

# Talking Points

Topical issues from the world of model railways

## Modelmaking courses – Are they useful?

By Steve Flint

Another day in paradise... That's the opening line on the Missenden Abbey Railway Modellers' Weekends website. It refers to a place where you can enjoy a *Summer Retreat*, or an *Autumn Weekend*. Paradise, Abbey, Retreat...? Sounds like somewhere to go for spiritual contemplation, or convalescence perhaps?

Actually, Missenden Abbey is a conference, event, and adult learning centre located in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire. It is available for hire to provide day and residential training courses in all sorts of subjects: and I do mean all sorts; from Creative Encaustic Wax Painting to The Ukulele for Beginners...

More to the point, for over 30 years it has been the venue for the aforementioned Missenden Abbey Railway Modellers' Weekends. These are short residential courses, up to five days long, at which enthusiasts can learn and polish their modelmaking skills – from chassis construction to electronics, scenics to kit-building, soldering to tracklaying, airbrush painting and weathering, and much more. The courses are led presently by Christopher Langdon; tutors are drawn



▲ The historical frontage of Missenden Abbey, dating from the early nineteenth century.



### Typical subjects for 2014 at Missenden Abbey

- Electronics for the bewildered
- Electronics for initiates
- Loco-building in 4mm and smaller
- Loco-building in 7mm and larger
- Painting & lining
- Scenics and dioramas
- Trackbuilding and test tracks
- Weathering workshop



▲ Julian Gascoyne practising the use of a bow pen. Ian Rathbone's painting and lining course fully met Julian's expectations.

from prominent railway modellers who are renowned for their work in specialist areas; Norman Solomon on trackwork, Tony Gee on locomotive kits, Tim Shackleton on airbrushing, Barry Norman on scenery, to name but a few.

When I visited earlier this year, as a sort of fly-on-the-wall observer, I was pleasantly surprised to see almost 50 individual 'pupils' making the most of what was on offer. All the classes are practical, hands-on sessions in which modellers bring along their own pet projects and work on them under the guidance of the session tutor.



▲ Father and son, Mark and Daniel Riddoch building loco kits for their GWR layout.



▲ Robert Smith says attending the Missenden courses helps him to dedicate his time and effort to modelmaking.



▲ Tony Gee's locomotive kit building session was one of the most popular tutorials in the spring weekend course.



▲ David Thursby gets to grips with long grass techniques in Barry Norman's scenics class.



*"It may be a former abbey, but student accommodation is to four-star standards."*

Chris Langdon

I asked Christopher what sort of demand there was for the courses and he explained that many of the attendees were regulars. "We get a modest number of first-timers each year, but a large contingent come back year after year with a different project on which they want to work."

His comments were verified by all of those I spoke with, including the youngest, 17 year old Daniel Riddoch who was attending with his father Mark, a 'returnee' to the hobby. "It's a great way to concentrate your time," Daniel said, "with the added bonus that expert tuition is on hand at a moment's notice." Daniel and his father are members of the High Wycombe club and are constructing a GWR station layout set in the late 1920s.

Stuart Holt, who was working on a Comet coach kit, said that the location was a brilliant place for a course. Retired since 2001, he is a frequent attendee and the courses helped him "...raise the bar..." on his modelling. He now builds to P4 standards.

Robert Smith, 51, from Fleet in Hampshire is a lifelong modeller. "I've had that creative urge ever since I built a model of the Eiffel Tower out of balsa wood." Railway modelling gave him something on which to focus. "I started in OO with plasticard bodies on R-TR chassis over 25 years ago." Robert is now developing a garden line in O gauge and recorded that the Missenden courses have met fully all his expectations.

In another room – and there's lots of them in the modern part of the centre which also includes four-star accommodation – I found returnee Julian Gascoyne busy trying out the use of a bow pen in the painting and lining tutorial led by professional Ian Rathbone. "I came back to the hobby after finding an old K's kit of a Dean Goods in a cupboard. I thought I'd better finish it," he said. "The hints and tips picked up on this course are invaluable."

Just about everything to do with the Railway Modelling hobby is covered in the Missenden Abbey prospectus. Being residential courses, means that the cost is commensurate with what you might expect: a typical two-night

weekend course with full board starts at around the £310 mark. A selection of available courses is listed in the adjacent panel, but full details and how to book can be found on the organisation's website [www.missendenrailwaymodellers.org.uk](http://www.missendenrailwaymodellers.org.uk)

So, are the modelmaking courses useful? It all depends on what you might be seeking, but all the students felt their skills and knowledge had improved remarkably. What was very apparent from my visit was that many attendees found the courses to be the best way in which they could focus their time and get on

with some modelling. To quote Christopher Langdon: "It provides a refreshing break from domestic interference, sponging kids, dogs that want walking, gardens that need tidying, and pushing a trolley around the supermarket." I'm not so sure whether his sentiments were rather too radical, but we all know what he means!

Anyone from an enthusiastic beginner to an experienced modeller will find topics about which they can learn, and also be able to set aside some time for their project without interruptions from the outside world.

And of my personal visit to Great Missenden; Paradise, Abbey, Retreat... Yes, it was certainly an enlightening experience!

## Other railway modelling courses

Several other organisations offer railway modelling courses across the UK including a regular series at Pecorama. In addition, many model railway clubs can be a great source of tuition from other members, and some model retailers offer workshops free of charge. Here is just a selection:

Pecorama  
[www.pecorama.info](http://www.pecorama.info)

Hobby Holidays  
[www.hobbyholidays.co.uk](http://www.hobbyholidays.co.uk)

Liphook and District Model Railway Club  
[www.millandvalleyrailway.co.uk](http://www.millandvalleyrailway.co.uk)

The Gas Cupboard Railway Thursdays  
[www.gascupboardmodels.co.uk](http://www.gascupboardmodels.co.uk)



▲ Peco Senior Designer Bob Phelps tutors a small group of modellers attending the Spring 2014 Railway Modelling course held at Pecorama.