

Upgrading RTR Models

Tim Shackleton reflects on the growing integration of ready-to-run 4mm scale models into the finescale ethos . . .

If you're over 40, the chances are that you'll view RTR products as very much second best, at least when compared to kit- or scratchbuilt models. If you're not, you'll accept RTR as an integral part of the finescale modelling scene – a source of high-quality, highly acceptable models that, were they not available over the internet (and even, in a few rare cases, over proper wooden counters) would have to be assembled by hand using processes that eat up precious modelling time and even more precious modelling skills.

So who's right? We old 'uns are governed, perhaps unjustly, by old prejudices. Fifteen or even ten years ago, RTR was pretty awful by comparison with what a competent finescale modeller could make with his own hands. Remember the Lima Mk 1s with wrong-sized windows, or the Deltic that freely mixed HO and OO dimensions, or Hornby's dismal attempt at a 'King Arthur', or Airfix 4Fs that ran – if they ran at all – as though powered by a rubber-band mechanism? Well, it simply isn't like that any more, and it's high time we shook up our ideas and got real. Hornby's new A4, the Bachmann Mk 1 coaches, the Heljan 'Hymek' and 'Western' – these, by any standards, are great models. If we do the kind of modelling that involves these prototypes, we should seize the opportunities RTR offers with both hands.

Unfortunately many of us still seem to think that finescale modelling (especially in EM or P4) based on RTR models is somehow cheating. Why? Recently I spent 18 hugely enjoyable hours building a large modern bogie wagon from an excellent etched kit. If I wanted to build the full rake of ten wagons, it would have taken – allowing for some measure of speed-up with batch production – about 150 hours; a couple of months' worth of modelling, including an awful lot of repetitive work. Who on earth would want to do this if there were a good enough alternative available off the shelf? Increasingly, RTR provides us with an option that was simply not available to us back in those fondly remembered days when we didn't have grey hair and our pension entitlement was something to worry about at a later date.

RTR is a broad church. It includes RTR buildings, RTR trees, RTR figures, RTR track, RTR electronics, none of which we have a problem with. But RTR locomotives and rolling stock seem somehow not quite the ticket. This is palpable nonsense. At their finest, the UK's RTR manufacturers – Hornby, Bachmann, Lima, Replica, and Dapol – have produced models that only the very best of us could hope to emulate. Even when they're not as outstandingly good as, say, the Hornby Black Five or Lima's class 73 electro-diesel, their flaws and failings can be generally put right without a great deal of effort. Either way, they present us with a sound basis from which to construct a model we can be really pleased with. So unless we have a particular wish to kit- or scratchbuild models of prototypes we are strongly attracted to, I can see no reason why we shouldn't take full advantage of what the trade has to offer us, especially as none of this stuff is particularly expensive.

There are two main drawbacks. One is that the range of quality models available RTR is still pretty limited. There is, for instance, a huge choice of coal wagons for every era of the 20th century, but only a tiny handful of oil tanks. There are very few good

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GWR coaches, and only one truly excellent BR Standard steam locomotive. Engineer's stock is virtually non-existent, as are third-rail electrics and multiple units, not to mention anything pre-Grouping – or even many of the green-era diesels. The other limitation is that virtually all these over-the-counter OO gauge models will need some work, at least, to convert them to EM or P4 (or even the finer OO standards to which many people work) and to bring them up to acceptable finescale standards. It is rarely sufficient simply to change the wheelsets.

On the other hand, the availability of promising RTR models, even if they're only 70% as good as we'd like them to be, at least enables us to get something up and running pretty quickly while we get on with more pressing tasks like tracklaying and wiring. At some stage in the future, when time allows, we can go back and finish off the remaining 30% of the job. For the moment we can enjoy running trains in a way that would be wholly impossible if we were building wagons that took 18 hours each to put together, and locomotives that took ten times as long. When the layout is functional and we've built up a core of hand-built locomotives and rolling stock we can go back to our RTR models and retro-fit springing and fine detail, we can build new chassis, we can convert our them into something else entirely – or we can simply leave them as they are, complete with one-size-fits-all chassis, bottle-glass glazing, factory numbering and the rest. It is entirely up to us, as individuals, to do what we like with the things we own, and none of the edicts of the Thought Police should persuade us otherwise. We are, after all, looking for happiness and fulfilment from our hobby. We shouldn't feel the need to conform to other people's standards if we don't want to.

I primarily look on RTR as a resource, and I feel much the same way about kits. The models are there, I can buy them, and I can do things with them. Some are really good, others are not so good. As a case in point I have very few steam-era RTR wagons, because I feel the majority of them (dating back to Mainline and even Airfix days) are nothing like as good as the kits we get from ABS and Parkside Dundas. But RTR still presents us with many opportunities for fulfilling and enjoyable modelling. We can drop a new set of wheels into a diesel locomotive or a plastic coach and it will run – maybe a bit stiffly, perhaps, by comparison with a hand-made fully sprung chassis, but it will go. If the loco is an older model with a poor-running 'pancake' motor, such as the Hornby class 25 or Lima's Metropolitan-Cammell DMU, we can take full advantage of its fine bodywork detail by replacing the mechanism with something more acceptably finescale – for my money, High Level's LoRider and LongRider motor bogies, specifically designed for RTR upgrades, are as good as it gets in the traction stakes.

Steam locomotives, however, are more of a challenge. As with diesel models, Alan Gibson and Ultrascale produce a wide range of replacement wheelsets for EM and P4 and while this gets a major obstacle out of the way, this time it's only part of the story. I have made a number of RTR conversions of new-generation models and it is not my idea of modelling heaven. Sure, I get a good-looking locomotive out of it but I find some of them can be very difficult to dismantle, to say nothing of putting them back together again – Bachmann's BR Standard class 5 4-6-0 and class 4 2-6-4T are a nightmare in this respect. Chopping bits of plastic about and sawing through lumps of mazak isn't much fun either, but we have to do it to get wheels to fit, pick-ups to work, brake gear to match. We will probably have to do a lot of fiddling about with

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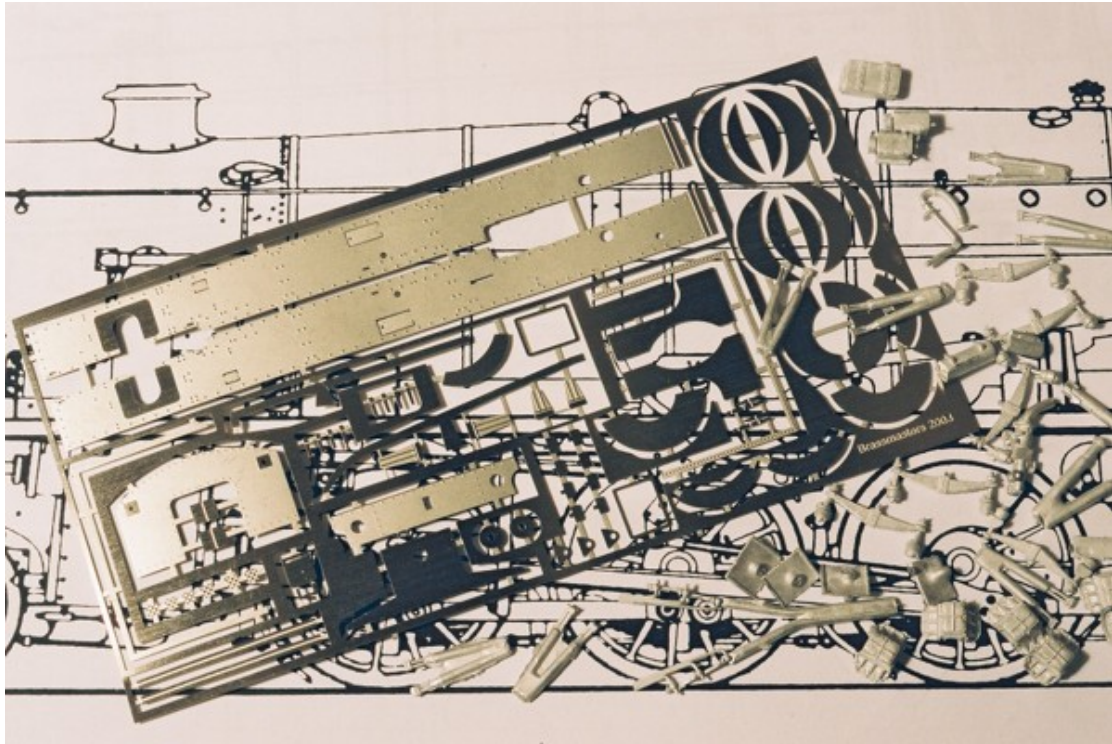
bushes for the coupling and connecting rods – modifying RTR return cranks to accept finescale-friendly wheel furniture can be a real elbow – and still end up with skinny-looking, unprototypical valve gear that isn't a patch on the kind of thing we find in a Dave Bradwell or Martin Finney kit and should, by rights, be one of those jobs to which we return later. Experience suggests we probably won't.....

Once re-assembled (eventually) our upgraded steam locomotives may well run quite smoothly and slowly but I still don't like the way they lumber along, because of their rigid chassis (even those with a sprung centre axle don't, in my view, seem to run any better). Rather than trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear it is generally preferable, I feel, to throw away everything below the footplate and build a new chassis – witness the recent High Level kit for the Bachmann 'Jinty'. A full mechanical and cosmetic upgrade of this nice-looking model will cost you around £100 – of which the basic RTR loco accounts for £40 or so – but this compares favourably with the kit-built alternatives. Over the past few years I've described quite a few of these finescale upgrades in MRJ but I have to say I feel a lot happier with (or at least get a lot more pleasure from) the kind of RTR conversions I wrote about in my Wild Swan book, *Plastic-bodied Locos*. A heavily reworked RTR plastic bodyshell, bereft of detail and bought cheaply as a spare, is mated with a bespoke chassis – possibly built from a kit, possibly not – to create an original model that is as close to my own particular specification and manufacture as I can manage, short of scratchbuilding. Some may loathe this approach of welding together of bits from many different sources, but I find this kind of extreme kitbashing to be remarkably satisfying. That's just personal preference, of course . . . and in any case engines like my Hawksworth 'County' and Bulleid Pacific are not, in the strictest sense, RTR conversions; rather their starting point was an RTR body and without it, the locomotives may very well never have been built.

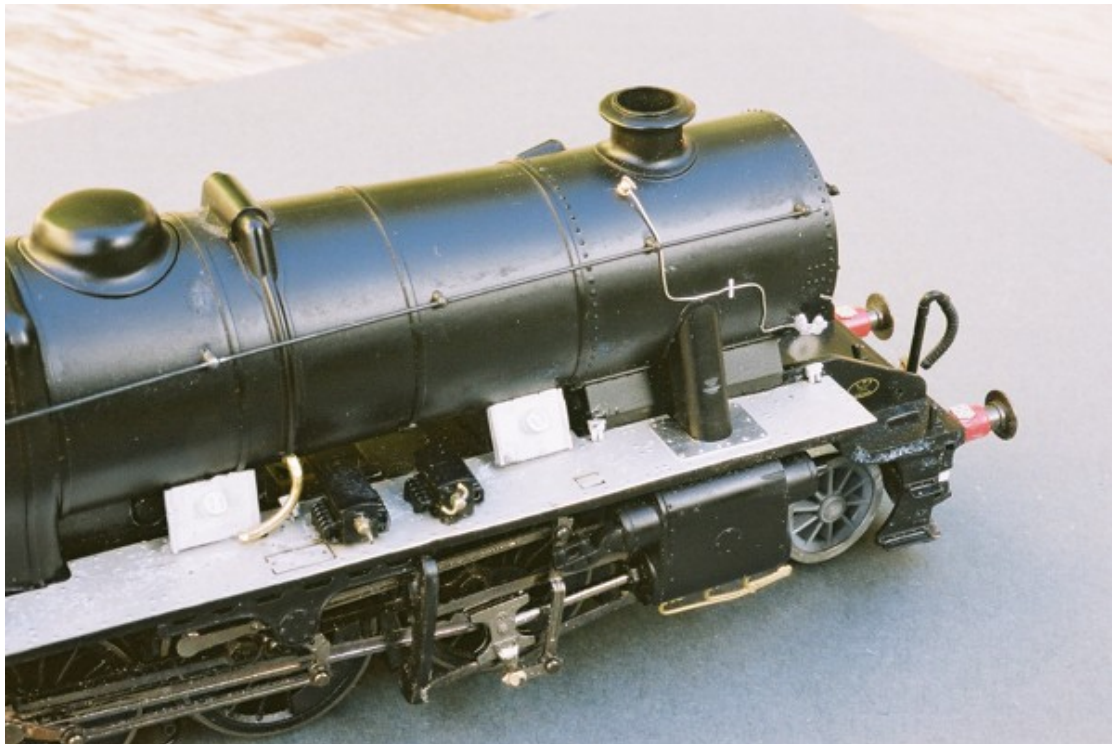
As yet the finescale after-market has not fully cottoned on to the possibilities of RTR – at least not in any coherent way, still less with much that specifically relates to EM or P4. We have the wheels and power packs already mentioned, a growing range of Brassmasters upgrade packs for ex-LMS steam locomotives, some interesting chassis kits (designed by Iain Rice) from Mainly Trains, various springing systems to make RTR bogies happier on scale track, and that's about it. Nevertheless, I think RTR still represents an important asset for the finescale modeller, one whose value will increase as proprietary models become more accepted into the mainstream. Anno domini will, as ever, be the determining factor because, like it or not, most of us are entering our twilight modelling years cash rich, time poor and full of unrealised dreams. Buying off-the-shelf models can help, if we're selective, by freeing up prime modelling time and allowing us to focus our skills on more challenging projects. That's why I feel we should celebrate RTR as a resource, not look on it as a soft option.

This article originally appeared in Scalefour News, the journal of the Scalefour Society. The attached photographs are a new addition for the Missenden Abbey Railway Modellers Manual.

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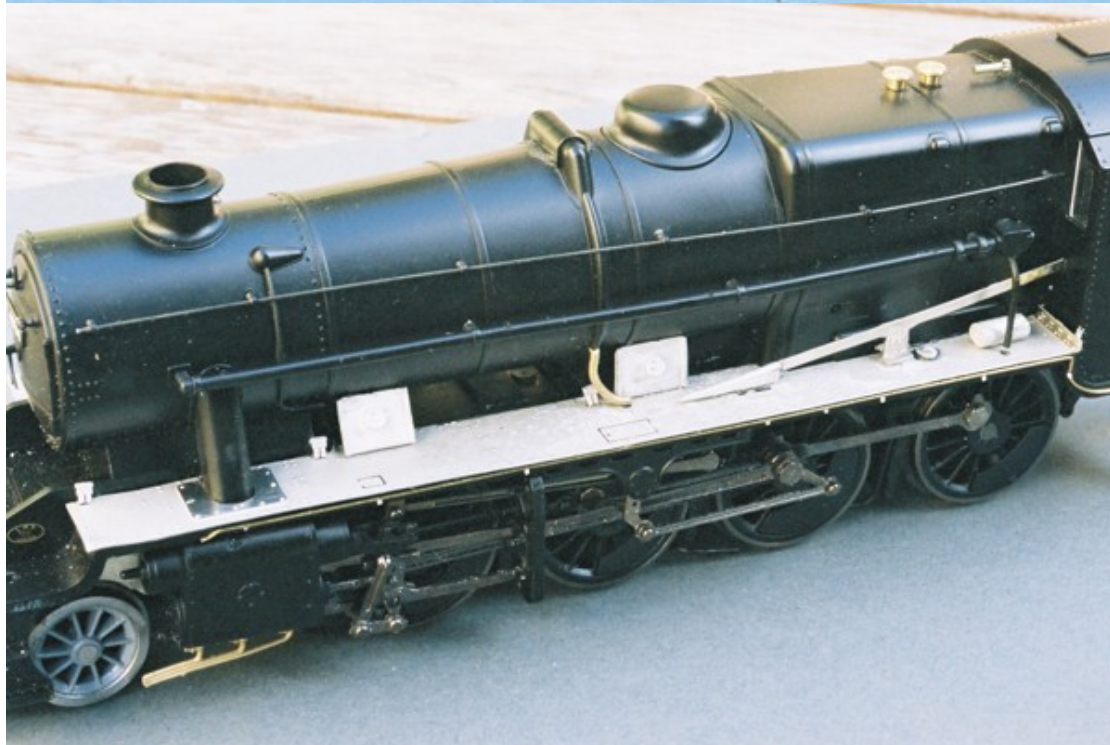


A typical latter-day RTR detailing kit from Brassmasters, with high-quality etched components – a far cry from the lumpy castings of ten or fifteen years.



Adding the detailing parts makes a considerable difference to the appearance of this Hornby 8F. They enable basic errors and compromises to be rectified – such as the missing rivets on the running plates, here replaced by etched overlays – as well as allowing the modeller to replicate specific variants within the class.

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With careful patch-painting and weathering, a total repaint of the model may not be necessary. The excellent quality of the detailing parts enhances the model's good points and enables its weaknesses to be rectified. The result is an outstanding model locomotive that few kit-builders could hope to emulate.



Older RTR models can also benefit from the upgrading treatment. The running of this Dapol 'Pug' has improved out of all recognition by rebuilding it with a new chassis from High Level Kits. The cab area has been opened up and fully detailed but otherwise the body is untouched.