owner at the recent NMRA convention in Derby. N Scale Laser is a trading banner for

Ansell Industries and owner Simon Ansell has introduced a range of laser cut building kits using MDF, Manilla board, paper and acetate. The kit I purchased was the Starlight Motel, an example of the 'second generation' motels that can still be found in operation in many American towns.

It's a large structure (14" x 3.1" x 2.1") and represents a two storey building with the upper floor rooms accessed from an external balcony. I'd say the period is late 1960s to early 1970s, or maybe a bit later though, as I said earlier, many are still fulfilling their original function. It immediately reminded me of the Days Inn we stayed at in Durango this year! The kit is well produced and an 8 page instruction booklet gives clear and concise building instructions with hints on painting etc. The kit even contains the parts to make an outdoor swimming pool!

Simon has a number of interesting kits in the range and the full list can be seen on the website [www.nscalelaser.com](http://www.nscalelaser.com)

### **Proses Tools**

I quite often mention tools in these pages and this issue is no different. I was browsing in a local model shop (yes there are still some out there) when the proprietor showed me a very useful new track laying tool from the Turkish firm of Proses. This tool is designed to help laying complex curves by holding the two sides of a curve in position relative to a centre point. It's actually more difficult to describe than use.



Figure 4 - Proses Track Laying Clamp

The main cruciform part is clear Perspex. Each of the yellow blocks is grooved to take N Track. All the blocks are free to pivot but can be locked with a wing nut clamp. The central block can slide along a slot till clamped and there are alternative positions for the end blocks. This neat tool should make laying those odd curves, where the Tracksetta can't go, something of a breeze. It cost me £17 for a pack of two clamps at Upstairs Downstairs in Sandown, IoW.

The Proses range is quite extensive and includes ballast spreaders, magnetic right angle clamps and many more useful widgets.

### **Osborn Kits**

I'd heard of this Canadian manufacturer from obscure comments in various magazines, but I was very surprised to find a trader at Derby who had a large selection of these laser cut kits on sale. The range seems to focus mainly on smaller structures, such as this small Branch line Station priced at £21.99.

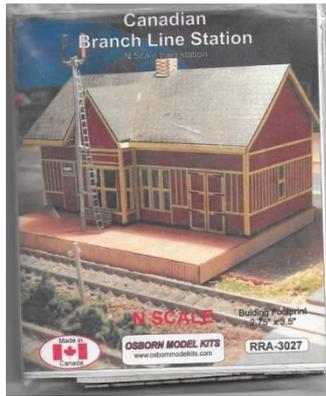


Figure 5 - Osborn Models Branch Line Station packaging (Photo - Osborn Models)

One of their larger kits is for a World War II hanger and was just too tempting to leave behind. It has the complete internal roof beam structure to create the characteristic roof shape of one of these iconic, and still used, buildings, which would probably today house one or two light aircraft on a grass airfield. This kit retails at £30.99

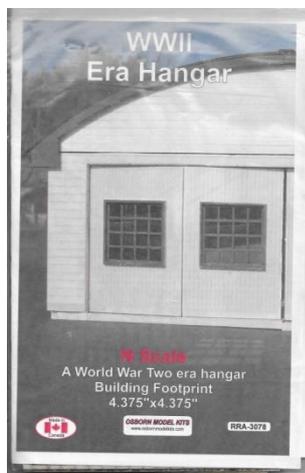


Figure 6 - The WWII Hanger (Photo - Osborn Models)

The range also includes laser cut kits for suitable aircraft (be prepared for quite a bit of sanding to create rounded shapes from layers of flat sheet) and airfield accessories such as the obligatory windsock at £2.50

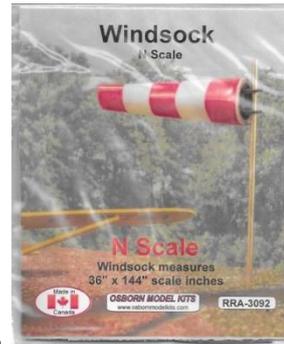


Figure 7 - The Windsock (Photo - Osborn Models)

Quite delightful little kits and well worth following up.

### N Scale Kits

A name many of us will be familiar with and another British manufacturer supporting American N Scale modelling. N Scale Kits has continued and developed the old Alan Curtis range of white metal kits for freight cars, mainly specialised flat cars. At Derby they released two new kits; a Pennsy 'Queen Mary' FD2 depressed centre car and the DoDx Nuclear Flask car.

The FD2 is a monster and runs on four, four axle, trucks.



Figure 8 - Pennsy FD2 (Photo from N Scale Kits instruction sheet)

Although etched brass truck frames are provided, if you want a free rolling model Peter recommends using 3D printed frames, available separately from Shapeways. Now where can I get sixteen axles with wheels? Apart from that, construction is relatively simple if you're familiar with working with white metal. Decals are provided for this vehicle in several of its manifestations.

The DoDx Flask car is of more complex construction and runs on four Microtrains roller bearing trucks. A resin casting is provided for the nuclear flask used to carry spent fuel rods from submarine reactors.

These, and others in the range, can be seen at [www.nscalekits.com](http://www.nscalekits.com)

### **Rapido Meat Reefers**

Seen briefly at Warley Model Railway show at the NEC were these lovely N Scale Meat Reefers by Rapido Trains. There's more detail on their website.



Figure 9 - Rapido Trains Meat Reefers

### **N Scale at Large**

#### **At the NMRA BR Convention**

N Scale had a huge presence at the NMRA BR Convention this year with large modular layouts from 'The Gosport Group' – Solent Summit, a large Pennsy themed layout from PH&LF in The Netherlands and from The Black Diamonds group. All are vast and spectacular and more importantly run well giving the spectator plenty to see. There was also a large 'conventional' N Scale layout from a club in Colchester



Figure 10 - Gosport Group members discuss 'issues' at Derby (Photo – Russ Cook)



Figure 11 - Just an idea of how big Solent Summit is (Photo - Russ Cook)



Figure 12 - Intermodal yard on the PH&LF layout (Photo - Russ Cook)

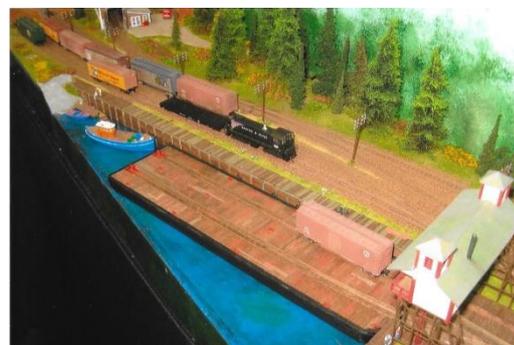


Figure 13 - Car Float operation on the PH&LF layout (Photo – Russ Cook)



Figure 14 - Rural backwater on the PH&LF layout

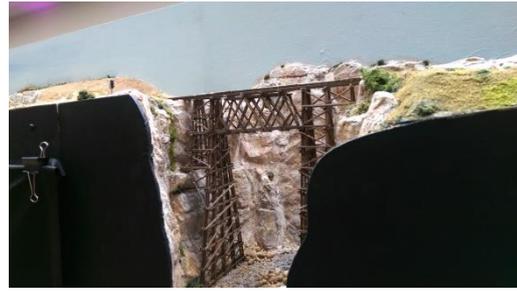


Figure 18 - Another smaller trestle on Solent Summit



Figure 15 - Down on the farm. Scene on the PH&LF layout



Figure 19 - Just a part of the Solent Summit layout occupying the centre of the exhibition space



Figure 16 - More of the PH&LF's beautifully scened modules



Figure 20 - Solent Summit in the foreground while PH&LF wraps around the space behind.



Figure 17 - Trestle on Solent Summit

## At Gosport



Figure 21 - Poole Group layout in action at one of the Gosport Group mini exhibitions (Photo - Russ Cook)



**Figure 22 - Alan Cross with the Barry Peacock's refurbished Mohawk Junction at Gosport (Photo - Russ Cook)**

## **Coming Events**

Don't forget there's still time to book for the N-Trak UK convention in March at The Trouville Hotel. We've reached our threshold target of 35 bookings so the event will definitely be going ahead. Contact Neil Lancaster for more details if you haven't booked already.

Before that, Alan Cross will be taking Mohawk to the Newbury show on February 13<sup>th</sup> and I'll be helping him out (getting in his way!). Come along and say hello or just stand and laugh if you prefer, but we'll be pleased to see you.

That just about winds things up for now but before I go can I take this opportunity to thank all the contributors who have helped create this newsletter over the past year and finally to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and to our friends in The Netherlands, vrolijk kerstfeest en een gelukkig nieuw jaar (Hope I got that right!).