Sundry Snippets 13 - Building Work

For this issue Jim has asked for something different. I am to keep in my period (1830-70) but to go into structures – buildings, sheds, and so on. The first problem is that he asked about the preparation of drawings. Now, as with locomotives, I don't prepare drawings but build the structures around a series of known dimensions – wheelbase, wheel sizes and the like – and only make a very rough working sketch. With buildings, even the "known" dimensions may have to be estimated! So, those of you with a tidy, well-ordered mind should move on to the next article, while I flounder on back here.

Some rules, though

From experience, I have established certain rules to which I stick. Don't, for example, invent a building: it never looks convincing, simply because each building was created for a specific use from available materials in a specific location. It is very hard to get that "feel" of character and atmosphere from pure invention.

What you can do, though, is to "adapt" a building from a photograph, and still retain its character. My French buildings on *Mélange* were from holiday photographs, and the English ones on the new town and station to replace the ageing *Bottom End* came from a series of photographs in albums of Victorian life in village, town and countryside, from the south coast to the Yorkshire dales.

The material I use is mainly Plastikard, with some balsa wood and the odd sheet of toilet tissue (if you glue the latter over a Plastikard roof it gives a good representation of roofing felt). The basic techniques of construction in Plastikard have been well covered in the model press, so I will concentrate on the planning, apart from mentioning a few ideas which I have discovered.

Size matters

Having selected the building, we must now assess the factors which determine the total height, width, and depth. The door is the first pointer, and it is very handy to have some people standing around in the photograph. A stooped elderly gentleman is rarely much taller than 5 ft., the average young woman is in the 5 ft. – 5 ft. 6 ins. range, but the odd collie dog or pram all help. Doors tend to be a fairly standard 2 ft 6 ins. – 2 ft. 9 ins. in width, but the height can be anything from 5 ft. to 7 ft., and that all in the same street.

Social height

The height had a lot to do with the class or wealth of the occupants. You will often get a clue to these from the caption under the picture.

Houses in the 1700 to late-1800 period tended to be built on to the one next door, with often no attempt to match it for style or uniformity, resulting in a row of two-storey

houses all of different heights. Put them so as they climb up a hill and the effect is wonderful.

The poorest house could have a 5 ft. 6 ins. door, a ceiling not much higher, with the upstairs bedroom the same. Total height from the ground floor to the upstairs ceiling would only be 12 ft. Next door, a family with a bit more to spend could have a 6 ft. door, a 7 ft. ceiling and a 6 ft. 6 ins. high bedroom, giving around 15 ft., and so on.

Calculating

To establish these levels, we must assess the door and draw an imaginary line from the top of the door horizontally across the building. We are looking for clues such as the ends of the floor beams, the frames on a timber structure, the ends of the roof beams. Then we can calculate the size of the windows by scaling them from the size of the doors, and we can work out how near they are to the roof or floor beams.
Windows which are level with the top of a door will mean a low ceiling; windows below the top of a 6 ft. door often indicate a 6 ft. 6 ins. to 7 ft. ceiling, and so on.

Atmosphere

As you get into the project, you will find you get in tune with the atmosphere of the buildings, with quite acceptable results. One result of doing a group of buildings properly is that I find the continental mums and children ask many more questions about the scenic aspects – construction and materials – than they do about the locomotives. Something to ponder, perhaps?

Now for a few notes on techniques……

Timber frame buildings

I have tried gluing thin dummy timbers over a brick sheet, but the real thing had bricks built into the frame, and – surprise, surprise – the model looks *much* better if we do just that.

Laminating

If you are building up a thick item, using layers which you are going to carve to shape, wait until tomorrow before you carve. It will not carve or file cleanly while *any* solvent remains.

Stucco

Quite by accident, which lies at the root of most discoveries of course, I have found a lovely way to produce stucco. Take two pieces of Plastikard sheet, roughly the same size, wash a good brush-full of solvent over one and press the other on top of it. Assuming you have kept the place well ventilated, you should be able to count to five and then pull the two apart. Wait till the "tacky" feeling of the card has gone and you will have a very nice rough effect, which you can then cut out and glue between your beams or on a plain wall.

Windows

On buildings for the upper class, windows tend to have larger panes of glass and are best represented by taking Micro-strip to clear glazing material using the minimum of solvent. Houses for the poorer folk tend to have much smaller panes and can be represented by drawing the framing on to the clear glazing with a bow pen, and then cutting out and gluing afterwards.

General

Make a strong "box" of a building and add thin brick/stone or stucco to this. If you try to get by using thinner, cheaper material as the base, then it will almost always begin to bow.