

MY AMBITION TO OWN A ROLLER

By Nicholas Oddy

Pictures by the author



Since I was a teenager, there was one locomotive that sat high on my 'must but never will have' list. It was the first Rovex 'Princess Elizabeth' **Fig 1a and b**. I have always had a soft-spot for cellulose acetate, its extraordinarily lucent colours, its waxy finish and ability to move by itself. As a tiny child I used to compare my dull coloured Lego bricks to those that had come down to me from my elder sisters. Though mine held together far better, there was something about the bright vermillion and creamy white of my sisters' bricks, the way they built into a not-quite-flat wall, that was altogether more visually exciting than the sterility of their polystyrene successors. My nascent interest was prescient in terms of collecting, I understand that cellulose acetate Lego sets are highly valued today.

Although people associate me with tinsplate, during my childhood, from seven to twelve, I was strictly loyal to the products of Tri-ang-Hornby and the legacy of that has remained with me to this day. When I was a teenager, and thoroughly consumed by Hornby 0 gauge, I found that Tri-ang had made stuff using cellulose acetate. It was too much a combination of nostalgia and fascination for me to resist. So, every now and then, when no-one was looking, I'd squirrel away a slightly warped Jinty, or unlikely looking rake of brightly coloured wagons, each with slightly different curvatures to their sides. I'd heard that the very first loco Rovex had made was different from the others in not only having a lot more plastic about it, but also easily spotted by its roller pick-ups. In my dreams I thought it would be nice to stumble across one of these, very nice, as it had to be the most significant toy train of the twentieth century, the one that introduced the industry to the potential of injection moulded plastic and swept all before it. Of course, it would be possible to argue that the Palitoy S gauge train, also introduced in 1950, pipped Rovex to the post, but the Palitoy set was a toy, no more than a shroud on a four wheel mech and in S gauge. It was and remains unexciting and obscure. On the other hand, the Rovex train set was, to all intents and purposes, a modern commercial model in 00/H0 gauge, to reasonable scale proportions, of a Princess Pacific with tender and coaches and it, rather than Palitoy's product, would 'set the fashion to the world'.

In my travels I was pleased to stumble across a pretty good 1951 plunger set (see 'On The Cover'), but the roller pick-up, first version remained elusive.

When Pat Hammond published his monumental survey of Rovex/Tri-ang/Hornby, the rarity of the roller loco was made clear. Pat had also valued this loco at £2000 in the *Ramsay's Price Guide*. Pat is the acknowledged authority and I knew that this would carry weight. £2000 was staggering in relation to all the other Rovex/Tri-ang products listed (about twenty times those of the more expensive ones), but not that substantial in the pantheon of 'significant' locomotives in other materials. If it was as rare as Pat made out, and it certainly seemed to be, I thought £2000 was good value for money, definitely so in comparison to, say, a Hornby 0 gauge Princess with little historical and no rarity value. I clocked the sum for future reference.

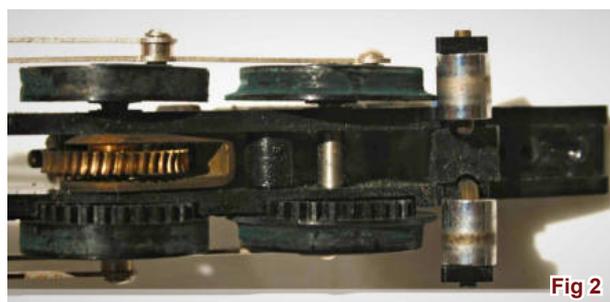
In the end, the time came. Not as I had hoped, in an antique fair for £15, but in a SAS auction. However, after forty years of waiting, I was not going to let it pass. Moreover, the sale had not one, but two, both from the estate of their designer, A G Venetian. This made me think about strategy. Tri-ang collectors the world over would be alerted to the locos and they would all be thinking £2000. There would not be many in the running, given the vast price gulf between this valuation and the next one down, but those who would be would be keen.

When you run an auction your eyes are never on the winning bidder or even the under-bidder. If you are sensible, you try to clock the actions of the third bidder. The third bidder will be the one who sets the price if a second

example ever comes up. As a buyer with two seemingly identical, extremely rare items in one sale, you can use this to your advantage. There was no way I was going to get either of these locos for much under £2000, but I was going to try to make sure that I did not inflate the price over that figure. I booked a telephone line. As I expected, the first example went up to about £1000 before coming to a close and I stepped in. I took it up to £1500 and stopped. The loco was knocked down for £1600. With commission this was near as dammit £2000. By this action the top price was set at £1600, with a clear two-horse race for some bids before. Had I gone on (and I was willing to go a fair way on) the top price would be set at whatever the pair of us fought it out to. The third bidder would then be encouraged to throw more money at the second loco, thereby inflating its price. If against me I'd end up paying more, but if I had been successful with the first, I might find I'd paid a lot more than the second one went for, even if this went for a lot more than £1600. I could have taken a chance and let the first drop out at the third bidder's price, but it looked too cheap against the nominal £2000 of *Ramsay's Guide* and someone else might have entered the fray. That might make things a bit more desperate the second time round. The second one came up. Sure enough, encouraged by the first, the price went up to match it, with me on the even hundreds, I bid £1600, there were no more bids and it was mine. Both locos went for the same price, the one that Pat had guesstimated in *Ramsay's Guide*. No surprises, no loony prices, two very happy successful bidders. Job done.

The next issue in my mind was why two locos? If these belonged to the designer, then they would surely have to represent two *different* locos. Ergo, one should be later than the other. But which was it? I had no idea who the other successful bidder was, but I knew I would never be fully happy unless mine was the first, but without a direct comparison, or more turning up, I would never know.

In the end, both successful bidders did locate each other. To my not very well concealed satisfaction it became clear which was which. The earlier loco has plain brass rollers, presumably these were seen to pick up 'mud' and lose current, the later loco has plated rollers **Fig 2**.



However, this was not all as the later loco's mould had been tweaked. Originally the fire-door opening gear was cast to clear the frames' rear stays, it looks awkward in a close up photo **Fig 3**, but this had been adjusted to give the gear more realism **Fig 4**.



Meanwhile, the stays themselves had been re-profiled to clear the adjustment **Fig 5**.

It might be that the latter eased assembly, but the former is a remarkably fine detail and it seems odd that it was done. The later loco also has an inserted lead weight, glued to the body, to

give a bit more traction **Fig 6**.



Fig 6: Note also the later locos has a plated forward fixing screw

These subtle, but significant adjustments are interesting because it suggests that a good number of the locos must have been made and reached the market, enough to find issues in mass assembly, receive feedback and make revisions. The problem for this early period is that we do not have the excellent memory of Richard Lines to help us as he did not take on the factory until late October 1951. Pat thinks only a 'few dozen' ever reached the market. I suggest it was a good deal more. Rovex had signed an

agreement with Marks & Spencer and had received an advance for 60,000 sets, the pressure was on them to produce these for the Christmas market. We know that they got nowhere near this figure. Richard told me that once Tri-ang took over, they managed to get out of the Marks and Spencer agreement having finally supplied over 40,000 sets in the new style and about 45,000 overall. Although it was grossly below 60,000, the two firms came to a gentlemen's agreement over the matter. That leaves anything up to 5,000 of the original sets. It has to be well below that figure, but in an overall 45,000, one or two thousand is fairly insignificant, even if a lot in collecting terms. We will never know, but there is no doubt that very few survive even though enough were made to justify two variations. We do know that Rovex copied Hornby's guarantee; so, feedback will have been quick and effective. Like Hornby, the sixty-day limit on the guarantee will have been largely ignored. Many will have been returned through 1951 and I suspect replaced by the improved plunger loco. In early 1952 Richard replaced the guarantee with a Service Department, which will have accounted for the replacement of even more. Then those that were

left were quickly outdated and not very reliable. They will have had little chance on the second hand market, particularly once the plastic began to distort. Not only that, but one of the key values of the Rovex train was it was designed to be cheap; it lacked the cache of Hornby Dublo, nor in later years was the product grand or old enough to register as an 'antique toy', as tinplate was beginning to do. A hugely disproportionate number must have been consigned to the dump. Even today I suspect few people outside of toy trains would see a slightly distorted roller Princess as a potentially 'valuable' item when clearing a cupboard.

The ambition of the Rovex product is truly magnificent. The company was not greatly experienced and the train set demanded a level of technology and sophistication way beyond their previous toys, a range of cars, again mainly for Marx and Spencer, which unfortunately had come into a trade-name dispute with the Rover car company, which effectively terminated production. In this context the train set took on an altogether greater significance in terms of the fortunes of the company resting upon it.

A parallel could be drawn to Meccano Ltd in 1920. The Hornby Train was a seriously under-designed product and there is little doubt that without the reputation and financial clout of Meccano behind it, making rapid development of the product possible, it would probably not have lasted into the next season. So it was with the Rovex train set, nothing like it had been made before, the company was willing to risk a new material even for demanding



Fig 7a: It is when you look at the loco in three-quarters view that its qualities become clear. It is an excellent representation, far better than Trix with its swivelling buffer-beam, strange nameplates and protruding brush gear, well on the way to Dublo.

commonplace, the new material had a further advantage, often overlooked today. Moreover, the end product was quite up to the level of scale accuracy and detail as Trix and anyone outside of Binns Road could see that it had the potential to produce castings to equal Hornby Dublo at greatly reduced cost. It was a semi-scale model sold as a toy, next thing to an experimental prototype, but being launched with a view to the mass production of 60,000 units by a company without anything else behind it than an advance from its only customer **Figs 7 and 7a**.



Fig 7b: It is, if anything, even better from the rear. Lines Brothers had a good eye.

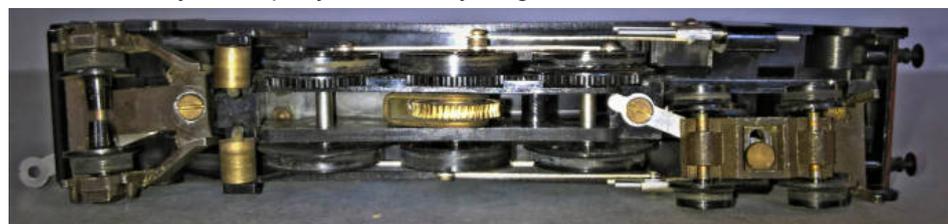


Fig 8: The substantial plastic frames are compromised by recesses for the drive gears.

extensive use of plastic in the frames and transmission made for mechanical unreliability and poor electrical pick-up **Figs 8 and 8a**.

There was no money left to pay for extensive retooling to incorporate the substantial revisions required to ensure electromechanical reliability. To bring the plunger Princess to market bankrupted the company and it was on the verge of having to declare insolvency. Its train set could so easily have fallen into the pit of 'great failures of our time'. But, that did not happen; instead the Rovex train set was innovatory enough to catch the attention of a company that could provide the Meccano-esque backing it needed, and the rest, as they say, is history. 🍷

applications such as driving wheels, mechanism frames and gearing, but had no track-record or 'parent product' to bank roll it.

There was no doubt of its potential, however. The plastic technology reduced the cost of production substantially in relation to die-cast metal or constructed tinplate. In 1950, with utility and rationing still in place and metal shortages still

It took nearly two years of R&D to get it to market, consuming all the money Marks and Spencer had advanced. If the product had been next-to-perfect Rovex might have managed to survive unscathed, but it wasn't. The



Fig 8a: Power is transmitted to the forward and trailing drivers via plastic pinions recessed into the frames, the connecting rods are effectively cosmetic.