

## Holy Grail Models

# Rovex 'Roller' Princess

In December 2013, at the annual 'Trains Galore' auction run by Special Auction Services (SAS), not just one, but two of the legendary Rovex 'roller' Princesses came up for sale. As most ardent Tri-ang Railways collectors will know, Rovex Plastics Ltd produced the Princess to fulfil an order for a train set for Marks & Spencers to sell at their Kingston-upon-Thames store in time for Christmas 1950.

It is thought that only a few dozen sets were made with roller pick-ups as it was soon discovered that the rollers had difficulty collecting the 12v current from the track, as they rolled dirt onto the track forming an insulation layer. So, a re-design was needed, which resulted in the change to 'plunger' pick-ups and thousands of the redesigned locomotives were made from 1951 with plungers fitted. However, Rovex were by then in financial difficulties and the company was bought by the Lines Bros. Group in October 1951. The locomotive became the Tri-ang Railways R50 'Princess' with further modifications.

An original 'roller' Princess is therefore incredibly rare and the 'holy grail' of many collectors. Indeed, apart from the incomplete one illustrated in Volume 1 of *The Story of Rovex* by Pat Hammond, which came from the Tri-ang factory archive, it was thought that few if any others had survived, not least as any that had been bought from Marks & Spencer were probably returned and exchanged for 'plunger' locomotives which ran better.

However, the two at the SAS auction come with impeccable provenance – they had been found in a trunk by the descendants of Alexander Vanetian, the founder and owner of Rovex Plastics Ltd. It also contained a virtually mint boxed Rovex 'Starburst' train set, a second-issue Rovex train set, a number of 'plunger' Princesses and various paperwork and accounts relating to the company.

The two 'roller' Princesses were actually part of two 'sets', comprising the *Princess Elizabeth* locomotive and tender, two short LMS coaches (which became the Tri-ang R20) and four pieces of original Rovex 'single-ended' track with brass rails (rather than the later and more common tinned steel rails). These 'sets' eventually sold for £1600 each

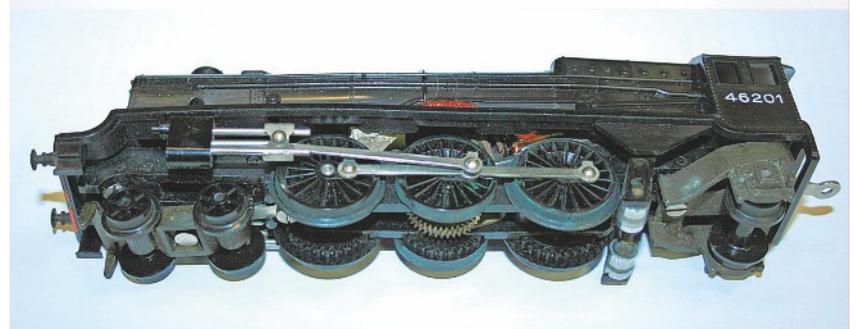
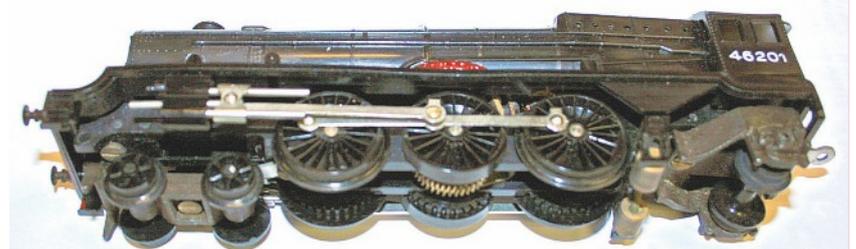
after a lot of bidding and, together with the buyer's premium, the total came to around £2000 each. It is interesting that this was exactly the value estimated in *Ramsay's British Model Trains Catalogue (7<sup>th</sup> edition)*! Was this a coincidence?

The writer has subsequently been able to inspect and photograph both 'roller' Princesses, with and without their plastic bodies on, which is when the differences between them and the more common 'plunger' version became apparent. The tender and coaches were identical to those found in the Rovex 'Starburst' and other early Rovex sets, with the 'hook and loop' couplings. The following were my observations:

1. The two Princesses have different rollers – one has its rollers made of brass and the other has bright metal rollers, possibly made of chromium or nickel. Both sets of rollers show signs of being run, with dirt on the rollers as well as the wheels. The brass rollers are also worn. For ease of reference, they are described in this article as 'brass' and 'chromium'.

Pictures supplied by the Author

Below: Rovex 'Roller' Princess (brass).



Above: Rovex 'Roller' Princess (chromium).

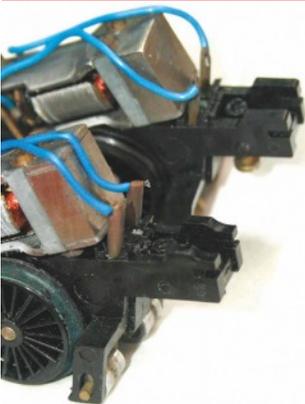
2. The chassis is plastic, seemingly made of two halves stuck together, and

includes plastic lugs that fit into the firebox aperture' in the body to hold the two together. The lugs also differ and those on the locomotive with the 'chromium' rollers seem to have been modified to fit better into the firebox aperture.



Above: Rovex 'Roller' Princess chassis (brass & chrome).

Far right: Rovex 'Roller' Princess (cab interiors) showing diff firebox doors.



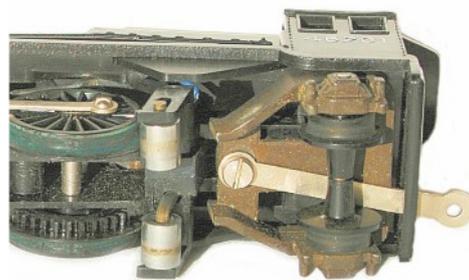
Above: Rovex 'Roller' Princess (chrome & brass) showing different lugs to fit into firebox hole in body.

Above right: Rovex 'Roller' Princess rollers (chrome).

Right: Rovex 'Roller' Princess rollers (brass).

3. The driving wheels are plastic, with metal axles, but the plastic wheels differ from those found on 'plunger' Princesses as on one side they have a moulded cogs, on the inside of the wheels, not the spokes side. These cogs are not used but they may possibly have been an earlier design idea for a 'gear train' drive.

4. The motor and integral gearbox are metal, and connect to the centre pair of driving wheels, as found on all subsequent Rovex and Tri-ang R50 Princesses. However, the motor in a 'roller' Princess is also different from that in a 'plunger' Princess. It is the Zenith X3 that later became the Tri-ang 'Super Twelve'.



5. The 'rollers' are attached to an L-shaped sprung brass rod which fits inside a tube, the upper end of which

is then wired to the motor. The plastic holder for the rollers is moulded as part of the chassis, whereas on all the 'plunger' Princesses that the writer has seen, the chassis is metal and the plungers operate in a metal tube assembly that is bolted into the chassis.

6. The body moulding appears to be identical to that found with 'plunger' and later Princesses, up until the four moulded safety valves on the top of the firebox were replaced with brass inserts. The funnel has a hole that will take the long securing screw found in later models but, on the 'roller' Princesses, the cylinder block is not drilled to take the screw and, hence, the front end of the chassis is screwed into the body from underneath, behind the buffer-beam.

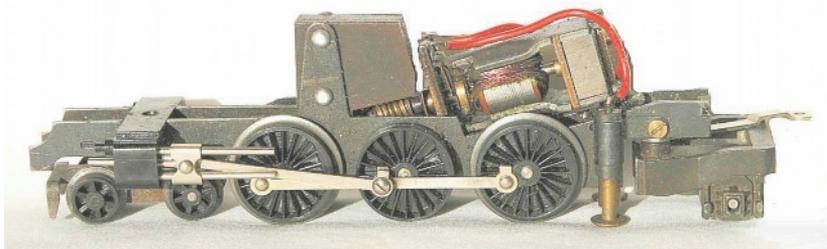
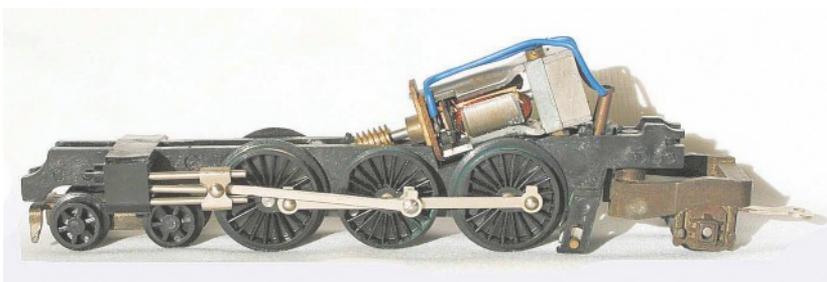
7. The rear bogie and connecting bar to the tender are screwed into the rear of the chassis (as on 'plunger' models). The rear and front bogies appear to be identical on the 'roller' and 'plunger' models. The screws seem to be tapered woodscrews (presumably to ensure some grip) rather than parallel thread ('BA') screws. Interestingly those on the 'brass roller' are brass screws, and those on the 'chromium' roller are bright metal!



8. The 'chromium' roller locomotive also had a weight (which appears to be a lead block that has been shaped to fit) glued underneath the centre of the body above the gear wheel of the motor. This seems to have been to try and give more 'grip' to what is otherwise a very lightweight locomotive due to the construction being almost entirely plastic.

The theory of the two lucky owners is that these locomotives are probably the original test models kept by Mr. Vanetzian. Also that the 'brass' roller version is the earlier of the pair, with the 'chromium' version, including modifications of the harder roller and a better fitting 'lug' for the firebox aperture in the body, that then went into production. The track with brass rails also seems to have been replaced fairly

quickly with bright steel track, and so it seems likely that the brass rollers on brass track just did not work well in terms of either picking-up the electric current, or in resisting wear-and-tear, given that brass is a relatively soft metal; hence the change to harder metals was made. Alternatively, as the UK Government imposed restrictions on the use of brass and zinc early in 1951, because of the Korean War, it might be simply that different metals had to be used in order to keep production going and fulfil contracts. However, as is mentioned in *The Story of Rovex Volume 1*, picking-up the 12v current was clearly still a major problem, which was only solved by changing to a metal chassis with spring loaded 'plungers', whilst retaining the plastic driving wheels. But even these soon gave way to metal wheels in Tri-ang days.



The owners have tried applying 12v current to the motors, which still show signs of life, but have for the time being decided not to chance trying to see if the locomotives would still run on the track. This is because the plastic frames have warped slightly and there is clearly a risk that they might disintegrate into a very expensive pile of 64-year-old broken plastic! So, while we may not be able to see a 'roller' Princess in motion, at least we now know that two have survived intact to give us some tantalising clues as to what went on in the very earliest days of their production. 🕒

**Top: Rovex 'Roller' Princess (chrome) side-view.**

**Above: Rovex 'Plunger' Princess side-view.**

**Far left: Rovex 'Roller' Princess (bodies interior).**

