



Shoeburyness Model Railway Club Periodical

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*****EXTRA EXTRA!!*****

Train-mad grandfather, 72, spends £250,000 building an incredible 3,000 square foot model railway in his garden shed because his girlfriend won't have it in the house...

Roy James, 72, from the Isle of Sheppey, Kent, started building the railway scene in his garden shed in the 1990s because his partner Hettie refused to have it inside. Now, twenty years on, his collection - which features more than 100 trains and its own working fairground - is so big that it has spilled onto his back garden.

He said: 'My grandchildren loved the trains, especially when they were very young. My partner Hettie doesn't have anything to do with it. She's quite happy for me to potter about with the trains, as long as they stay in the shed. 'She won't have me bringing it in the house.'

Mr. James, a former pub landlord, said it started off small but that 'one thing lead to another'.

'Before I knew it, I needed to take it out into the garden,' he said.

'Then there still wasn't enough room, so I looked to extending the shed. I've done that quite a few times now.'

As well as the trains, the creation - which Mr. James has named Dream City Railway - comprises 400 coaches and wagons, 16 stations, and its own town. All this makes possibly the largest O-gauge model in the country.



But it also means it can be difficult to keep the trains running.

Mr. James said: 'There can be up to 30 trains running at the same time and when that it happens it's a real challenge. Sometimes it's more complicated than running a pub!' Building up the collection has not been an easy job either. Mr. James has cast his net

far and wide to find the best trains to suit his railway.

Celebrity hobbies that make even Rod Stewart's railway models look cool.

You can see them in the newsagent's - shifty, furtive, eyes glancing to the left and to the right, in case anyone they know might see them.

These men - they are nearly always men - then slither over to the specialist magazine stands.

With a quick movement, the required publication is grabbed and the till approached.

Sometimes, the shame is too great; a disguise is needed. So another magazine is taken, something wholesome and respectable - anything will do - into the pages of which the offending publication can be slid.

Then, at the till, the final hurdle, the hope that the cashier will not, as in that Woody Allen film, bark out the name of the publication across the shop floor.

"Railway Modeller? Does anyone have a price for Railway Modeller?"

For then, the shame would be complete, the humiliation absolute.

I know of what I speak because I - and I confess this publicly for the first time (friends and family are already in on the secret) - am not unacquainted with the so-called hobby of model railways.

"Hobby", "Railways" and "models" - are there any three more shameful words in the English language?

For years I have kept it quiet, but now, with a bit of celebrity endorsement, it is time to come out of the attic and declare my interest in the pastime that dare not speak its name.

It is a relief to find out that I am not alone.

For it was Rod Stewart, no less, he of the skin-tight leopard skin trousers and a string of slinky blondes to his credit, who emerged as the unlikely champion of this most unlikely hobby.

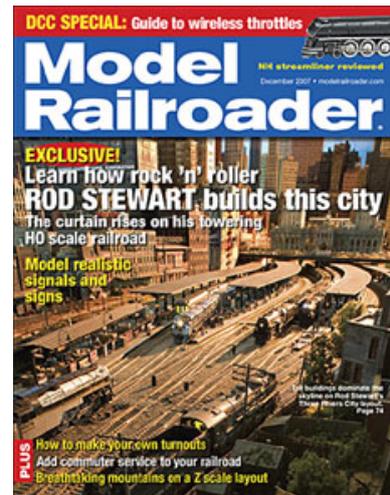
In between the crooning, the blondes and heaven knows what else, it seems that Rod has been creating a wholly magnificent replica of New York's Grand Central Station, complete with 100ft of track, buildings and figures in 1940s period dress in one of his no-doubt numerous attics.

Rod's impressive layout graces the cover of this month's Model Railroader, an honour he says means more than "the cover of Rolling Stone".

And he's not alone.

Jools Holland, one of the coolest men on the planet, pianist, mover in toff circles and doyen of live music, is also a model railway man.

As is impresario Pete Waterman, and was (rather less fashionably) Hughie Green of Opportunity Knocks fame.



So what is the appeal of this most arcane of pursuits?

And can it really be the case that toy trains are about to become cool?

According to Tim Rayner, editor of Railway Modeller magazine, "the hobby", as railway modellers like to refer to their pastime, never really went away.

"It's always been there," he says, with men throughout the land making their excuses after dinner and retreating to their lofts to be at one with their soldering irons and track plans.

But in recent years a quiet revolution has been under way.

In 2002, Hornby, one of Britain's oldest model railway firms, was declared Company of the Year by the Financial Times and Stock Exchange - making millions of pounds per annum from its models now made in a state of the art factory in southern China.

Some of this is undoubtedly down to the traditional children's market.

Hornby has cleaned up with its Harry Potter and Thomas the Tank Engine ranges. Children seem to be turning away from "virtual" toys, played with on a computer screen, and back towards something more substantial.

But the bulk of Hornby's profits come from a series of beautifully made, delicate models that can cost hundreds of pounds a pop and which are certainly not aimed at children.

So who is buying them? People like me, it seems.

Men - not exclusively, but mostly - in their 30s and 40s who had a train set in their youth and are looking to recreate that lost hobby, this time with the cash to do it properly.

A friend of mine, who is also afflicted, put it neatly: "You grow out of model trains. You get into girls and music, jobs and so on, but you always come back to trains in the end."

The demographics have changed, too.

In the old days, making model railway layouts was associated with the skilled working classes, the preserve perhaps of retired fitters and boilermen and people who worked on the real railways, the sort of folk who used to be the bedrock of Britain but who now belong to a vanished age.

Now, miniature trains have become a classless hobby.

According to Tim Rayner, exhibitors book fancy stands at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham, whereas in decades past this pastime was showcased in church halls and schools.

So, what is the appeal?

It is hard to say.

For me, it is the sheer number of skills you need to master to create a working layout.

You have to be a semi-competent carpenter, electrician, metalworker, painter, sculptor and designer to make anything which functions mechanically and looks good.

There is something about trains that is endlessly fascinating.

To me, the idea of standing on a cold station platform and counting train numbers as they zoom past is beyond madness.

But then again, some would say the same about my habit of disappearing into the loft to build tunnels and stations and watch miniaturised Staniers and Gresleys, Bulleid Pacifics and even modern diesels whirling past at top speed.

The idea that one can create a world, however imperfect, in miniature is hugely appealing.

And the point of model railways is, of course, that one is never finished.

I started my layout seven years ago and it is nowhere near complete.

Indeed, I dread the day when it is, because then, I suspect, I shall start to lose interest.

My next project is to build a small mountain range at one end. That should take me safely up to 2010.

Confessing to having a model railway habit is hard.

It usually happens at a dinner party, after a few drinks.



It'll probably be my wife who spills the beans.

There will be tittering, some embarrassment, people looking at their watches and wondering if it's time to leave and considering whether they still want to be my friend.

But then, almost inevitably, something strange will happen.

"Er," someone will say. "Can I have a look?" And up to the loft we all troop, being careful not to trip over the unfinished wiring or fall down the ladder-hole.

"Does it work?" someone will ask.

Yes, of course it does. I fire up the transformers and set a train in motion. Yes, it goes, and then you can see the light in their eyes, those oh-so-cynical friends.

"Hmm," you can almost hear them thinking, "I'd like one of those. Wonder if we've got room . . ."

Model railways may be more popular than ever, but they still retain the image of perhaps ultimate nerdery in this country.

Not so abroad. In the U.S., 'model railroading' is hugely popular, with millions of adherents of all ages

and (most importantly) both sexes.

Most U.S. cities contain several model shops, well-stocked cornucopia compared with our dusty stores, and there is no shame attached to having some trains in the attic.

Certainly the most impressive model railway layout I have seen is the gigantic construction in the Industrial Museum of Chicago.

The size of maybe a couple of tennis courts, this magnificent creation is America in miniature, complete with a 3D facsimile of the Rocky Mountains, the Great Lakes and Chicago itself, skyscrapers and all.

And this was built not by a few beardy, middle-aged geeks, but by dozens of volunteers, including many teenage boys and girls who belong to local model railway clubs.

There should be no embarrassment associated with model trains.

If Rod Stewart and Jools Holland can do it, then it is cool enough for anyone to admit to.

Modellers of the world unite: you have nothing to lose but your shame.

****Rod's up in the loft playing trains and she downstairs in the kitchen – I love my hobby but he must be nuts!****